Black, Female, First-Generation College Students: Perceptions of Academic Persistence

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BLACK, FEMALE, FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE

By

Renée Dickens Callan

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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BLACK FEMALE, FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS:
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Higher education continues to grapple with addressing the successful retention and degree attainment of first-generation students. Further, there is limited research that explores implications of first-generation status by racial or ethnic group. Black women who are first-generation are members of at least two groups that have been historically marginalized in education. Although the percentage of Black women participating in higher education has increased, graduation rates for this demographic remains disproportionate. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore factors that contribute to college persistence of Black, female, first-generation college students. Research questions that were explored include: (1) how do Black, female, first-generation college students experience college and, (2) what are Black, female, first-generation college students’ perceptions about factors that contribute to their persistence in college?

The setting was a predominately White, private, mid-sized institution in the state of Florida, and the participants were Black, female, first-generation college students. The methodology used was a multi-method qualitative approach. Results contribute significantly to past research that examines the persistence of first-generation college students. More specifically, this study adds to the discourse on first-generation Black,
female students and can be used to make recommendations that guide institutional best practices and policy.
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Finally, I dedicate my dissertation to my Angel. To the person who taught me how to read, instilled a love of learning, conveyed the importance of education, and taught me the most important lessons in life. Love you mom.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

Black women who are first-generation students face a host of challenges that might reduce their success in college. Approximately one-third of today’s college students are first-generation, that is they are the first in their families to attend college (Berkner & Choy, 2008). Researchers agree that many first-generation college students (FGCSs) arrive on college campuses with several disadvantages that do not apply to their continuing-generation peers. A first-generation college student is more likely to be an ethnic minority, score lower on standardized achievement tests, come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and live in homes where English is not the primary language spoken (Choy, 2001; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). First-generation students are also said to lack social and cultural capital, are less likely to seek guidance, and due to outside obligations, have difficulty integrating into the academic and social environment of college (Strayhorn, 2006).

Not only have studies shown that FGCSs disproportionately come from underrepresented backgrounds, they have also been found to have lower degree attainment rates (Choy, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), the six-year bachelor degree completion rate is 43% for White students, 21% for Black students, 16% for Hispanic students, 63% for Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 15% for Native American students (McFarland, et al., 2017). The Center for Education Statistics (2016) also reports that the graduation rate for FGCSs is 11%.
Further complicating the issue of support for this group is the lack of a universal
definition for first-generation students. This increases the obstacles when researching
and developing strategies for success for this cohort. In 1982, Billson and Terry defined
first-generation students as those who do not have at least one parent who graduated with
a bachelor’s or higher degree. Choy (2001) defined first-generation students as a college
or university student from a family where no parent or guardian has earned a
baccalaureate degree. Further, Mehta, Newbold, and O’Rourke (2011) indicate that a
FGCS is a student whose parent or guardian did not graduate from college. For the
purposes of this research, the Mehta et al. (2011) definition of FGCSs as a student whose
parents lack experience with higher education was used.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges that first generation-college students
face, Black female, first-generation college students confront a host of additional
challenges, including the burden of navigating campus environments where racism and
discrimination still exist (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Black women are members of two
groups that have been historically marginalized in education, yet they continue to
participate in higher education. Although the percentage of Black women participating in
higher education has increased, graduation rates for this demographic remains
problematically disproportionate. These statistics and literature underscore the
importance of examining the continued gaps in degree attainment for underrepresented
groups and understand the additional challenges FGCSs from diverse backgrounds
encounter while pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Higher education must gain a better understanding of this unique population to
address retention challenges and develop strategies that positively impact graduation
rates. Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) seminal work indicates that the onus of retention falls upon the university. Retention is the way in which institutions keep students through academic and social engagement. Thus, the institution is responsible for creating an environment that allows for greater involvement with faculty and peers, to increase the likelihood that students will remain at the institution and graduate.

**Research Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative, grounded theory study was to gain an understanding of how Black, female, first-generation college students experience college and explore the factors that contribute to their college persistence. Specifically, the primary purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the challenges and obstacles Black, female, first-generation students encounter, ascertain educational and motivational influences, better understand how the intersectionality of race and gender influence their student experiences, and identify resources that are helpful in navigating their collegiate journey.

There have been significant contributions to research regarding Black students, most of which has centered around the collective experiences of Black males (Hamilton, 2004). There is however a dearth of research on the experiences of Black females (Rosales & Person, 2003; Bush, Chambers & Walpole, 2010) and even less on Black females that are first-generation (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). This study addresses gaps in the literature by illuminating the specific experiences of Black females, whose identities and experiences are vastly different from Black males or other comparison populations.

Deficits in Black student achievement is well documented (Harper, 2012). Previous research on Black students tend to center upon student demographics, pre-
collegiate factors, gaps in academic performance, as well as parental influences. Additional areas of recent focus have included academic connections (Strayhorn, 2006, 2008a), environments (Fleming, 1984; Strayhorn, 2008a; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Harper 2012; Bank-Santilli, 2014; McCoy, 2014), belonging (Strayhorn, 2008a), and social and cultural capital (Banks, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010b). Major studies on Black students have primarily examined Black male performance and retention in relation to graduation rates (Harper, 2015). More specifically, persistence and retention challenges of Black males has dominated much of the literature.

Existing research on Black women has mainly focused on demographics and graduation rates (Rosales & Person, 2003), enrollment trends and achievement between Black men and women (Rosales & Person, 2003; Watt, 2006; Henry, 2008; Banks, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2008, 2015), and campus and racial climate (Shavers & Moore, 2014). College success of Black women are underexplored as much of the literature primarily points to deficiencies.

Studies pertaining to Black, female first-generation students are even more limited. Strayhorn (2013) argues that research on Black students is limited due to inadequate comparison groups and this is also true for research pertaining to this study’s population. Of note are two major qualitative studies that examined the experiences of Black female, first-generation college students. Winkle-Wagner’s (2015) research on the intersectionality of sexism and Rosales and Person’s (2003) study on the disproportionately low graduation rates provide important perspectives regarding first-generation students who are Black and female. Currently, there are no qualitative or quantitative studies that investigate the intersections of identities of Black women and
first-generation college students by examining race and gender. Unfortunately, other important insights on the current study population are sparse at best or completely absent from research. For example, missing from the literature is research and analysis on the cognitive and developmental growth of Black women in general and more specifically, of Black women who are also first-generation.

The current qualitative study is significant because it focused on the intersectionality of race and gender of a population that has largely been ignored. It also placed Black women voices at the center of educational inquiry, addressed gaps in the research, provided a missing perspective on the lived experiences of Black female, first-generation college students, and contributed to persistence and retention literature on this growing demographic.

Overall, retention is a significant policy issue for education. Considering shifting demographics, the retention of FGCSs is of importance as this population will continue to increase and represent a significant percentage of future college students (Strayhorn, 2010a). Postsecondary institutions can contribute to the overall mission of education by helping to facilitate the successful academic and social adjustment of first-generation students who occupy several identities. Furthermore, higher education can develop policy and practices that address continued gaps in retention and result in successful completion rates of this student population.

**Theoretical and Empirical Literature**

Research has demonstrated the connection between college persistence and a student’s connection with the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008a; 2010a). According to Tinto (1975, 1987), persistence is the degree to which a student
feels academically and socially connected to the institution and is committed to the institution. Based on connectedness, the student is more or less likely to remain at and graduate from the university. In order to better understand the college persistence of Black women who are first generation college students, it is important to examine theories that pertain to college student persistence in general. There are several theories that particularly provide insights into college persistence. They include Astin’s (1993) theory on involvement, Tinto’s (1993) theory on student departure, and Strayhorn’s (2008) framework on belonging. Finally, in order to understand the experiences of Black women in general on college campuses, it is important to consider the role of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Identity Development and Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI). In this section, each of these theories and how it pertains to this study is explained.

**Astin’s (1993) Theory of Student Involvement.** Astin (1993) theorized that involvement is strongly correlated to student retention. The overall amount of energy a student devotes to connecting with peers and developing positive relationships with faculty members, is proportional to their overall satisfaction and ability to integrate into the academic and social components of campus life. Involvement according to Astin (1993) is both qualitative and quantitative. Students benefit from continuous involvement, as well as the quality and quantity of involvement. Each is important in how students learn, change and adapt to college.

Astin’s (1993) theory is based upon the premise that students must actively contribute to their integration into college. There are several behaviors Astin (1993) identifies as indicators of involvement. Participation in student organizations, active
development of connections with faculty members, and attendance at academic programs each constitutes a form of involvement. The more students are involved academically and socially, the greater institutional connections they develop. These efforts become paramount in helping students bond with the institution and persist. Considering many studies have indicated academic and social engagement represents a significant challenge for this study’s target population (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2012), it was important to understand Astin’s (1993) theory because it was foundational in research which demonstrated that academic and social involvement was positively correlated with student persistence.

**Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure.** Tinto’s (1993) research built upon the work of Astin (1993) and sought to explain student departure from higher education. Similar to Astin (1993), Tinto theorized that students must be integrated into the academic and social aspects of college life. As students interact with academic and social components of the institution, their perspective and commitment to higher education is modified. The higher level of commitment and connection to the institution, the greater likelihood the student will persist.

Departure decisions according to Tinto (1993) are attributed to student characteristics, collegiate goals, and institutional factors. A student’s characteristics include family background, academic history, and individual skills and abilities. A student’s college goals refers to the intention or commitment to stay and complete college. These attributes, along with the institution, influence an individual’s collegiate goals. As students interact academically and socially within the college setting, negative and positive experiences influence their desire to stay in college. Students who fail to
integrate do not develop a connection or commitment to the institution, which can ultimately result in their departure from college.

Similar to Astin (1993), Tinto’s (1993) departure theory placed the onus on the student to integrate into the existing culture and to conform to institutional norms. Critics of Tinto (1993) argued that “integration” as a concept is vague and much of the emphasis is placed on the student’s ability to connect with the institution. They further contended that the theory has a Eurocentric framework, fails to recognize cultural variables, and may not be easily applicable to students from different ethnic or racial backgrounds (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Tinto’s (1993) model reinforces the dominant culture, as well as the norms and values of the institution. Institutional culture or the university’s role in establishing a campus climate that is representative and welcoming is absent from the theory (Rendón et al., 2000).

Tinto’s (1993) model postulates that students must separate from their known communities, to integrate and conform to the established campus culture. Rendón et al. (2000) argued that the theory lacks a cultural perspective, which is an important lens from which to view student attrition. Furthermore, Tinto’s (1993) model stipulates that students are expected to acculturate to their new environment, and the institution seemingly bears no responsibility for creating or maintaining an inclusive and welcoming campus environment. According to Rendón et al. (2004), the successful social integration of students should be shared with the institution. The ability to adjust to the social and academic environment of the campus is not a failure solely on the part of the student. Underrepresented students may not identify with institutional culture, and the college or university should share responsibility in helping them to adjust. Further
supporting this view, Strayhorn (2008a) argued that how campuses are perceived in terms of climate influences student satisfaction with college. This is troubling considering findings by Winkle-Wagner (2015) and Harper (2015) that indicated students of color encounter discrimination and find many college campuses, particularly PWIs, to be unwelcoming. According to Tinto (1993) student satisfaction is correlated with student persistence.

**Strayhorn’s (2012) Framework on Belonging.** To further examine the persistence of students, Strayhorn (2012) examined the concept of belonging for marginalized populations in particular. Strayhorn (2012) suggested that belonging is a basic human need where one’s sense of self and feeling of value are essential. Strayhorn (2012) linked collegiate student success to developing a sense of belonging. A student’s sense of belonging is directly related to experiences with the institution and the educational environment. He further posited that belonging, particularly for diverse students, directly impacts student outcomes. Strayhorn’s (2012) framework was important to understanding the experiences of first-generation, Black women because academic and social engagement influence a student’s sense of belonging to the institution, which ultimately impacts the student’s performance, motivation, and desire to stay.

**Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Identity Development and Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI).** Strayhorn’s (2012) research specifically targets students who occupy more than one social identity. Research indicates that students from marginalized identities experience college differently (Jones & Abes, 2013). Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Identity Development and Model of Multiple
Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) served as concepts for understanding identity salience (Jones & Abes, 2013). Students who occupy multiple identity groups often experience challenges associated with college engagement and persistence (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Tierney (1992) argued that higher education and college systems are based upon Eurocentric and oppressive structures that often are challenging for students of color to navigate. Identity models provide an important perspective on the psychosocial development of students and address intersectionality of identity (Jones & Abes, 2013). Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993) equate student success with traditional modes of assimilation, socialization, and engagement. These theories are not always applicable to students who arrive on college campuses with varying identities and perspectives. Research has demonstrated the importance of academic and co-curricular engagement. Social identity theories such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Identity Development and Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI), were important theories in understanding the experiences of Black, first-generation, female college students because they served as alternative viewpoints with which to examine behaviors that contribute to and impact student success.

Astin (1993), Tinto (1993), and Strayhorn (2012) each provided an important perspective in explaining student behavior. Identity models contribute and enhance each theory by incorporating additional identities that affect student development. A student’s background, individual characteristics, academic history, and ability to integrate directly impact the student’s sense of belonging and ultimately their ability to be retained. Although the work of Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993) are relevant to broad cross-sections of students, Strayhorn’s research was particularly significant as it sought to explain the
college experiences of diverse communities. It further provided evidence for the persistence and departure tendencies of multicultural, first-generation, and underrepresented students who attend predominately White institutions (PWIs). This student population often encounters additional challenges unrelated to their ability to integrate into the established collegiate system.

**First-Generation, Black College Students.** First-generation students account for about 30% to 50% of the U.S. undergraduate student population (Choy, 2001; Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). According to Strayhorn (2010a), that number is expected to continue to escalate. The varied backgrounds, educational experiences, age, socioeconomic status, influences, obligations, racial and cultural identities, as well as cultural and social capital, make it impossible to apply a single-theory solution to addressing educational difficulties for this population. Responding to these wide-ranging needs with appropriate strategies to support, retain, and graduate this demographic will be an ongoing challenge for higher education. The following studies outline theories and characteristics that are specific to first-generation and Black college students.

**Social and Cultural Capital.** Pre-collegiate characteristics, family influences, and lack of resources are identified as challenges for the study population. Several studies were conducted to determine who FGCSs are in terms of family background, pre-collegiate academic credentials, socioeconomic status, and ethnic/racial demographics. These studies tend to focus on the deficits of this student population. For example, much of the literature indicated that FGCSs lack social, cultural, economic, and academic capital (Sasso & DeVitis, 2015). Drawing on the foundational work of Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital refers to information and knowledge shared by parents and families with
their student. Social capital refers to networks for relationship building that can contribute to a student’s ability to connect with others who can assist in navigating college (Mehta et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2010b). Economic capital includes money, scholarships, loans, grants, and other forms of financial aid (Sasso & DeVitis, 2015). Academic capital refers to prior academic preparation (Sasso & DeVitis, 2015). Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993) link social and academic integration to persistence and degree attainment. The lack of resources or a family member who can provide guidance in navigating college, and the unfamiliarity of college norms and traditions, are identified as reasons FGCSs have difficulty integrating into college.

Strayhorn (2010b) argued that minority and underrepresented students are not devoid of “social and cultural capital” but simply possess a different type of capital. He stated that: “… minority students bring with them various forms of culture that may be decidedly different from the “culture” privileged in schooling contexts” (p. 309). The “capital” Strayhorn (2010b) attributed to FGCSs provides grit, tenacity, and motivation to persist in college.

Research further indicates that FGCSs have problems integrating into the campus community (Ishitani, 2006). They do not know how colleges work and are unfamiliar with expectations of college curriculum. FGCSs struggle to fit in with their collegiate peers and acclimate to their new community while maintaining connections with family and friends who do not understand or support their efforts to obtain a college degree (Terenzini et al., 1996). According to research, the failure of FGCSs to connect with their peers and academic resources is attributed to many of their personal characteristics and educational background. Tinto (1993) argued that the inability to adjust to the
institutional culture leads to dissatisfaction with educational experiences and contributes to the decision to depart from college.

**Belonging.** Strayhorn (2012) provided an alternative perspective in examining the concept of belonging. He indicated that students who do not feel a sense of belonging to the institution are at risk of persisting. FGCSs tend to work more hours, live off-campus, and are less involved with campus life (Choy, 2001). Research indicates these factors impede students from developing meaningful experiences and having quality interactions with the institution. Consequently, the student does not develop a sense of belonging and their perception of their value within the campus community is negatively impacted.

Harper (2012) and Strayhorn (2012) provided similar opinions, arguing that viewing students from a deficient perspective fails to properly acknowledge a student’s whole story. Harper’s (2012) anti-deficit achievement research outlines the negative impact deficit thinking has had on Black men in society and consequently in education. Ascribing underachievement models to Black male performance resulted in the mistreatment and lowering of expectations for this population. Harper (2015) further indicated that Black males experience racism, discrimination and campus climates that are unwelcoming. These experiences and encounters, which are often acute at PWIs, impact student performance, retention and outcomes.

Although Harper’s research is focused primarily on Black men, it is applicable to other underrepresented groups. Black, female students encounter similar obstacles and face challenges associated with racism and unwelcoming campus environments that affect their ability to thrive and persist on college campuses (Winkle-Wagner, 2015).
Additionally, Black women confront the intersectionality of sexism as they navigate the higher education environment. It is important to provide a counter narrative and reframe research that uses a deficit-oriented viewpoint to investigate student behavior and outcomes. Higher education should not ignore the impact deficit thinking has on students who encounter it on college campuses. Finally, scholarly investigations should also focus on positive attributes marginalized students bring to their educational endeavors as these traits become paramount to their pursuit of a postsecondary degree.

**Current Study and Research Questions**

There are limited studies on Black female, first-generation students that have qualitatively examined the lived-experiences of this college student demographic. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding and explore the factors that contribute to college persistence of Black, female, first-generation college students. Specifically, this study aims to provide a voice for a diverse student demographic, to gain a better understanding of the challenges and obstacles these students encounter, to ascertain educational and motivational influences, better understand how racial and gender identity influence their student experiences, and identify resources that were helpful in navigating their collegiate journey. The research questions explored were: (1) How do Black, female, first-generation college students experience college and (2) What are Black, female, first-generation college students’ perceptions on factors that contribute to their persistence in college? Phenomenological and grounded theory approaches informed the research design, methods, and analyses to address these questions.
Research Method and Rationale

Qualitative research provides an opportunity to study a specific topic or phenomenon in its natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 2003) and provides rich data on the lived experiences of Black female, first-generation college students. The researcher develops a relationship with participants that she hopes will result in obtaining meaningful data that tells a story about a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). Research should reveal behaviors, opinions, perceptions, or expectations of the target audience that are culturally specific to the population (Creswell, 2003). A benefit of using a qualitative approach is the ability to modify questions and make follow-up inquiries that provide complex textural descriptions and help the researcher gain a greater understanding of discoveries that impact the research question (Creswell, 2003). “Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent” (Rwegoshora, 2014, p.146). Each of these factors was relevant to the research questions of this study.

A phenomenological approach based upon the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and education was used as a framework for this research (Creswell, 2003). This methodology allowed participants to naturally share information that was rich and descriptive. Why and how the participant experienced the phenomenon was significant as it provided insight into each subject’s motivations and actions (Creswell, 2003). Through investigation, the researcher gained an in-depth understanding of the nuanced and shared experiences directly from the target population. The use of phenomenology encouraged study participants to provide stories and data that pertained to the research
questions of (1) How do Black, female, first-generation college students experience college and (2) Perceptions on factors that contribute to the persistence of Black, female, first-generation college students? Attention was paid to the meanings and “essence” of what each participant shared regarding their experiences in college (Moustakas, 1994).

Grounded theory provided a framework for analyzing the data. Categories and themes were continually established as a mechanism for better understanding participant stories (Charmaz, 2006). A mid-level theory based upon connecting themes derived from each research participants lived experiences through their own voices was developed to provide a greater understanding of the research problem. Ultimately, each story provided important insight into the lived experiences of participants who navigate a PWI as a Black, female, first-generation college student. It was important to use a grounded theory approach to ascertain analytical connections based upon participant stories, which allowed for the construction of a theory related to how Black, female, first-generation students experienced college.

The data collected in this qualitative study came from an exploratory research project that examined the lived experiences of Black, female, first-generation, college students. A qualitative approach allowed participant stories to highlight their educational trajectories and potential intersections of race, gender, and class. Research questions centered upon demographic information, academic history, family influences, background characteristics, adjustment (academic and social), and institutional attachment. Research findings helped to identify overarching themes that shape nuances of each participants lived experiences. This research provided a unique opportunity to
examine the collegiate experiences of a marginalized population with special focus on collegiate success in PWIs.

**Target Educational and Community Context**

This multi-method qualitative research study took place in a four-year, private, mid-sized, research, Division I institution located in Florida where according to university data, over one thousand students are identified as first-generation (J. Haller, personal communication, September 2016). Student demographics at the study setting were 52% White, 20% Hispanic or Latino, 10% Black, 13% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% two or more races (University of Miami, 2016). Demographics for the county where the institution resides were 14% White, 67% Hispanic or Latino, 17% Black, 2% Asian, and 1% two or more races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). At the time of this study, there were no available statistics to indicate specifically how many of the first generation students identified as Black women.

Although the institution is classified as a PWI, there is a higher percentage of Hispanics attending the target institution and living in the county where the university is located. Texas, Florida, New Mexico and California are the only four states where Hispanics account for more than 20% of college students (Excelencia in Education, 2015). According to the U.S. Census (2015), over 1 million Hispanics live in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York and Texas. These statistics differentiate the target institution and surrounding community from the national norm and may influence the collegiate experience and success of the study sample.

It is also important to note that in the last 16 months, the university recruited and hired a full-time academic advisor whose primary responsibilities included providing
additional academic support to underrepresented student populations, including first-generation students. Thus far, the office has convened a focus group consisting of representatives from various university departments including enrollment management, registrars, career planning and placement, and multicultural student affairs. Additionally, students who were identified as underrepresented were notified via email that they now have an office and designated staff member whom they can contact for support. An orientation welcome, one-on-one meetings and group sessions were also coordinated over the past year. Currently, the office is creating a mentoring program to connect first-generation students with faculty and staff who were also first-generation college students. The academic preparation, cultural and social inequality, psychological and familial conflict, compounding factors of race and ethnicity, and financial constraints of first-generation and Black students continue to be a focus of researchers. However, investigating the nuances of first-generation status from the perspective of the Black female at a predominately White institution (PWI) in a Hispanic/Latinx dominated community is missing from the research. Much is known from a deficit perspective; however additional research is needed on the persistence and college success of this student demographic. The examination of factors associated with the persistence of Black, female, first-generation students fills a gap in the research, and provides much needed guidance on supporting this growing population.

The focus of this current study was to fill these aforementioned gaps in the literature by identifying themes regarding the persistence of FGCSs. The themes were then used to construct a mid-level theory that explained the factors and processes that supported and challenged persistence for first-generation, Black female students. This
project contributed to the knowledge-base by changing the discourse on variables that contribute to collegiate persistence to a more strength-based perspective. Finally, participant stories were intended to provide guidance on developing recommendations, policies and best practices for secondary school and higher education that impact the persistence and retention of the study population.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

A greater number of African-American, female, first-generation college students are entering higher education (Rosales & Person, 2003). However, the graduation rates of this population continue to be disproportionately low relative to the overall population (Rosales & Person, 2003). There have been studies exploring factors that lead to lower graduation rates for first-generation college students (Bui, 2002; London, 1989; Willet, 1989), African-American students (Harper, 2012), and women (Rosales & Person, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). However, there has not yet been a study that considered the unique experiences of these compounding challenges for Black women who are first-generation college students.

Further, research on Black, female, and first-generation students tend to center upon challenges, deficits, and factors that contribute to each population’s lack of persistence, engagement, and academic success (Choy, 2001; Bui 2002; McMillian, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ishitani, 2006; Banks, 2009; Henry, 2013; Bartman, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Until recently, there was limited research outlining positive contributing factors that led to college persistence and degree attainment for each of these populations. Strayhorn (2013) also argued that existing research is limited due to inadequate comparison groups. “Much of the research that has examined college students’ academic and social challenges has focused on women and White students or has compared White students to a heterogeneous group of students of color, rather than a specific racial/ethnic group that is adequately represented in the study’s sample” (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 118). The anti-deficit framework of Harper (2012) represents a departure from viewing marginalized student performance from a deficit perspective.
The purpose of this current qualitative study was to explore the collegiate experiences of Black, female, first generation college students and identify student perceptions of factors that lead to their persistence. In this literature review, I first provided historical background on access for Black and FGCSs. Second, theories and research relevant to student persistence were discussed. Third, pre-collegiate characteristics of Black and FGCSs were provided. Fourth, compounding factors for persistence were outlined. Finally, multicultural models and theories relevant to the target population were provided as context for understanding diverse groups of students such as those represented in this study.

**Historical Background of Access for Black and First-Generation Students**

Access in education evolved as a result of legislation, population shifts, urban expansion, and public demand (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 are legislative actions that had a profound impact on education by providing access to new populations of students (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Government intervention created a pathway and higher education became an option for students from different races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The Morrill Land Act of 1862 established public universities and provided government assistance that supported the expansion of postsecondary education (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Private institutions like Oberlin College led the way in providing access to women and eventually Black students (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) served as the primary means of educating Blacks when enrollment was denied from White institutions (Cohen & Kisker, 2010).
Today there are thousands of colleges and universities that provide educational opportunities for any student. Although access in higher education has expanded, gaps in enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment rates continue to exist for many under-represented populations (Center for Education Statistics, 2016). This is particularly true for first-generation and Black students (Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Strayhorn, 2006; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Garibaldi, 2014). The most recent report issued by the Center for Education Statistics (2016) indicated that the racial/ethnic breakdown of postsecondary students documented in 2014 were 9.6 million White, 3.0 million Hispanic, 2.4 million Black, 1.0 million Asian, and 0.1 million Pacific Islander, and 0.1 American Indian/Alaskan Native. At four-year institutions, graduation rates during that same timeframe for Black students were 41% as compared to 63% for White students (Center for Education Statistics, 2015). These statistics highlight gaps in both enrollment and graduation attainment.

According to the Center for Education Statistics (2016), Black student enrollment in postsecondary institutions increased from 11.7 to 14.5% between 2000 and 2014 (Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Black student enrollment is highest in community colleges, for-profit institutions and historically Black colleges and universities (Strayhorn, 2008a; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Although Black students are participating in higher education, they enter higher education with several challenges and obstacles that make navigating college difficult. This is particularly true for Black students attending PWIs (Strayhorn, 2008a; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010).
Black students encounter myriad challenges in pursuing a college degree including difficult transitions (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010), lack of supportive relationships (Strayhorn, 2008a), academic and financial barriers (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010), unwelcoming environments (Fleming, 1984; Strayhorn, 2008a; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010), as well as a lack of knowledge regarding collegiate norms and traditions (Strayhorn, 2008a). Racism and discrimination which has existed on college campuses since higher education was established, continues to negatively impact students (Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b). Each of these institutional issues contribute to difficulties in the academic and social integration of Black students.

The attainment gap between White and Black students widened in 2015 (Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Black students do not graduate at the same rate and are more likely to delay pursuing a postsecondary degree, attend for-profit institutions, and enroll part-time. Additionally, Black students represent a small proportion of students enrolled at private, 4-year institutions which tend to more successfully graduate its students (Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

There are several reasons for the lower enrollment of Black students at 4-year institutions much of which center around lack of academic preparation, cost, campus climate, and inadequate social support (Fleming, 1984; Bonner & Evans, 2004; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). Often students encounter social isolation and are challenged to establish relationships with faculty members and peers (Strayhorn, 2008a). Research demonstrates the importance of integrating students into campus life by participating in social and academic activities that contribute to academic success (Tinto, 2003).
Theories and Research Related to College Persistence

**Student Involvement.** Astin’s (1984) student involvement theory provided an important perspective in explaining the correlation between student engagement, learning, and successful academic outcomes. Astin (1984) posited that the amount of energy a student devotes to involvement is directly proportional to their personal growth and academic success. The theory is formulated on three premises which include inputs, environment and outputs (Astin, 1984). Inputs refer to a student’s background, demographic and experiences, environment refers to college experiences, and outputs are characteristics, knowledge, beliefs and attitudes a student possess after graduating from college (Astin, 1984).

Astin’s (1984) theory provided an explanation for student behavior as it relates to involvement. Involvement according to Astin (1984), is the investment of energy both physical and psychological, is continuous and occurs along a continuum, and can be qualitative or quantitative. The outcome of meaningful involvement in college is student learning and academic success. The theory postulates that involvement is critical to student success, whereas dropping out is attributable to a student’s lack of involvement.

Astin’s (1984) theory relies on the student to take advantage of involvement opportunities. Colleges create opportunities but the onus is on the student to be engaged. This perspective is not easily applicable to underrepresented and marginalized communities who may not be familiar with how colleges work (Strayhorn, 2013). Students arrive to campuses with a variety of inputs, or background characteristics and knowledge, but may lack social and cultural capital making it difficult to navigate college (Strayhorn, 2010b; Sasso & DiVitis, 2015). Astin’s (1984) involvement theory also
requires students to understand and acclimate to the campus culture which is often based upon a Eurocentric model and privileged identities (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Students have different social identities and the theory presupposes that all students, regardless of their identity salience, can easily adapt to their new environment.

Although Astin’s (1984) theory on involvement does not address social identities, it is relevant as this study seeks to understand how Black, female, first-generation students experience college. The study also attempts to better understand factors that contribute to student persistence. Interview data may reveal connections between participant perceptions of involvement and collegiate persistence.

**Student Retention.** Similar to Astin (1984), Tinto’s (1975) work provided an explanation for student retention and departure habits. Tinto’s (1975) model of student integration is based upon the work of Durkheim’s suicide model and is linked to the beginning of the national discussion on undergraduate student retention (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Tinto’s work served as a theoretical framework for understanding student behavior and was used to examine enrollment and persistence behaviors of students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1994). Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011) indicated that Tinto’s work is one of most widely referenced theories, used over the past 35 years to explain student departure behavior.

Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2004) theory has evolved over the years to include more variables (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). The initial model posited that the decision to drop out is a result of the student’s background characteristics, and whether or not they are academically and socially integrated into the campus community (Tinto, 1975). Tinto modified his model to include different student groups that might require
specific interventions (Tinto, 1993). Some of the groups included Black students, students for low-socioeconomic backgrounds, transfer and non-traditional student populations (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (2004) continued to adjust his theory to include additional variables related to motivation, the decision-making process, commitment to achieving one’s goals, student expectations of the institution, and the college transition process (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Moreover, Tinto’s work points out the importance of academic and social support services needed to help students develop connections with the institution and campus environment (Tinto, 2007).

The variables and factors linked to persistence in Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2007) models include pre-entry attributes such as family background, personal attributes and skills, and previous educational experiences. Tinto’s model (1993, 2007) also indicated that variables such as a student’s goals, external commitments and motivation affect their ability to commitment to the institution and persist. Furthermore, Tinto (1993, 2007) highlights institutional experiences. Formal and informal academic and social interactions impact a student’s collegiate experiences (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) indicated that a student’s sense of belonging which is connected to their integration into the academic and social aspects of the institution impact persistence decisions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Much of the research on retention is based upon Tinto’s groundbreaking theory (Tinto, 2007). Many of the studies tend to point to similar conclusions that parental education, background characteristics, and previous academic experience are defining factors in the success of college students (Atherton, 2014; Bui, 2001; Pascarella et al, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For example, Ishitani (2006) conducted a
quantitative study and his findings indicated that a student’s educational expectations, parent’s educational attainment, and institutional characteristics are defining factors in attrition and degree completion. Additionally, Strayhorn (2006) examined the academic achievement of FGCSs and results show a correlation between a student’s commitment to higher education and attaining a higher GPA. The findings presented by each author is consistent with previous research on FGCSs and align with Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2004) model of student departure by including culturally relevant communities.

Several researchers offer criticism of Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2004) theoretical model. One of the central critiques was that the model is static (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1984, 1994). Institutional experience and integration are the main factors used to explain departure behavior. For many researchers, these variables are one-dimensional and do not reflect the complicities of different populations of students (Pascarella et al., 1983; Tierney, 1992; Rendon et al., 2000; Ishitani, 2006). Hurtado and Carter (1997) and Tierney (1992) maintain that the model espouses mainstream values which do not support culturally relevant alternatives. Kember (1995) argued that external factors contribute more significantly to a student’s departure decisions and the model does not appropriately account for this variable. Furthermore, researchers contend that pre-enrollment characteristics may play a larger role on student departure then originally stated (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Although Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2003) model does not account for cultural differences, it serves as a foundation for understanding why students leave college. Research indicates that first-generation and Black students often arrive to campus with characteristics that are linked to retention challenges (Pascarella et al, 2004; Pascarella &
Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2013). The current study sought to better understand influences that affect Black, female, first-generation, student success as it relates to persistence and retention.

**Pre-Collegiate Characteristics of Black and First Generation Students**

Students’ background characteristics have been broadly discussed in research. Specifically, pre-collegiate factors of first-generation and Black students have been used to explain the persistence of these student populations. First-generation and Black students represent a significant portion of the undergraduate student population and share similar pre-collegiate characteristics (Choy, 2001; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Vargas, 2004; Fries-Britt Turner, 2004). This can be attributed to findings that first-generation students tend to be Black or Hispanic ethnic minorities (Ishitani, 2003).

Research indicates that first-generation students and racial/ethnic minorities encounter more challenges and are at a higher risk for departure than continuing-generation students (Choy, 2001; Bui, 2002; Ishitani, 2006; Strayhorn, 2013). This student demographic is more likely to be academically underprepared, do not take advanced placement courses in high school, and scores lower on college entrance tests (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003; Atherton, 2014; Sasso & DeVitis, 2015). First-generation students are more likely to be a racial or ethnic minority, live in homes where English is not the primary language spoken, and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Thayer, 2000; Choy, 2001; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001; Hurtado, 2007).

First-generation and racial/ethnic minority students often lack knowledge on how college works, do not understand the college admission process or financial aid procedures (Warburton et al., 2001; Bui, 2002). They also delay attending college or
choose to attend institutions that are in close proximity to home, and limit their collegiate
options due to work and family obligations (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Bui, 2002).

These pre-collegiate factors contribute to the lack of college readiness,
educational expectations, and difficulty transitioning to college for FGCSs and for Black
students (Terenzini et al., 1996; Bui, 2002; Ishitani, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004). The
unique demographic and performance backgrounds of underrepresented students
contribute to complex performance challenges encountered in pursuing a postsecondary
degree. The lack of academic preparation and basic knowledge about college is linked to
persistence and attrition challenges and has been well documented (Astin, 1993; Tinto
1993, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Strayhorn, 2006).

Ishitani (2006) argues that it is difficult to determine the effects of student
background characteristics and departure decisions, due to the variety of students in
national data sets, multiple survey sites, and differences in the number of times data is
administered and collected. Ishitani’s (2006) study examined attrition and degree
completion of first-generation students and found that background characteristics are not
always predictive in sophomore, junior and senior years. Additionally, he indicated that
financial aid, institutional characteristics, and the student’s educational expectations play
a role in student attrition (Ishitani, 2006). Furthermore, Pascerella et al. (2004), and
Sasso and DiVitis (2015) posited that much of the research on first-generation students is
based upon comparisons to continuing generation students. The authors believe it is
important to move beyond initial demographic and pre-college characteristics
comparisons and in order to examine the nuanced collegiate experiences and outcomes of
first-generation students.
Compounding Factors for Persistence

Social, cultural, academic and economic capital. Building upon the research of Bourdieu (1986), several studies have connected social, cultural, academic, and economic capital to successful outcomes of college students. Social capital refers to the support and networks that can be accessed in understanding college (Banks, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010b). Cultural capital refers to the skills and knowledge that is shared and passed down from parents and families that provide an advantage in navigating the educational system (Banks, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010b). The possession or ability to access social and cultural capital is linked to a student’s ability to make beneficial educational decisions and navigate the higher education landscape (Pascarella et al., 2004). Academic capital refers to prior educational experiences and economic capital is money or things that can be used to pay for college such as scholarships, grants and financial aid (Sasso & DeVitis, 2015).

Several researchers counter-argue that marginalized students access a different type of capital which facilitates the development of self-efficacy and academic confidence (Strayhorn, 2008b; Banks, 2009; Garrison & Gardner, 2012). Further, researchers indicate a positive correlation between social and academic assimilation, as a result of familial support and social structures (Guifrida, 2006; Strayhorn, 2006; Garrison & Gardner, 2012). These findings contradict research that contend the personal characteristics of students of color and first-generation students as lacking. Sasso and DeVitis, (2015) further argue that capital is representative of privilege and the structure of higher education facilitates the continued success of students who possess it.
Research indicates that the parent’s education level is a significant predictor for pursuing a postsecondary degree and student persistence (Choy, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978, 1980, 1983). These findings illustrate that students whose parents did not attend college, are at a distinct disadvantage in understanding and navigating college. Parents of FGCSs are often uniformed about higher education and as a result are unable to provide guidance in navigating college (Pascarella et al., 2004; Parks-Yancy, 2012). Research also indicates that first-generation and students of color encounter family strain once enrolled in college, are challenged to navigate two worlds, and struggle to maintain two different identities (Oribe, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996).

For first-generation and Black students, familial obligations are often identified as an additional obstacle for students to navigate. Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993, 2007) theorize similar conclusions, by indicating that students must assimilate to their new college environment in order to become academically and socially engaged. Critics however offer a differing perspective, in findings that indicate the challenges associated with disconnecting from one’s family and social community, and to subscribing a theory based upon a Eurocentric perspective to diverse populations (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1984, 1994; Tierney, 1992, Hurtado & Carter, 1997, Rendón et al., 2000).

First-generation and Black students, unlike their continuing-generation peers, lack important social and cultural capital, which many researchers agree is essential to accessing and persisting in college. Harper (2012) argued that first-generation and students of color are not devoid of social and cultural capital, but possess a different type of capital that when accessed, serve as grit and encouragement for collegiate success. Guiffrida (2006) found a positive correlation between social and academic assimilation,
family support and first-generation collegiate persistence. Furthermore, Banks (2009) expanded upon the concept of cultural capital in her qualitative study which explored how Black female students access and utilize different forms of capital in order to navigate college. Although a few recent studies provide a counter narrative to understanding social and cultural capital, researchers predominately agree that students who lack social and cultural capital encounter additional challenges in understanding educational requirements (Pascarella et al., 2004; Strayhorn, 2010b). Research indicates that the lack of textural context contributes to social, cultural, and academic transition difficulties for FGCSs (Pascarella, et al., 2004; Strayhorn, 2010b).

**Challenges Based on Race**

Navigating college is challenging for students of color and even more arduous for students of color who are also first-generation (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). This is particularly true for Black, first-generation students who attend PWIs and report feelings of culture shock and alienation (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Banks-Santilli, 2014). Campus environments are most often cited as a determining factor in students of color departure decisions (Griffin, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008b; McCoy, 2014). These findings are consistent with research that indicates “…Blacks generally perceive PWI environments unwelcoming and unsupportive, if not hostile or threatening” (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 117).

Black students indicate that they experience discrimination, racism and are often marginalized on campus (Strayhorn, 2008a; Banks, 2009; McCoy, 2014). They encounter unwelcoming environments with inadequate support (Fleming, 1984). Black students fail to engage and do not participate in college because they believe faculty members and their peers do not care about them (Strayhorn, 2008a). Students’
perception that campuses lack supportive relationships contribute to social isolation and
difficulties acclimating and engaging in campus life (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000;
Strayhorn, 2008a; Shavers & Moore, 2014).

Research indicates that social and academic integration is important to the
academic success of Black and first-generation students (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). It is
critical for first-generation and Black students to establish relationships with faculty
members and their peers as these connections are essential support structures that are
needed to persist in college (Bonner, 2004; Strayhorn, 2006, 2008a). The importance of
academic engagement is consistent with Astin (1993) and Tinto’s (1993, 2007) student
theories and subsequent research findings on academic success.

Strayhorn (2008a) also argued that it is important for marginalized and
underrepresented students to find a sense of belonging on college campuses. “Sense of
belonging, then, reflects the extent to which students feel connected, to a part of, stuck to
a campus…” (Strayhorn, 2008a, p. 505). Belonging is accomplished through culturally
relevant programs, psychological resources that are specifically designed for students of
color, mentoring programs, purposeful academic and social engagement opportunities
(Bonner & Evans, 2004; Guiffrida, 2006; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008a).

**Challenges Based on Gender**

Similar to race, researchers seek to better understand how gender impacts identity
development. “Gender remains a powerful enough organizing concept in most
contemporary societies to have a substantial interactive effect on individuals and their
self-perception, self-regulation, gender expression, and gender identity” (Patton, et al.,
2016, p. 183). Female identity is influenced by interactions and the environment and for
many students, college represents a time where their identity as a female is salient (Patton, et al., 2016).

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule’s (1986, 1997) intellectual development, Baxter Magolda’s (1992) self-authorship theory, and Gilligan’s (1982) moral development sought to explain identity development from a female perspective (Patton, et al., 2016). Each study highlighted important differences in how women and men differ in shaping their self-image. Gender identity development is established in early childhood, although researchers indicate that college can reinforce or challenge one’s understanding of gender identity and expression (Patton, et al., 2016). Gender identity may be a salient for members of the research sample, therefore it is important to ascertain how gender may impact their collegiate experience.

Black, female, undergraduate student enrollment has increased over the past 10 years (Banks, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Currently, females account for the majority of the undergraduate, Black, student population (Banks, 2009; Aud, Fox & KewalRamani, 2010; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Between 1971 and 2005, Black males were more likely to enroll in college however, Black females currently outpace Black male enrollment 2:1 (Henry, 2008; Banks, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). In 2012-2013, Black female students earned 65% of the bachelor degrees awarded to Black students (Center for Education Statistics, 2016). This trend is expected to continue as female students overall account for 56% college students (Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Banks (2009) and Winkle-Wagner (2015) argued that Black females occupy two historically marginalized groups in higher education. They also comprise of a significant portion of students who are also first-generation. The intersection of race, class, gender,
socioeconomic background, and first-generation status contribute to the overwhelming challenges Black female students encounter at postsecondary institutions.

There is limited research on Black, female students (Rosales & Person, 2003; Bush, Chambers & Walpole, 2010). Most of the studies on Black students focus on men. According to Hamilton (2004) Black men and women are treated as a monolithic group. There are however some unique differences that Black women experience during college. Watt (2006) writes that perceptions of race and gender cause additional stress for students that impact their college experience. Shavers and Moore (2014) further argued that the racial climate in educational spaces impact the academic persistence and overall well-being of students, particularly Black, female students.

Although enrollment and graduation rates for Black women have increased this student population continues to encounter challenges (Allen, Jayakumar, Giffin, Kon, & Hurtado, 2006; Constantine &Watt, 2002; Banks, 2009). There is an imbalance of male/female enrollment (Rosales & Person, 2003; Henry, 2008; Garibaldi, 2014). Cuyjet (2006) found that the lack of Black male students negatively impacts Black female students. The imbalance in Black student enrollment results in social adjustment challenges for female students. Consequently, Black female students experience isolation due to underrepresentation (Winkle-Wagner, 2008).

Existing research indicates that Black female students, including Black, first-generation students, encounter several obstacles in pursuing a postsecondary degree (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006; Banks, 2009). Students are often underprepared and less confident in their academic abilities which
leads to anxiety, lower self-esteem, and identity development challenges (Bui, 2002; Alessandria & Nelson, 2005; Banks, 2009).

Black female students encounter negative stereotypes and racial prejudices that also impact their ability to connect with the college community (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2000; Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002; Banks, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Students report feeling like an outsider and adapt a marginalized self-concept which results in low self-esteem (Orbe, 2004) and stress (Banks, 2009). These experiences are particularly acute at PWIs (Solóranzo, Allen, & Carroll, 2002). Bonner and Evans (2004) and Banks (2009) found that student performance for Black students, is connected to how they feel about themselves. “An important factor in the success of Black collegians on predominately White campuses is the actual institutional environment, campus climate or institutional ecosystem” (Bonners & Evans, 2004, p. 9).

Shavers and Moore (2014) found in their longitudinal study of Black, female, graduate students, that research participants utilized various strategies in order to persist and thrive in the academic environment. The authors indicate that the cultural notion of the iconic Black woman as strong, independent, and resilient results in coping mechanisms that impact the emotional health and well-being of students. Additionally, projecting a resilient and motivated image can silence student experiences, deny authentic representation of one’s identity, and discourage students from seeking assistance or support. Shaver and Moore’s (2014) study indicated that students often use shifting and academic masks to combat stereo-types and oppressive environments. Shifting, as defined by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) is used by Black women to present themselves in different ways as a response to oppression. Students change identities
based upon context (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). Academic masks are used as a strategy to portray intellectual ability and professionalism (Shaver and Moore’s, 2014). Students act in ways consistent with institutionally accepted identities as a necessity.

Consistent with previous research, Strayhorn (2008a) and Banks (2009) found that Black students attending PWIs reported feeling pressure to prove their intellectual ability. These findings also highlight the additional burden students feel in mitigating negative stereo-types and demonstrating academic achievement.

**Challenges Based on Socioeconomic Background**

Socioeconomic background or social class is often used as a proxy for first-generation status (Patton, et al., 2016). There is limited research pertaining to low-income students and according to Patton, et al. (2016), no developmental theories related to class and college students. Bourdieu’s (2000) research regarding social and cultural capital is often used to explain social class structures. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often lack traditional forms of capital that are associated with successfully navigating college.

According to Patton, et al. (2016), colleges are often structured to give preference to students who possess capital that is typically accessible to students from middle and upper-class backgrounds. Additionally, social class structures can affect social integration and campus involvement (Patton, et al., 2016). The intersecting identities of race and class, which are often associated with first-generation status, present additional challenges in integrating first-generation students into campus life.

Similar to race and gender, research indicates that a student’s socioeconomic background impacts their collegiate experience and educational attainment (Nuñez &
Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Walporo, 2003; Sasso & DeVitis, 2015). First-generation and Black students are more likely than their peers to come from low-income backgrounds (Choy, 2001; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006). Students from low-income backgrounds tend to delay entering college, attend less selective institutions, study less, and take longer to degree completion (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Walporo, 2003).

Students from low economic backgrounds tend to come from single-family households, work more hours, live off campus, and have outside family obligations (Bui, 2002; Ishitani, 2003; Pike & Kuh, 2006). These outside responsibilities often interfere with the time students dedicate to academics and campus engagement opportunities that contribute to collegiate success. Consequently, students from low-income backgrounds spend less time with peers and do not participate in extra-curricular activities. Research shows that persistence rates are negatively impacted when first-generation and Black students do not engage in academic and social college experiences (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et. al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2006).

**Challenges Based on First-Generation Status**

For the past 25 years, researchers have studied this population to better understand the persistence and retention issues of this unique demographic (London, 1989; Willett, 1989). Many FGCSs encounter significant obstacles in accessing, navigating and completing college. Research indicates first-generation students are often unprepared for the rigors of college life and have a difficult time adjusting to the norms of higher education (Terenzini et al., 1996; Choy, 2001; Bui, 2002; Ishitani, 2003).
First-generation students often are academically unprepared, do not take advantage of advanced high school courses, and are more likely to score lower on college entrance exams (Choy, 2001; Bui, 2002; Ishitani, 2003). They lack social and cultural capital, are unfamiliar with how colleges work, and have trouble acclimating to campus life (Terenzini et al., 1996; Thayer, 2000; Strayhorn, 2006, 2008a). First-generation students do not have family members who can provide guidance in navigating financial aid, academic expectations, and social aspects of college (Nunez & Cuccaro-Almin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004). This lack of support can impact students’ sense of self, academic confidence, and perception of the campus environment.

College and universities, although diverse in numbers, often have campus climates that marginalized and underrepresented students find challenging to navigate (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). This is even more pronounced at PWIs who only began to admit students of color in 1954 after government intervention (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). The mandate to acclimate to the campus culture can have psychological and academic consequences for underrepresented students as they attempt to negotiate the educational environment (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Students often view the college environment from the lens of an outsider or marginalized member. This perception contributes to engagement issues which can impact the persistence and retention of this population (Orbe, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004).

There is a need for higher education to understand the persistence challenges of its increasingly diverse student population. Shifts in student demographics are expected to continue, with students of color and nontraditional students accounting for the majority of college students (Choy, 2001; Hurtado, 2007). The increase in undergraduate
enrollment of students from every race, ethnicity and social economic background, represent an opportunity for higher education to positively impact retention and completion rates of students.

Although there has been progress in obtaining access for under-represented populations, gaps continue to exist in degree attainment for students from different races and ethnicity, low socioeconomic backgrounds, and first-generation status (Center for Education Statistics, 2016). It is imperative that higher education administrators examine data in order to develop policy and programs that have a positive impact on the persistence and retention of students. This is particularly important for underrepresented and marginalized groups who are overwhelmingly represented in the data as retention challenges.

**Multicultural Models and Theories Relevant to Target Population**

Much of the literature on first-generation and underrepresented college students, center around a deficit model that highlights the myriad ways these populations are disadvantaged, fail to acclimate to college life, have significant retention and persistence challenges, and lag behind their counterparts in college attainment (Nunez & Cuccaro-Almin, 1998; Thayer, 2000; Bui, 2002; Ishitani, 2003; Orbe, 2004; Terenzini, et. al, 2006; Strayhorn, 2006; 2008a). Many of the foundational student development theories including Tinto (1975, 1993, 2004) and Astin (1984) do not include identity as a contributing factor in a student’s collegiate success. Consequently, research tended to highlight deficits when applying student development theory to diverse populations of students. As a result of the omission of identity as a factor in initial student development theories, several researchers began to explore aspects of social identity and its impact on
student development (Jones & Abes, 2003). Although not all aspects of each theory directly relate to the research population, the overall premise of Black Identity Development, Critical Race Theory, Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, Anti-deficit and Belonging frameworks provide a perspective from which to understand student behavior.

**Racial identity theories.** Race is a salient identity for many minority populations. Patton, et al. (2016), indicate that “racial identity theories highlight the role of race and the extent to which it is incorporated into self-concept” (p. 94). They further argue that racial identity is a shared phenomenon experienced by individuals of common racial heritage. Cross (1991) identifies five stages of Nigrescence which refers to the “process of becoming black” (p.147). This framework provides context for understanding race salience and how it may impact the experiences of Black college students.

Building on Cross’s (1971) seminal theory of Nigrescence, Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) postulate that Black identity is developed over a life span (Patton et al., 2016). The authors denote six different sectors that individuals experience, from infancy to adulthood, that contribute to the development of their Black identity. Family, historical events, socialization experiences, racism, self-concept, and world-views are contributing factors that shape, inform, and influence one’s Black identity (Patton, et al., 2016). These influences continue to impact students during college as they begin to explore and question their identity and ask, “who am I?” (Patton, et al., 2016).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) also provided a perspective from which to understand the racial identity development of college students. CRT seeks to provide context
regarding how students are impacted by their environment (Jones and Abes, 2013). “Put simply, it is impossible to fully understand college student identity without also addressing more macro elements, such as campus environment, campus climate, campus programs and policies, and student success” (p. 169). Race is central in CRT, and is often used by researchers to better understand the experiences of underrepresented students (Jones and Abes, 2013).

Black students often encounter racism, microaggressions, and negative stereotypes about their race and culture (Fries-Britt Turner, 2000; Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002; Watt, 2006). These occurrences can affect a student’s sense of self and impact their collegiate experiences. Harper and Quaye (2007) indicated that student departure is often related to identity conflict. Strayhorn (2010) and Harper (2012) each conduct research on Black student populations. Their work outlined several of the challenges students encounter, and further highlights the importance of identity and its impact on student outcomes. Furthermore, their research underscored the importance of why education professionals should develop competencies in understanding the dynamics of Black identity development and its impact on students, particularly for students attending PWIs.

**Model of multiple dimensions of identity.** The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) is based upon the work of Jones (1995, 1997) and presupposes that identity is layered, complicated, and fluid. Individuals possess multiple social identities that can be examined in relation to one’s core and societal contexts (Jones & Abes, 2013). “That is, one’s sense of self and identity is constructed through interactions with
others and a larger social context, which includes systems of privilege and oppression, social norms, and societal expectations” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 57).

Essential to the model are one’s core or personal characteristics, multiple social identities, salience of each social identity, and the proximity of the social identity to the core (Jones & Abes, 2013). MMDI serves as a framework for understanding identity intersectionality and salience of different social identities (Jones & Abes, 2013). The framework also established that identity is internally defined and constantly reshaped based upon context, identity salience, and its relationship to the core (Jones & Abes, 2013).

MMDI served as context for understanding the study population and the intersections of race, gender, and first-generation status. Research data may indicate the salience of one or more of the participant’s social identities in relation to their core and current context. Additionally, because identity is constantly being constructed, MMDI may provide a useful perspective for understanding the lived-experiences of Black, female, first-generation students during their collegiate career.

**Anti-Deficit Framework**

Much of Harper’s (2012) work focuses on the persistence of Black students, with specific attention on Black males. His anti-deficit model is based upon the fields of sociology, psychology, gender studies, and education, and is informed by three decades of research conducted on Black males and society. Harper (2012) sought to reframe the lens through which under-represented and marginalized student collegiate attainment is examined.
Harper’s (2012) research examined the Black male student population from an alternate perspective. Instead of adding to the literature on the various ways in which Black males are not academically or socially prepared, are disadvantaged, and have family deficits, Harper (2012) focused on the success stories and habits of Black male achievement. Consequently, his findings highlighted positive traits that impact the persistence and attainment of Black males (Harper, 2012).

Harper (2012) reframed commonly asked deficit perspective research questions which helps to yield responses that highlight achievement and factors that contribute to collegiate success. His framework focused on precollege socialization and readiness, college achievement, and precollege success (Harper, 2012). Variables such as familial factors, academic preparedness, classroom experiences, out of class engagement, enriching educational experiences, graduate school enrollment, career readiness are examined in his studies (Harper, 2012).

The anti-deficit model is primarily used as a framework for research on students of color. Harper’s (2010, 2012) work examined persistence of students of color in the STEM field, high school, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Each study sought to highlight factors that keep students enrolled in college.

Harper’s (2012) anti-deficit framework challenged the practice of examining the educational attainment of ethnic and racial minorities, as well as students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, from a deficit framework. His work filled a gap in the literature by highlighting the achievement of students of color from a different lens. Harper (2012) argues that deficit theory thinking is racially and socially contextualized. Deficit thinking connects student performance to cultural background, self-motivation,
and individual abilities. It automatically attributes low educational attainment to traits, behaviors, and motivations that place students from underrepresented identities, first-generation statuses, and low socioeconomic backgrounds at a disadvantage (Harper, 2012).

Harper (2012) acknowledged that students have a responsivity to contribute to their collegiate success but argues colleges and universities have a responsibility for providing a campus climate, support structures, and institutional practices that foster environments that support educational attainment.

Harper’s (2012) model was useful in examining achievement of underrepresented student populations. It was particularly relevant as this research sought to understand the factors that contribute to the persistence and retention of Black, female students. The intent of this study connects with Harper’s approach of reframing research questions to identify success strategies and highlight participant stories that give a voice to the collegiate achievements of students of color. The overall goal was to better understand the positive contributing factors that impact the persistence of under-represented and marginalized student identities.

**Belonging**

Tinto (1993) and Astin (1993) identify ways in which students are responsible for becoming connected and engaged. Strayhorn (2008a) however, emphasized the importance of belonging, arguing that student success is also tied to a student’s perception of their importance within the campus community. He further argued that Black students attending PWIs are at risk and may fail to persist (Strayhorn 2008a). Strayhorn (2008a) contends that the needs of Black students are different from their
peers, where interpersonal relationships are necessary for academic and social
development (Strayhorn, 2008b). Isolation and the lack of connection with the institution
and members of the community, contribute to the lack of belonging students may feel.
Ultimately, a lack of belonging contributes to challenges in student persistence.

Strayhorn’s (2008b) premise was not solely based upon the student’s actions, but
recognized the institution’s role in maintaining an inclusive environment, and in
implementing practices, policies and procedures that facilitate student engagement.
Previous student development theories did not specify institutional responsibility.
Belonging as a framework, applies to a broader spectrum of identities and is an important
construct in facilitating student success.

First-generation and Black students share similar background characteristics that
are often used in theoretical models to explain student persistence (Tinto, 1975). Pre-
collegiate characteristics, the lack of social, academic, economic and cultural capital,
race, and gender are often identified as factors that affect collegiate success (Pascarella &
Terenzini, 2005). Research demonstrates the importance of understanding the elements
and social identities that influence the transition, academic achievement, engagement,
and degree attainment habits of marginalized and under-represented student populations.

It is important to understand how background characteristics and pre-collegiate
factors impact the experiences of diverse and underrepresented college students. This
study adds to the growing body of research that seeks to better understand the
experiences of Black, female, first-generation college students. A qualitative study using
a grounded theory approach allowed participants to provide rich data and detailed stories
that further explain the research phenomenon and answer study questions on how Black,
female, first-generation college students experience college and what contributed to their persistence.

**Current Study**

**Research purpose and questions.** The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences Black, female, first-generation college students and explore the factors that contribute to their college persistence. Specifically, the primary purpose was to provide a voice for a diverse student demographic, to gain a better understanding of the challenges and obstacles these students encounter, to ascertain educational and motivational influences, to better understand how racial and gender identity influence their student experiences, and to identify resources that are helpful in navigating their collegiate journey. The research questions that were explored are: (1) How do Black, female, first-generation college students experience college and (2) What are Black, female, first-generation college students’ perceptions about factors that contribute to their persistence in college? Phenomenological and grounded theory approaches informed the research design, methods, and analyses to address these questions.

**Research method and rationale.** Qualitative research provides an opportunity to study a specific topic or phenomenon in its natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 2003). The researcher develops a relationship with participants that hopefully results in obtaining meaningful data that tells a story about a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). Research should reveal behaviors, opinions, perceptions, or expectations of the target audience that are culturally specific to the population (Creswell, 2003). A benefit of using a qualitative approach, is the ability to modify questions and make follow-up inquiries that provide complex textural descriptions and help the
researcher gain a greater understanding of discoveries that impact the research question (Creswell, 2003). “Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent” (Rwegoshora, 2014, p.146). Each of these factors are relevant to the research questions of this study.

A phenomenological approach based upon the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and education was used as a framework for this research (Creswell, 2003). This methodology undergirded the data collection and allowed participants to naturally share information that is rich and descriptive. Why and how the participant experienced the phenomenon were significant as it provided insight into each subject’s motivations and actions (Creswell, 2003). Through investigation, the researcher gained an in-depth understanding of the nuanced and shared experiences directly from the target population.

The use of phenomenology encouraged study participants, to provide stories and data that is specific to the research questions of (1) How do Black, female, first-generation college students experience college and (2) What are Black, female, first-generation college students’ perceptions about factors that contribute to their persistence in college?

Grounded theory provided a framework for analyzing the data in this study. Categories and themes are continually established as a mechanism for better understanding participant stories (Charmaz, 2006). A mid-level theory based upon connecting themes derived from each research participants’ lived experiences through their own voices, was developed to provide a greater understanding of the research problem. Ultimately, each story provided important insight into the lived experiences of participants who navigate a PWI as a Black, female, first-generation college student. It
was important to use a grounded theory approach, to ascertain analytical connections based upon participant stories, that allows for the construction of a theory related to how Black, female, first-generation students experience college.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Participants and Setting

The participants for this study included currently enrolled college-aged Black, female, students who were 18 years of age and older. The following vulnerable populations were not included in this study, minors, college students that were under the age of 18, minors, or are unable to consent due to communication or cognitive challenges, pregnant women, or individuals who are not yet adults. Vulnerable populations such as minors and cognitively impaired individuals are unable to give consent due to increased risk for adverse outcomes and therefore were excluded from this study to safeguard their well-being. Table 1 outlines the participants with pseudonyms and additional relevant demographic information on the eight study participants.

Table 1

Participant Chart

| Name   | Gender | Class Standing | Race/Ethnic Identity | Age | Housing | SES         | High School         | Major                  | Minor                     | Sibling Attended College |
|--------|--------|----------------|----------------------|-----|---------|-------------|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Nia    | Female | F              | Black/African American | 19  | On-campus | Middle Class | Public               | Psychology             | Biology                  | No                       |
| Kali   | Female | F              | Black/Haitian         | 19  | On-campus | Lower Class  | Public              | Biochemistry & Accounting   | Business                 | Yes                      |
| Amber  | Female | F              | Black/Rwandan         | 19  | On-campus | Lower Class  | Public              | Accounting & Advertising | N/A                     | No                       |
| Nola   | Female | F              | Black/African American | 18  | On-campus | Middle Class | Home-schooling      | Undeclared             | N/A                      | No                       |
| Bailey | Female | J              | Black/African American | 20  | On-campus | Middle Class | Public              | Psychology             | Spanish & International Studies | No                       |
| Joy    | Female | F              | Black/Haitian         | 18  | On-campus | Lower Class  | Public              | Athletic Training       | Sports Administration   | No                       |
| Naomi  | Female | F              | Black/Jamaican        | 18  | On-campus | Lower/Middle Class | Public       | Journalism & Sociology | Africana Studies         | No                       |
| Gia    | Female | F              | Black/African American | 18  | On-campus | Lower Class  | Charter             | Psychology             | Sociology                | No                       |

The research site was a private, predominately-White, Division I, research institution in Florida. The student demographics at the study setting were 52% White,
20% Hispanic or Latino, 10% Black, 13% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% two or more races (University of Miami, 2017). The demographics for the county where the institution resides was 14% White, 67% Hispanic or Latino, 17% Black, 2% Asian, and 1% two or more races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

**Data Collection**

In this multi-method qualitative study, which was specifically informed by phenomenology and grounded theory, IRB approval was sought for conducting the research. A snowball sampling technique that is participant and site specific was used. Snowball sampling is an effective tool used to determine the individuals that can be a rich source of information that is relevant to the research problem (Creswell, 2003). The researcher utilized social networks to include FaceBook, Twitter, OrgSync Student Organization portal, and student organization listservs, to ask members via email, phone, social media, and word of mouth, whether they know of any individuals who fit the inclusion criteria. Professional colleagues and members of the researcher’s social network were contacted by phone, email, and word of mouth. Social network members to include institutional representatives such as the Vice President for Enrollment Management, the first-generation student academic resource advisor, enrollment management information technology manager, and the FirstGen U student organization co-advisor. Additionally, flyers were distributed via email to members of FirstGen U and posted on OrgSync, which is a student organization portal at the research site.

The study population was participant and site specific, meaning all members were Black, female, first-generation, and currently enrolled at the target setting. Creswell (2003), indicated that a sampling strategy for a qualitative study should include
purposeful sampling of the individuals and site. This strategy is useful in conducting qualitative research with limited resources and where a limited number of participants are used to explain the research phenomenon. (Creswell, 2003). Participants who met the research criteria were contacted via email to explain the purpose and procedures of the study. All participants were given oral and written informed consent. Additionally, permission was secured for audio recording. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time during the process.

Participants were asked to meet in person. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, using initial prompts with additional elaborating questions. The process of asking open-ended and broad questions allowed the interview to flow and change as needed (Creswell, 2003). This methodology was consistent with a phenomenological perspective where respondents can share culturally relevant and salient responses that provide the researcher with comparable data that is rich and descriptive (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes and was audio recorded. Pseudonyms were used in place of participant names and all participant interviews were anonymously submitted to a third-party vendor for transcription. No identifiable participant information was shared. Data was then analyzed in order to identify important themes and concepts. After considering initial research findings, additional snowball sampling was needed to follow-up on important themes and clarify initial findings. Clarification was accomplished through member checking and follow-up interviews which were based upon participant consent.

It was important that phenomenology and grounded theory approaches were used for the current study as it allowed the researcher to explore real-life stories and
understand the lived-experiences of research participants. Phenomenology provided a methodology for the collection of data and helped to uncover the meaning of the phenomena experienced participants. The data collected during in-depth one-on-one interviews where important as they allowed the women to provide rich data pertaining to their experiences navigating college as a Black female. Focus groups which were also conducted allowed the researcher to ensure that the data, categories and themes accurately captured participant experiences and to gain a greater understanding of the research phenomenon. It also permitted the researcher to focus more deeply on areas of interest. Seven of the eight women attended the focus group discussion which was moderated by the researcher and recorded for later transcription. The women had an opportunity to interact with fellow participants and discuss similarities and differences of each person’s lived-experiences. The discussion allowed for further clarification and confirmation of initial themes.

**Data Analysis**

Research data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach, informed by Charmaz (2004) and Miles and Huberman (1994). This method allowed for the extraction of categories and themes, coding and refining of data, and constant comparisons in order to obtain a theory that was grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2004). Creswell (2003) also highlighted the work of Miles and Huberman (1994) as an effective systemic approach to analyzing data for qualitative research. This strategy was used as the procedural framework for analyzing interview data from this research study. The process included preparing and organizing transcript data, followed by analyzing, coding
and developing themes. Finally, the data was condensed and prepared for discussion (Creswell, 2003).

Following the procedural analysis process outline by Miles and Huberman (1994), all data collected in one-on-one interviews to include audio recordings and memos were organized into files. After the conclusion of each interview, the audio recording and researcher notes were saved using a pseudonym on a secure university server that is password and identity authenticated, and prepared for transcription by a third-party vendor. Creswell (2003) highlights the importance of writing notes and reflective passages as part of the research process. The notes which were transcribed contained initial researcher impressions, were helpful in developing a chronology of the interview process, defined relationships between categories, and highlighted potential comparisons in the data (Creswell, 2003). Participant interviews and research notes provided an initial understanding of the phenomenon under study (Charmaz, 2006).

A preliminary review was conducted to provide the researcher with an initial assessment of the data. Charmaz (2014) indicated that continually placing the data in relevant context or constant comparison is one method used in grounded theory. Constant comparison allowed the researcher to continually analyze the data to develop a theory that emerged from participant stories. Memos were created to identify key concepts, highlight initial impressions, and categorize the data (Creswell, 2003). It was important to analyze the data and memos during collection. This step allowed the researcher to avoid collecting tangential data, provided an opportunity to reflect on the process, determine if information collected provided context for answering the research question, ascertain if new ideas or concepts had emerged, and gave an opportunity to
establish how to make sense of the data that was received (Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, reviewing the data during the collection process helped the researcher to have an in-depth examination of the files and include additional detailed descriptions that were helpful in determining themes related to understanding the experience of Black, female, first-generation college students (Charmaz, 2006).

After receiving the transcribed interview from a third-party transcription service vendor, the data was reviewed for accuracy. A grounded theory approach is not linear and required the researcher to continually review and compare data during the analytic process (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher transferred the transcript data to an excel spreadsheet and became familiar with all facets of the data, often including additional detailed memos (Creswell, 2003). According to Charmaz, (2006), memo writing is a useful analytical note for the researcher to identify gaps, clarify codes or categories, make initial comparisons, or explain how categories arise from the data. At this juncture, the data was coded line by line. This was achieved by reviewing, interpreting and coding the data using the participant’s own words. Four columns of coding were created based upon participant responses. Each column contained data that was continually broken into segments that captured the essence of participant comments. The first column was open coding where the data was summarized and initial concepts were labeled. The second column contained axial coding which further summarized the data into families which helped to relate categories and concepts to each other. The third column contained selective coding where the grouped concepts were turned into core categories. The fourth column was emotional coding and contained notes regarding verbal and nonverbal emotional responses and reactions of participants.
Coding in qualitative research includes reducing data into manageable segments, labeling blocks of text, writing notes, and grouping segments based upon predetermined categories and themes (Charmaz, 2006). Coding was pivotal to the research process as it identified categories, organizes data into meaningful groupings, highlighted emergent themes and developed conceptual elements of a theory in interpreting the lived stories of first-generation college students that are Black and female (Creswell, 2003).

Next, using a grounded theory framework outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008), the researcher analyzed and interpreted the coded data by developing context specific descriptions which were then used to create themes. Grounded theory allowed the researcher to progressively focus more narrowly on the research questions and phenomenon. The aggregated data was organized by code allowing the researcher to categorize the information, see emergent themes and group common concepts together (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Reviewing the data in aggregate allowed for different field interviews to be appropriately coded, categorized and labeled (Creswell, 2003). Named categories derived from words and phrases from participant transcript data and coding allowed for the classification of the text. According to Creswell (2003) classifying the text is a common step in analysis and results in the identification of broad themes.

The interpretation of the data was based upon the researcher’s perspective and personal views (Creswell, 2003). The analysis was accomplished by raising questions, determining what was important, why it was important, and how the phenomenon was experienced by research participants (Creswell, 2003). It was important to identify specific words and phrases which were significant to participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Additionally, the researcher continually prioritized the phenomenon and the
manner in which participants described their experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This grounded theory approach was an attempt by the researcher to summarize, sort, synthesize, and find meaning in the collected data. Furthermore, the researcher connected the data to theory and other research literature (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The cyclical nature of grounded theory logic helped the researcher make sense of participant stories related to question one and their experiences as Black, female, first-generation college students.

Based upon the work of Charmaz (2004) and Miles and Huberman (1994) seven themes and twenty-three categories were found using grounded theory, that explained first research question of what were the experiences of Black, female first-generation college students. Upon reflection, these themes did not adequately address the essence of how the women persisted in college. To address research question two, a second data analysis was conducted using Charmaz’ (2014) research. Charmaz’s (2014) grounded theory framework allowed the researcher more leeway to interpret grounded theory themes and answer research question two on participant perceptions of academic persistence. The researcher again identified themes based upon the shared lived-experiences of the participants. The procedure of moving back and forth between data and analysis, and the systematic generation of a theoretical explanation based upon participant stories, is essential in a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Findings developed concepts and generated a mid-level theory that is both explanatory and predictive in explaining the experiences of the study population (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Based upon the findings a grounded theory model was developed. Finally, charts,
tables and visual images were used to assist in illustrating themes and research findings (Creswell, 2003).

**Trustworthiness**

Shenton (2004), outlines several actions that can be used to support the trustworthiness of qualitative research with a grounded theory approach. The first is credibility which focuses on ensuring that research findings are accurate (Shenton, 2004). The accuracy of this study was achieved by member checking transcript data, reviewing researcher analysis, and by debriefing findings with peers, advisors and colleagues who are knowledgeable of the phenomenon and study population. Member checking in this study was achieved by providing participants an opportunity to review transcript data, researcher notes, emergent themes, and final conclusions. The researcher sought consent from each study participant and asked them to approve, amend, or disapprove research data at any point during the research process.

Participants were invited to attend a focus group and/or a one-on-one interview in order to member check. Focus groups are a useful technique as they can provide the researcher an opportunity to obtain clarification on transcript data, emergent themes and final conclusions. It also gave participants an opportunity to interact with one another and compare individual opinions (Acocella, 2011). Creswell (2003) indicates that focus groups and interviews may yield different types of data. Some participants may be inclined to share more detailed information in interviews while others may find that focus groups create synergy among participant stories and perspectives. The use of interviews and focus groups as a strategy allowed participants an opportunity to share in the environment they find most comfortable and gives the researcher an opportunity to have
greater insight into patterns and research themes (Creswell, 2003). This strategy was selected as an additional method of ensuring the trustworthiness of the research study.

The trustworthiness of this study ensures that the true stories and experiences of participants are shared, allowing readers to understand the phenomenon of participant experiences as Black, female, first-generation students. By providing sufficient detail related to context, research design and methods, and specifying the systematic approach used to ascertain, analyze and formulate findings, readers can determine if the study is applicable to different environments, situations, or institutions. Additionally, the quality of work can be scrutinized so that the study can be duplicated and findings regarding the experiences of Black, female, fist-generation college students are confirmed to have emerged from the data.

Throughout the project, the researcher documented closely and consulted research committee members to review and provide feedback in order to ensure researcher influences and biases did not impact research results. An audit trail detailing research steps taken from the start to the conclusion of the study was taken (Creswell, 2003). This allowed for research decisions and methodology to be duplicated. Secondly, transcripts were coded with preliminary observations annotated in a memo format. Participants were invited to member check, by reviewing transcript data and analysis. This feedback, which was solicited throughout the research process, was important to ensure the researcher’s understanding was a close account of the participants lived experiences. After all data was collected and analyzed for developing themes, participants were invited to affirm, amend or disaffirm interview data, researcher notes,
and emergent themes to indicate if model accurately reflects their stories. Participants also had an opportunity to ask clarifying questions of researcher findings.

As an agent and administrator for over 20 years at the research site, I am familiar with the organizational culture and have established contacts that are helpful in accessing data and identifying potential study participants. Furthermore, my office advises FirstGen U which is a registered student organization at the research site. To ensure there is no conflict of interest, emails and flyers were distributed and potential participants were asked to contact the researcher to discuss participation in the study. All participants were asked to review the informed consent form, explicit instructions and a detailed explanation of the research study was provided. Participants had at least one opportunity to review, amend, and disapprove of transcript data, themes and conclusions. Study members did not benefit from participation in the study nor did participation impact their standing with the institution. These strategies were utilized to further guarantee trustworthiness, and to ensure students felt comfortable sharing their vivid experiences as Black, female, first-generation college students.

Snowball sampling was another method used to establish credibility (Shenton, 2004). This type of sampling refers to asking participants to assist in identifying individuals who may fit research criteria. This strategy helped to ensure credibility as new participants were encouraged by their peers to assist with the research study. It also helped to mitigate potential coercion of participants by the researcher and encourage honest sharing. This approach was utilized in the recruitment of participants. Participants were recruited in person and through email. Contact information of potential
participants received from personal, professional contacts and members of the university community were vetted to determine if the student was appropriate for the study.

Participants were informed in person and in writing of their right to leave at any time, or to discontinue participation in the study. Participants could also refuse to answer any question during the interview process. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and contribute additional ideas to the study. This strategy was used to ensure that the information shared by participants was voluntary, forthright, and honest (Shenton, 2004). In an effort to ensure information shared by participants were authentic and transparent, the researcher asked follow-up questions and clarifying responses. Participants were also asked to review interview transcripts and examine initial researcher findings to ensure accuracy of data collected. This process called “member checks” ensured that the information collected accurately reflects the participant’s intention and experiences (Shenton, 2004).

Member checks were completed throughout the research process. If given consent, participants had an opportunity to formally and informally review transcripts, researcher interpretations, analysis, and conclusions. Participants could affirm, amend or disaffirm interview data, researcher notes, transcript data, emergent themes, as well as researcher conclusions. This process ensured validity and accuracy of collected information (Charmaz, 2006). Additionally, it allowed participants to correct errors, exclude or challenge interpretations, and assess adequacy of data and preliminary findings.

Transcript data was also continually reviewed to guard against readjusting the research question to align with participant responses. This was also accomplished by
member checking. Participants could assist the researcher in ensuring reported data accurately captured participant intentions. Additional information and clarifying data could also be contributed (Charmaz, 2006). Shenton (2004) indicated that this type of action is referred to as “negative case analysis”. The researcher reviewed data to ensure accuracy, reconfirm themes, and substantiate that findings relate to the phenomenon (Shenton, 2004). If permission was given, the researcher systematically engaged with participants to ensure collected data and conclusions were authentic and reflect their experience as a Black, female, first-generation college student. At any time, participants could request to review, amend or remove data that was not an accurate representation of their interview or experience.

Frequent meetings with advisors and the principle investigator also contributed to trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). Monthly consultations were held with Dr. Carole Anne Phekoo, Assistant Clinical Professor in the Department of Educational and Psychological Studies, and Program Director of the Higher Education Program at the University of Miami, and with Dr. Debbiesiu Lee, my dissertation chair, an experienced psychological researcher, and a tenured faculty at the University of Miami. Dr. Lee also served as an external auditor, giving feedback on all stages of the coding process, and the theory generation. Guidance was sought in managing the data, identifying categories and themes, as well as honing research findings. Following each interview, researcher notes, transcript data and initial findings were presented in their original form and in an excel document to my dissertation supervisor. Feedback was solicited from advisors at specific intervals during the research process, including after the conclusion of each interview,
during the progression of analyzing and developing themes, throughout the auditing and writing process, at monthly class sessions, and in one-on-one consultation meetings.

In addition to receiving supervision from experienced faculty researchers, several professional colleagues and classmates periodically reviewed the research process. Colleagues who were familiar with institutional data and the participant population, were utilized monthly in clarifying categories, themes, and initial research findings. Meetings were scheduled the second week of each month, to review research progress and discuss emergent themes and conclusions. Mini research project presentations were also given during monthly class sessions which were scheduled by Drs. Phekoo, Lee and Ahn. Class members and faculty members were helpful in reviewing methodology and assisted the researcher in connecting participant stories to existing theory. Additionally, participation in periodic informal writing groups scheduled by doctoral classmates provided opportunities to share ideas, review methodology, and receive feedback on the research progress. Shenton (2004) argued that frequent meetings and discussions with superiors, peers, and colleagues provide a different perspective and help the researcher refine and strengthen the research project.

“Reflective commentary” as described by Shenton (2004) involved continually evaluating the research analysis process which included reviewing the researcher’s notes to determine consistency between data, findings and final conclusions (p. 68). As part of the research methodology of this study, research notes and memos were used to track initial impressions, themes and emerging ideas. The researcher consulted with senior advisors to clarify questions and reconfirm categories and themes.
The credibility of the researcher was tantamount to the credibility of the entire research project (Shenton, 2004). Details regarding the researcher’s background, professional experience, funding sources, and study approvals provided important information regarding the researcher’s motive and relationship to the phenomenon that is investigated. The researcher for this study is a third-year University of Miami doctoral student in the Higher Education Leadership program. In addition, the researcher has over 20 years of professional experience as an educator in higher education. The current study was supervised by Dr. Carole Anne Phekoo, Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational and Psychological Studies, and Program Director of the Higher Education Program at the University of Miami, and Dr. Debbiesiu Lee, dissertation chair, an experienced psychological researcher and tenured faculty at the University of Miami. IRB approval was secured to conduct the research and John Haller, Vice President of Enrollment provided additional approval to access institutional data on the participant population. Outside funds were not used to complete this research study. All expenses were paid by the researcher.

Specifics regarding the research site, participants, and method of data collection detailed research parameters, context and restrictions (Shenton, 2004). These details contributed to the credibility of the research and ensure that findings are transferable. Transferability refers to the applicability of the results to new populations and sites (Shenton, 2004). Shenton (2004) however acknowledged the larger debate among researchers that question the ability of some qualitative research to be transferable due to relatively small participant sizes. One strategy to mitigate the effects of a small participant sample was to provide enough detailed information that allowed the reader to
draw their own inferences (Shenton, 2004). The research phenomenon and findings described in this study provided sufficient detail and evidence to assist the reader in understanding the target audience, Black, female, first-generation college students and their college experiences. Specifically, this research gave a voice to the research questions of how Black, female, first-generation college students experience college and what contributed to the persistence of this population.

All research was conducted at a single site, all participants are Black, female, first-generation, currently enrolled, 18 and older college-aged students. The study was bound by the research site, however findings may be transferrable to other student populations, with similar backgrounds, attending similar institutions.

Another strategy used to ensure research trustworthiness was to examine its dependability. Dependability refers to the ability to obtain the same results if the research study was duplicated (Shenton, 2004). To achieve dependability, the researcher provided an audit trail which is a detailed account of the research design and execution (Charmaz, 2006). This in-depth account or audit trail of the investigative process allows for duplication of the research study.

It is imperative when utilizing a grounded theory approach that trustworthiness is established by gathering thick and rich data, that uses participant words which are systematically member-checked for accuracy, which helped to develop themes and yield conclusions that accurately and authentically represented the phenomenon and answered study questions on how Black, female, first-generation students experience college, and what contributes to their persistence.
**Saturation**

Saturation was achieved when themes were comprehensive. According to Charmaz (2006), when the data yields no new themes, the same patterns continue to emerge, or the exact same comparisons are made, the research has reached saturation. Constant comparison required at each stage for interview data, themes and observations to be compared at all levels and between all interviews to gain greater awareness of themes and potential researcher influences (Charmaz, 2014). After the sixth interview, when the researcher was confident that all themes derived from the research were exhaustive, two additional participants were interviewed to ensure no new themes arise, thus helping to ensure saturation.

Finally, the researcher accounted for the findings and ensured that the information obtained was confirmed. “Confirmability” as described by Shenton (2004) included acknowledging any biases that may have influenced the research, conceding assumptions and how decision processes are made, and providing an “audit trail” so that findings can be tracked back through the data (Shenton, 2004). Researcher biases for this study were further acknowledged below under the heading Researcher’s Stance.

In an effort to confirm the objectivity of this research project, a detailed reporting of the methodology was provided. There are several strategies used to gather and verify the data, including member checking each section, reviewing field note and memos, consulting superiors, colleagues and peers, and creating headings and themes which created an audit trail (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, diagrams and charts were used to depict the research process and findings (Shenton, 2004).
Each of these techniques and systematic approaches to gathering, analyzing and reporting research findings, allowed the authentic voices and stories of participants to be shared. Furthermore, each practice allowed the research questions of how do Black, female, first-generation college students experience college and what contributes to the persistence of Black, female, first-generation college students to be highlighted.

**Researcher’s Stance**

As a researcher, certain biases shape my worldview and perception of higher education. My experience as a Black, female who attended college at a PWI in a predominately White state, influences my opinion on issues encountered by Black students pursing a postsecondary degree. It is my belief that Black students encounter additional challenges in navigating the higher education system. They also face subtle and overt instances of racism, discrimination, and stereotyping in academic and co-curricular spaces. These experiences influence how students feel about the institution and can affect their ability to thrive academically and socially. Higher education can and should do more to support marginalized population in navigating, acclimating, persisting, and excelling in college.

Additionally, I am an educator within the higher education field with over 20 years of experience, ten of these years have been in multicultural student affairs. My role is to serve as an advocate for under-represented and marginalized student populations, similar to the students represented in this research study. The students who inquired about first-generation student services challenged me to think of ways in which my institution and more specifically my department, could be more responsive in supporting this student population.
My interest in this research topic was a direct result of interaction with several first-generation students who sought resources and support from my office. The ultimate impetus for this research was to serve as a voice, to provide support, impact policy, and develop programs and resources, that facilitate the successful matriculation of this underrepresented population. “The basic tenet of this worldview is that research should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers’ lives” (Creswell, 2003).

The researcher acknowledges biases pertaining to challenges underrepresented and marginalized groups encounter when pursuing a college degree, particularly when attending a PWI. These beliefs are a direct result of personal attributes, previous collegiate experiences, and observations made as a higher education professional. First-generation students at the research site have requested support and guidance in navigating college, and I believe it is incumbent upon higher education institutions to be more responsive to this growing population.

My personal and professional beliefs served as the impetus for studying this target population. It was my hope that by highlighting the experiences of study participants, additional resources, services and policies can be established to assist in the retention and persistence of Black, female, first-generation college students.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of Black, female, first-generation college students who pursue collegiate success at a predominately White, private, research institution in the state of Florida. The research questions explored were: (1) How do Black, female, first-generation college students experience college? and (2) What are Black, female, first-generation college students’ perceptions about factors that contribute to their persistence in college?

The collective results revealed themes and categories that captured student experiences. The seven themes found to be particularly salient for participant experiences included: Resources that Impact My College Experience, I Had to do it on My Own, Preparing for and Navigating College is Emotionally Taxing, It Always comes Back to Finances, I Always Count the Number of “Mes” in the Room, Challenges within the Black Student Community, and It’s All On Me.

To more accurately answer research question two, a second data analysis was conducted. Based upon participant narratives, a separate theme titled Core Strengths: #BlackGirlMagic was developed which more accurately captured participant perceptions on persistence. Grounded theory was used to develop a model called “The Piece”. This model captured the essence of participant experiences and answered research questions regarding factors that contribute to the persistence of Black female, first-generation college students. Finally, aligning with phenomenology, a vignette was used to portray the essence of the experience being a first generation, Black, female, college student on a predominantly White campus.
Below chapter four outlines study findings by highlighting collective themes and categories, next a grounded theory model is presented, and finally the vignette Kathryn’s Story provides additional context for understanding the experiences and persistence behaviors of Black, female, first-generation students.

**Resources that Impact My College Experience**

Participants were asked about their pre-collegiate experiences as well as high school resources that impact their college experiences. Each spoke about classes, high school staff, and access to college preparatory programs that continue to influence how they experience college.

**High school classes the foundation.** As part of the curriculum, advanced classes were offered at each of the participant’s high schools. Seven of the eight indicated that during high school they had taken at least one advanced placement class. Senior year, three of the participants were in dual enrollment programs and received college credits. Four participants spoke positively about their high school advanced placement classes and dual enrollment programs, crediting them with helping to ease the transition to college academic life. “Bailey” indicated that her high school offered “challenging courses” and that she was encouraged to take them. She states the following.

That's why they pushed me to the honors classes and AP classes. And I feel as though the teachers did a very good job of preparing students if they didn't want to go to college. I don't feel like now that I've gotten here that I'm lost and I didn't learn anything to help me prepare to go here as far as education goes (Bailey).

“Amber” further indicates, “academic wise, I think it's pretty nice since I was challenged in high school. I don't really find the work here to be too overwhelming at all.”
“Nia” took advanced placement classes and participated in her high school’s nursing program. She graduated from high school with an LPN degree. Nia however wishes some of her classes would have been stronger academically, especially the science courses. She stated a more challenging curriculum would have better prepared her for college.

But um yeah, so like the social aspect wasn’t that bad um the educational aspect, in certain courses is not that bad but in other courses I wish I had a different experience in high school. I feel like it would have helped me more when I got here (Nia).

Someone at my high school encouraged me and served as a resource or I lacked resources. Each of the participants had varying levels of support and encouragement from staff at their high school. Five of the participants had a teacher or counselor who encouraged them to think about college and served as a resource in helping to complete college admissions requirements. Nia indicates that not all teachers at her high school were encouraging when it came to discussing college. She however feels fortunate to have had a college advisor and advanced placement literature teacher who were helpful.

We also had a college advisor who was amazing. If you needed anything in regards to college, how to get there, how to apply things and that sort-you could always go to her and she was a great resource (Nia).

As a home-schooled student, “Nola” had limited interaction with her high school. She began thinking about college just before her senior year. Nola’s athletic talent caught the attention of several college coaches who approached her about obtaining an athletic scholarship. As a result, Nola sought the assistance of a counselor who provided advice and waiver forms for the college entrance exams. Nola indicated that:
They were all very helpful. So you know she was still there for me helping me with the ACT, SAT type things. I hadn't taken them until senior year even though I should've taken them before that. But I didn't know and my parents didn't know.

“Amber” also stated that she attended one of the best schools in her county. Her classes were rigorous, high school staff were helpful and it was common for the entire graduating class to attend college.

My school pretty much provided information and I had a really good guidance counselor. So that was pretty helpful. She would help me with application and I had teachers who would also help me with my essays. I was very close with my teachers in high school so that was very helpful when it came to the application process (Amber).

Although Bailey, “Joy”, “Naomi” and “Gia” had high school staff that were supportive. They each encountered challenges in getting required paperwork processed and supporting documents mailed in a timely manner. Bailey states that her high school did not have SAT or ACT preparatory classes and students were encouraged to attend the local community college. She further states that most students remained local after graduating and it was rare for a student to attend college out of state. Consequently, she says staff did little to assist them in preparing documents for out-of-state schools.

Most of the school didn't go away so they weren't going to make a class for me to go to. And they really also didn't asked me if I needed it or not. I think they just assume that since I was, um, my, I was so like. What's the word I'm looking for? Adamant about going to an away, away school that they just figured I knew what I was doing. They were like, she probably, she clearly wants to go away so she knows what she is doing. So Yeah (Bailey).

**I couldn't afford to take a college prep course.** When asked about SAT and ACT preparatory classes, several of the participants indicated that they had to prepare for the college entrance exams on their own. Naomi recalled how she prepared for the ACT stating, “I had one ACT book. I shared it with everybody in the senior class and I'm like
if you guys need help I'm studying after school today” (Naomi). Others spoke of the cost and shared that classes were too expensive to take. Kali stated that it is normal for most of the students in her high school to take an ACT or SAT class, but that it was not an option for her. “No, you had to pay for those. I didn't have money so I had to teach myself. Most of the kids in my school did, they could afford it so they did” (Kali). Amber further stated that the SAT courses at her high school were often taught by the teachers and cost $500 making them unaffordable.

My family couldn't afford to provide me with SAT classes or tutors or anything along that line. So that was actually kind of hard. I had a study on my own and then figure out like what I was doing wrong on my own (Amber).

Joy stated that her high school offered SAT information but she did not consider it helpful. “Yeah, it was not even a prep. It was like information session. Let me rephrase the word prep in that, it was a workshop” (Joy).

I Had to do it On My Own

For several of the participants, lack of funds prohibited access to preparatory seminars for college entrance exams. Although lack of funds impacted their ability to take advantage of this resource, participants found ways to prepare for the exams. All eight participants spoke at length about having to navigate their collegiate journey on their own. The lack of knowledge, information, resources, being the first in their families to pursue a college degree, and managing family expectations were part of the challenges that participants encountered.

I don’t know how college works. For each of the participants learning about college was often a solitary and frustrating experience. They were unfamiliar with how college works and often consulted the internet to search for answers. Kali states:
I have to figure everything out by myself. So that's probably the worst thing. I have to figure everything out. I have to search everything. I have to ask other people, because they know it. I don't know. My mom can't help me, my parents can help me (Kali).

Many of the participants indicated that they felt as if they were always behind, struggling to catch up and learn what they believed most already knew. Gia recalled that applying to college was challenging because she and her family were learning as they went along.

It was hard because like me and my mom were both learning about the process together. So like stuff will pop up. And we didn't know what it was, what was going on. And she tried to help me as much as she could. But, she didn't know, I didn't know. So we were like be asking people like what we should do with this, what does this mean? (Gia).

Taking college entrance exams is a necessary component of applying to college. Nola indicated that she took the SAT and ACT late because she was unaware of their importance. “I hadn't taken them [SAT and ACT] until senior year even though I should've taken them before that. But I didn't know and my parents didn't know” (Nola).

Each participant recalled completing official documents, applying for financial aid and submitting housing and meal plan forms with little or no direction. All eight agreed that they had no one to rely on to ensure paperwork was submitted correctly and on time. Each was solely responsible for ensuring that whatever needed to be accomplished was done. Kali states “I'm just like, I always fill that out by myself because my parents, my mom doesn't know how to do that.”

**Being first-generation there is no one to tell me how it should be done.** The participants indicated that it was challenging being first-generation because there was no one to provide guidance on what and how things should be done. Naomi referred to her experience as a “struggle” because she lacked a family member who could provide
advice on how to navigate the college process. She further stated that being Black adds another dynamic which caused additional stress.

I think it has a lot to do with being you know first-generation because there's, there's no one before me to, that has went through these struggles and can tell me you know this is what you need to do. Someone that you know can be like I went through this. And also being, being like Black I just feel like there's, there's a lot on us to succeed, there's a lot on me to succeed (Naomi).

Nola has an older brother whom she thought would provide advice on applying to college. She says that he had enrolled in college but was not sure he had completed any classes. Nola spoke of her disappointment at not having a role-model to explain how college works.

I was like you know, I was always looking forward to someone to look up to and like show me how it's supposed to be done. I'm like OK you're at school now, you know I'm here. And you know, tell me how this is going to work, tell me what it's like and then he's like no. So I'm like OK well that didn't work out (Nola).

As a result, Nola feels obligated to serve as a role-model and provide information about college to her younger siblings. She would like advocate for her brothers and sisters, something she wishes her older sibling had done.

Kali also shared that as a first-generation student she lacked knowledge on how college works. She often consulted others or was self-reliant in searching for answers. Kali commented on the challenges of being the first in her family to pursue a higher education degree.

I have to figure everything out by myself. So that's probably the worst thing. I have to figure everything out. I have to search everything. I have to ask other people, because they know it. I don't know. My mom can't help me, my parents can help me (Kali).
Although all the participants agreed that being a first-generation student adds an additional factor in navigating college. Nola indicated that she ultimately believes it is important to mitigate any influences that could negatively affect how she experiences college. Nola shared how she attempts to navigate college as a first-generation student.

I don't want to. Yeah, I don't want to place an obstacle in front of me when it doesn't have to be. Like I could wake up every day like, you know thinking about the past or thinking about my parents and like everyone before me. I'm like man this is a lot on me. And basically, that's me placing a lot on me. When I could just wake up and do what I do. And I can embrace it and enjoy it like I'm supposed to. It instead of like carrying it like it's a burden. It doesn't have to be (Nola).

**I have to advocate for myself.** All eight participants shared that they must advocate for themselves when it comes to college. Joy, Gia, Nola, Naomi and Bailey each spoke about their high school experience and interacting with high school staff. Each described frustration at the lack of resources, support, and direction provided by their high schools. It was imperative that they advocate for themselves in order to attend college.

Bailey indicated that it was rare for students at her high school to pursue college out of state. As a result, staff at her high school focused on preparing students for the local community college and in-state institutions. Bailey shared that she was never asked what type of support she might need in preparing her college application and ultimately had to advocate for herself in preparing for college entrance exams and securing required documents. Bailey stated the following when asked about high school support. “And they really also didn't asked me if I needed it or not” (Bailey). She also indicated why she believed her high school staff was not more helpful. “They were like, she probably, she clearly wants to go away so she knows what she is doing.” (Bailey).
Joy also shared that she had to advocate for herself in high school and that it has continued in college. She spoke about challenges with her high school counselor who tried to encourage her to stay in the IB program although Joy was no longer interested in staying. She said the following of their relationship. “But me and my guidance counselor like we had a fall out because he wanted me to stay in IB and I didn't want to stay in IB because I didn't think that was the right choice for me” (Joy). Joy continued to express frustration regarding college classes and the advising process. She stated that her high school and college course selection processes feel similar because she must advocate for herself in order to take specific classes. Joy shared the following about advising at the university.

I told one of my advisor that I don't want to do this major and they tell me wait, you might change your mind, take these classes now and see how you like it. I know what I want just help me out (Joy).

Nola spoke about her experience being home-schooled and shared that once it was determined she could obtain an athletic scholarship, it was imperative that she advocate for herself so that she could take the necessary classes and exams, obtain paperwork and complete not only the admission process but the athletic compliance processes as well. She articulated challenges associated with interacting with faculty because she is unfamiliar with classroom protocol. As a home-schooled student, Nola interacted one-on-one with her teachers and was looking to establish a similar dynamic in college. Nola said it was important that she is comfortable and shared this about her classroom expectations.
I be sure to always like, when I first got here I introduced myself walked up to each one of them [professors] and the ones that I didn't like, that I felt kind of scared and nervous in, I switched out of. Not because of that, of being scared or nervous, but one, I didn't care for the classes and two like the teacher wasn't engaging. I didn't feel that you know one-on-one (Nola).

**My parent(s) expected me to get everything done.** Each of the participants shared that their family expected them to complete all required paperwork, submit necessary documentation and meet all deadlines often with limited direction or support.

Nola shared that her parents frequently said they knew she would attend college. Nola was expected to complete required admissions paperwork, submit documentation for athletic approval, and finalize scholarship requirements which all needed to be expedited. She indicated the following regarding her parent’s role in the application process.

> Oh yes. I filled them out and even when I needed their information I'm still filling them out. Sitting there typing or writing and filling it out. Like OK. And it was funny because they care a lot. They wanted it done but they just were very sitting back about it. And I don't know if it was me over reacting or tripping. I don't think it was me (Nola).

Amber had a similar experience throughout her college admission process. She stated that many of her friends, who were continuing-generation students, were guided by their parents to complete their applications. Their parents also ensured that all materials were submitted in a timely manner. Amber’s experience was different as she was solely responsible for all aspects of the college admission process. She shared the following about her experience.
Well specifically like through the application process I know a lot of my friends who weren't first gen their parents were there just like pounding them to do that essay. They filled out the FASFA for them. They told them meet the deadlines. My mom wasn't really there, like she expected me to do that on my own. I filled out the FASFA and I'd ask her for the tax information. I was in charge of making sure I met my own deadlines. And also like I pretty much booked all my own tours and I made all the plans for that whereas my friends like their family members did all of that from them like the year in advance (Amber).

Preparing for and Navigating College is Emotionally Taxing

The process of preparing for and navigating college has been challenging for each of the participants. Determining how to proceed with limited direction is a source of stress for participants. Navigating college with limited support and feeling as if others do not understand your situation was described as isolating. Managing challenges related to fitting in and interacting with peers where differences in socioeconomic backgrounds are described as significant, was deemed overwhelming. Participants shared how preparing for and navigating college was emotionally taxing.

Getting everything done and figuring out what to do causes me a lot of stress.

Nola recalled the stress associated with the application process and her transition to college. She shared that much of her senior year was overwhelming as she had to learn about the various college requirements and complete tasks, all while backtracking to fulfill high school pre-requisites that she was unaware of due to being home-schooled. Nola indicated that even after being admitted to the university, she continued to experience significant stress related to making decisions on her own.

And it went on basically until I got here. Because you know signing up for housing here. Making sure I have the financial aid to together. My stepdad's a veteran he wanted me to get that done. I was like, oh my goodness (Nola).
Bailey further commented on the stress of being a Black female, first-generation student. She like many of the participants were overwhelmed by not having a parent who was familiar with college processes. When asked about barriers and obstacles that cause stress, Bailey responded:

I don't have, like my mom doesn't know anything about it so I can't really go to. I go to her she helps me but I can't really go to her about certain things so I just feel like a lot of pressure on myself to do good (Bailey).

Naomi further commented that as a Black person, as a female and as an immigrant, she feels additional pressure to succeed. Being admitted to college was only the beginning for Naomi and the participants, who all agreed that they face additional stressors that are different from many of their peers.

Like OK, you’re at college you made here. But you know you have to graduate, you have to do this and everything. You have to be the Black female, you have to be the strong Black female. You can't, you can't break down, you have to do your work. You gotta go to class you can't. It's just. You have to be strong (Naomi).

**Being a first-generation college student can be lonely.** Participants expressed experiencing feelings of isolation that surface at different times during the academic year. Kali mentioned feeling sad during some university-wide events where parents and family members are visiting campus. “Yeah, that's probably the sad, sad part for me because I never see my mom or anybody with me” (Kali). Several other participants also expressed feeling left out because their parent was unable to miss work to attend university sponsored events. Kali went on to describe additional challenges relating to being first-generation and seeing her peers interact with their families.
And um, the other thing sad about being I guess first-gen is that I see people with their parents coming, you can tell their parents have been to a university. You can see their parents helping them figure out what to do, what's next year after school, after undergrad and everything to help them apply (Kali).

In addition to feeling isolated during university events. Seven of the participants indicated that not many of their peers or their faculty members know they are first-generation students. Nola commented that she informs each of her faculty that she is first-generation and was home-schooled. She actively seeks to develop a one-on-one relationship with each instructor so that they can provide additional feedback on her course work. Nola said this is an important part of building a relationship with her faculty, something she lacked in high school as a home-schooled student.

When Kali was asked about being first-generation she indicated that most of her small group of close friends are first-generation. She developed a friendship with a female, first-generation student who lives in her residence hall and from that, met a few others who all happen to be first-generation. Kali stated her small group of friends are the only ones on campus who know she is first-generation.

Although Nola and Kali indicated they have shared with a few individuals their status as a first-generation college student, for the most part, each of the participants choose to keep this information private. Each said being first-generation does not usually come up in conversation or they chose to keep this part of their identity to themselves out of concern for how they might be perceived or treated. Amber indicated that only two people at the university knows she is first-generation. She however stated that it might be helpful to connect with others who are also first-generation and shared the following:
No, but it would be nice to find other people that I can relate with you know in that way because I feel like being a first-generation student it was kind of different from everyone else whose parents like have gone through the process, helping them. For me I pretty much had to do it like on my own. So, finding a friend who also did the same thing would be kind of nice (Amber).

**Class differences between me and my peers.** One of the reasons the participants are reluctant to share information related to being first-generation is connected to sentiments regarding socioeconomic status. All eight participants spoke about the challenges associated with connecting with their peers due to disparities in income. Naomi characterized the differences within the student body by stating. “And I think also it comes in with class. Like I knew I was going to come here and it was going to be like you know a whole bunch of rich White people because that's what the school is” (Naomi).

Differences in socioeconomic status are viewed as extreme. Participants shared stories of times where a lack of disposable income differentiated them from their peers. They are often unable to participant in social events and at times have uncomfortable conversations with peers who they say lack sensitivity and understanding of differences in economic backgrounds. Kali stated that it is difficult to connect with her peers due to differences in lifestyle. Below she commented on having to ask her friends to alter their plans.

Like, I guess maybe sometimes, my friends will want to go out like my upper-class friends. And I kind of have to tell them like I can't afford that it's a little too expensive. And so you feel like, you're making everybody not have fun and try to like find cheaper ways and things. I guess that's the only time I feel kind of bad (Kali).
Joy shared that she often has disagreements with her roommate which center around a lack of understanding of socioeconomic differences. Joy believes her roommate is insensitive to the economic challenges she experiences.

It's so much class difference. Cause it's like, even my roommate. That's why we can't really get along because she makes me feel like. I'm sorry to say she makes me feel like shit sometimes. Like that what I go through. I be like damn lady, you fortune, and I'm unfortunate but here, but at the end of the day we still meet at the same place (Joy).

Kali agreed that many of her peers lack empathy and understanding for the financial constraints of others, and they need to learn more about class differences. Kali said that she attempts to explain some of the differences to her peers but finds it difficult to connect with most people at the university.

Yeah, they don't understand. They ask, why do you always have to work, why do you have to do this? Why do you have to do that? Oh, can't you just like call your mom, your parents? They say something like that (Kali).

Naomi believes the student body lacks socioeconomic diversity stating that many of the students she encounters have similar backgrounds. “I feel like it's the same type of people that are here. Like when it comes to about people it is always, it's these private school and athletes, private school athletes there's no diversity in opinions and background and socio.” (Naomi).

Joy believes many of the comments that are made by her peers are unintentional. She laments that although these remarks are not meant to cause harm, they are still hurtful. Joy shared her perspective on the differences between first-generation and continuing-generation students as it relates to class and socioeconomic status.
Me, I'm first-generation, she's, I don't know how many generations. Cause her brother went to this school and it's just like, when it comes to her. She is. How do I say this? Actually, I ain't gonna sugar coat it. She is just, to me she's just like it's just different for her, like she don't understand. She says things and it makes me feel below and it's not intentionally (Joy).

**My parent(s) want me to succeed but can't really help me.** Parental support is important to each of the participants. Although their parent(s) often do not understand and are unfamiliar with college norms, the pressure from family to succeed can be emotionally taxing. All eight participants spoke about the type of support and guidance they receive from their parent(s) as well as the challenges associated with balancing those additional expectations. For each, the pressure to succeed can be overwhelming.

Bailey comments that her mother, although encouraging, cannot help with many aspects of navigating college. She provides insight on why she feels additional pressure.

I feel like it’s, I put a lot of pressure on myself as being a Black female and a first generation student cause I don't. I don't have, like my mom doesn't know anything about it so I can't really go to. I go to her she helps me, but I can't really go to her about certain things so I just feel like a lot of pressure on myself to do good (Bailey).

Kali further explains that she is responsible for herself. Her mother is unable to contribute financially so Kali is responsible for all managing all aspects of her college experience. Additionally, Kali shares that she has a sibling that attends college and often provides financial support to help them purchase books and items for school. Kali’s comments regarding work illustrate the additional pressure she has in navigating college. “I mean it’s really just for that, to take care of myself like my parent, my mom doesn't help me whatsoever, she probably can't afford to help me anyway. So just take care of myself’” (Kali).
Like Kali, Nola has siblings that she tries to encourage and support. She is the second oldest and would like to serve as an example for her brothers and sisters. It is important to Nola to provide information that inspires her siblings to pursue a higher education degree. Nola shares why she feels pressure to succeed for her family.

I have nine siblings total so I feel a lot of pressure. One for them and because I want to be, I want to be what I wish my brother could have been for me. I basically just want to be there for like my sisters and my brothers for them to look up to and see that it is possible that you can do it. And also be able to give them the information (Nola).

Part of Nola’s desire to serve as a role-model for her siblings is a result of wishing she had more guidance and support. She indicated that although her parents would say they knew she would go to college, they did not necessarily help to facilitate making it happen. As an athlete, Nola was highly recruited by several colleges and universities. She recalls that after it was determined she would qualify for an athletic scholarship, there was significant pressure to complete paperwork and follow-up on requirements. Nola not only had expectations from her immediately family, but also from coaches who were trying to help her through the enrollment process. Although Nola laughed as she recounted her experience, she admits she was confused and frustrated by her parent’s lack of action in helping her apply and transition to college. Nola shared her experience during this time.

Oh yes. I filled them out and even when I needed their information I'm still filling them out. Sitting there typing or writing and filling it out. Like OK. And it was funny because they care a lot. They wanted it done but they just were very sitting back about it. And I don't know if it was me over reacting or tripping. I don't think it was me. Because my coaches, even they were like, your parents, they have to get it. And they were just like, la de la de da (Nola).
When Nia was asked about her family dynamics and being first-generation, she indicated, “um, being a first-generation student, um. It's definitely a lot more pressure. Because your parents are looking at you and you are like you have to accomplish what they didn’t” (Nia). Each of the participants expressed similar sentiments when talking about the pressure of being a first-generation college student.

**It Always Comes Back to Finances**

Participants shared stories related to the stress of navigating college with limited financial resources. Each indicated that money was a constant concern in determining how they could afford tuition and fees, books, supplies, and living expenses. Even for participants who receive full scholarships, money remains a significant challenge that affects how they prepare for the start of the academic year, navigate the institution, interact with peers, and experience the university. Receiving a scholarship, the ability to work and access to financial resources was paramount to how participants experience college.

**I was able to attend the University because I received a scholarship.**

Participants indicated that they did not know how they would afford coming to the university. During high school, each believed the university was financially out of their reach. Receiving a scholarship ultimately affected their college choice. When Nia was asked how she decided to attend the university she indicated.

I did everything they told me to do and through that I was able to get a scholarship which funded the tuition aspect of coming here. And because it covered my full tuition, that really, made, that made a great difference as to coming here or going somewhere else (Nia).
Amber also communicated that attending the university made financial sense for her family. She indicated that her decision to attend the university was based upon receiving a scholarship and mitigating student debt.

And so I ended up at "the institution" because they gave me the most scholarship money. So that was really nice I didn't really want to have to worry about student debt and I didn't want to have my mom worry about that (Amber).

I don't know how I would make it if I didn't work. The ability to work and maintain part-time employment was important to each participant. Four of the participants currently work 10 to 20 hours per week at on-campus jobs, two participants anticipate securing student employment in their second semester and two find it would be challenging to work during the academic year with academic, athletic and extra-curricular responsibilities. Several participants have scholarships that cover tuition, fees and the cost of attendance. Each however indicated that they worry about having money and often refrain from participating in social events due to lack of funds.

Concern for family also served as an impetus for needing to work. Several participants indicated that they did not want their parents, specifically their mothers to worry. Five of the participants come from single-parent households, where their mother is the sole provider. Each was keenly aware of how finances impact not just their college experience but affect their family households. Joy stated the following when asked about work and other responsibilities she has as a first-generation student.

So thank God I got on the job I get paid like only $100 for two weeks to last me. So that I'm trying so hard right now so my mom don't gotta. I don't have to call my mom, like hey mom I'm hungry can you please bring food. Or hey mom I need something or hey mom like this or that. I'm trying so hard to go away from that. But to other people it's like my mom is a phone call away (Joy).
Kali indicated that she must work in order to survive college. She currently works a minimum of 20 hours per week but wishes she could work more hours at her on-campus job. Kali further revealed that working full-time over the summer really helped to balance out the academic year. When asked about her transition to college experience, Kali said she is used to taking care of herself and that she worked in high school. Securing a job in college was imperative because she comes from a single-family household and has siblings. She recalled the beginning of the academic year and having to purchase books, which she said was different from many of her peers. Kali shared why she must work. “And I took it like I always have to work, if I don't work like the work-study or anything. I don't think I can make” (Kali).

**I don't have money like the other students.** For the study participants, having money or being able to access funds from a parent, is a considered a distinct difference between their experience and that of their peers. Each believes it is easier for continuing-generation students to obtain funds. Kali recalled two separate occurrences where having access to money was demonstratively different for her than her peers. The first was witnessing others purchase books while she looked for more economical options to secure required texts. Kali states, “they can just call their parents and they'll get anything. Like I remember I was struggling to buy my books and everything”. The second occasion occurred when she had to evacuate campus due to a natural disaster. Kali indicated that most of the students just purchased tickets and flew home, while she had to figure out how to leave campus on her own. Purchasing a ticket at the last minute was not an option. Kali stated the following.
Most of the students are like I am just going to get a plane ticket outside. I'm just like. Some of us are like, it just like I just never seen it before. We just we're just taking the train or were getting rides or something. A plane ticket out, that would be super expensive just out of nowhere (Kali).

Gia recalls completing university paperwork and how early in her college experience money became an issue. She stated “and it was so many fees, and they were not trying to give me waivers for stuff. And I'm like, we don't have the money to like pay for this. So it's like, it always goes back to finances” (Gia).

“Naomi” lives with her father and indicates that money is often a concern. She witnesses her peers going out, purchasing items and wonders when she will be able to do the same. Naomi spoke of her frustration when she had to relinquish funds that were meant for her college expenses.

And sometimes I'm like, like I want to like buy something but I'm like I can't ask my dad because my dad really does not have the money. Like he is struggling. Like I had a scholarship and I had gotten the money and I had to like give it to him so he could pay rent (Naomi).

I Always Count the Number of "Mes" in the Room

Much of college revolves around students learning to navigate academic, social and co-curricular experiences. Each of the study participants shared ways in which they experience the campus as a female, first-generation college students. Each commented that they are always aware of racial dynamics and try not to allow this to become overwhelming. As a student at a predominately-White institution, participants indicated that they always seem to notice and count the number of Black people. The collective perspectives on navigating academic spaces, campus climate, and finding your community encompass the theme of counting “Mes”.

I always notice the Black students in my class. For most of the participants it is not unusual to be one of a few Black students in the class. For some, they are the only Black student which can affect their academic experience. For some, being the only Black student is a continuation of their high school experience, and they try not to let it influence their performance. But for others it makes them cautious. Nia shared how being the only Black female in the class affects her classroom experience.

Other than being like the only Black girl in the classroom and because of that it makes you hesitate as what you say you know or answering questions because you don’t want others looking at you like, oh my gosh she is so dumb or what is she even talking about (Nia).

Like Nia, Nola shared an experience she had in class where she inwardly questioned if other students also notice race. She recounted a class assignment where being the only Black student left her feeling vulnerable and somewhat exposed.

I'm the only African-American in the room in that class. So I invited them into my life. I'm like I feel kind of naked. It's almost like they're looking at me. What are they, what are they thinking about me? I'm more like the African-American, you know. Do they notice I'm [the] only African-American in this room, or is it just me? I keep looking around like, we have our first paper was called like Black me in public spaces. And every time something is mentioned that is Black or African-American or, I just look around and I'm just like OK. I can feel other people look around and it's not even just in that class but like in general (Nola).

Like each of the participants, Bailey says she often takes note of where the Black students sit in her classes. In her observation, students are segregated although she believes it may be unintentional. Bailey wonders if the professor is cognizant of the separation.
I have noticed this semester that in my psychology class all of the Black kids are sitting in the same row and literally all of the Black students are sitting in the same area of the classroom and all the White students are just everywhere else. So it's, it looks very segregated and I don't know, I don't know if it's because of us or because of them. I don't know. I don't know if it's the university environment that's bringing that on but it's just I do notice that it's just a lot of segregation in classrooms sometimes for example (Bailey).

Nola spoke about academic and social spaces, conveying how different each feels when thinking about the Black student community. She also notices the difference in the number of Black students dependent upon the space. Nola shared that in certain environments she feels more connected and comfortable, but this feeling is short-lived when it comes to representation in academic and classroom spaces.

When I first went to like the first Black Student Union meeting. You know I was like oh my goodness this is exciting. There was a lot of us. It was comfortable. We were dancing, we were vibing. It was like nothing was wrong. And then the next day we like you know went back into classes and all that and it was like wow. Here we are, again. Where did everybody go over. Yeah, where did everybody go? Where, where are you guys? Then we meet back up in the room we're like oh here we are again. We meet back up at a friend's house. Then next day again we just poof, all over the place (Nola).

**I haven't personally experienced discrimination on campus but I always feel like something could happen.** The classroom is not the only place on campus where participants identified race as a contributing factor to their college experience. Not all eight participants have encountered a situation they would classify as discriminatory or racist. They all however believe there is a potential for an incident to happen. Nola commented that “…I haven't actually had to experience it one-on-one but sometimes it feels like it could happen at any moment, like I can feel it coming” (Nola).

Kali also indicated that she has not experienced any discrimination but the subtle looks and actions of some peers contributes to her perception of the campus climate.
When asked to give her perspective on the campus environment she indicated “…it was pretty much welcoming, it was not like that bad”. Kali says she has heard racists remarks but they were not directed at her. When asked to elaborate on the campus climate and interacting with her peers, Kali commented the following. “You can tell what they're thinking. Or you could tell by their actions and like exactly, what they say, they don't say in a racist type of way. It's kind of like hidden within a message. Or hinting at something”.

Although each of the participants indicated they feel there is an undercurrent or potential for tension, Naomi and Gia recalled specific incidents that affect how they perceive the campus climate. Naomi stated, “well one person called me the N-word” and Gia indicated that a derogatory statement was said to her close friend. “She got called a n***** slut. So yeah. Which is, a hot mess. But. Yikes” (Gia). All the participants acknowledged that these types of incidents take place on campus and consequently become part of conversations among the Black student community.

Amber and Nia shared that they try not to dwell on some of the subtler issues related to race. Amber however added that it does affect how she interacts and develops relationships with her peers. She shared sentiments on being overlooked as a Black female college student.

Yeah it makes me want to work harder because I want to prove them wrong. I want to show that I can succeed. I'm more than what's on the outside. It's not all about like what you look like you can be something completely different you know. And also, it also makes me like very cautious you know in class I'm sort of like scared to speak out sometimes because you know people judge me immediately and just making friends sometimes can be kind of hard because I'm just always cautious I always have my guard up (Amber).
Similar to Amber, Nola recounts how race has impacted her classroom experience and perception of the campus climate. She recounts an in-class assignment where her peers’ response caused her to wonder if race was at the root of the issue.

For example, we had to get up in class today and we had to do it like we had to recite a sonnet. And how different African Americans sound from Caucasians or the Asians or whatever other race was in the room. It was always like we sounded different and you could hear like the giggles or the snickers in the room and it's almost like what's funny? I don't understand why we're laughing. Or when there is you know an African-American that can, he recited his perfectly. He recited his with like you know really well. And the surprising looks on people's faces is like, like we can't do that. He's not supposed to do that. Or where did he learn how to do that (Nola).

Naomi shared that she arrived at the university willing and excited to interact with students whose identities are different from the homogenous background of her high school peers. She lamented not have an opportunity to connect with some of her new peers.

I have no White friends, friends. And that was weird, because I came here, like I kind of wanted White, like White friends. But I, they kind, it's very segregated like. They smile, well they will smile at you in the hallway, but I don't think that they will really sit down and be like be my friend and it's weird because I came here and I kind of wanted to be their friends and I kind of feel like they do that because we hang out with like a lot of Black people. But it's not because we only want to have Black friends, it's because Black people are the only ones that talk to us actively (Naomi).

**You have to find your community.** One of the ways in which the participants navigate campus and cope with issues related to climate, is by connecting with members of the Black community. Establishing connections earlier in their collegiate career was one way in which some participants facilitated transitioning to the university community. Gia described a group text called “Black U” that she joined prior to coming to campus. As a member of that group she was introduced to other Black students, obtained answers
to questions, and began creating connections with the Black student community. Gia described her experience as a member of the “Black U” group text.

I think that I was blessed because over the summer. I um, I got into a group chat with a lot of other, other Black people. So you know I made friends and stuff. And I just think it's good to have that connection here. Especially going to a PWI. Because this isn't an HBCU, like you're not going to have like, all like all Black friends all the time. You're not going to be in a class with all Black people all the time. So I think that it's good to, to, to like find your people and know where they are (Gia).

When discussing the Black community, each referenced the Black Student Union, university resources and staff as important parts of their support structure. Amber indicated that attending a pre-orientation program at the beginning of the academic year was helpful in transitioning to the university. She states, “orientation, I actually moved in early with the “Multicultural U” program. So, I did that and that was really nice. Immediately I felt like the community was very welcoming and like this was going to be home you know” (Amber).

Nola shared that finding her community was important and that she is always aware of the number of Black students in the space. Nola says that counting students who share similar identities, has become almost an unconscious habit. This is something each of the participants have in common. Nola shared her perspective on counting Black students.

No it's pretty much all the time. I can pretty much feel something all the time as far as being an African-American female on the campus whether it's in the weight room, whether it's in the training room or there's just in the lunchroom. I always seem to like count. Count the number of me's in the room. Or just like where ever I just seem to count (Nola).

Involvement in student organizations and departments where Black students are represented is important to the participants. All eight participants mentioned student
groups as well as university offices that they feel are welcoming and supportive. Nia shared why these organizations are important to students.

There have been organizations and there are clubs out there for people like me. Um having adults who are diverse and who are there to help you and welcome you, I feel like it has really been very helpful thing. And just really having peers who welcoming as well has really been good. And I just feel like because of like the different programs, because of the different offices that our campus does have, it does help with you know feeling like the outlier, the outsider. It makes you feel like you can do this, you are capable of it despite what others might think or feel (Nia).

Nola spoke specifically about the Black Student Union and her involvement with the organization. She and several of the participants are active in the group and indicated that it serves an important role in their collegiate experience. Nola explained why she in a part of the group.

So I involve myself in that group because it's, because I can for one. You know it's, it's fun we do different activities we go different places. You know we bonded, and we you know just to make the Black community get I guess stronger. And you know we, it's different you know, we’re always comfortable around each other (Nola).

**Challenges within the Black Student Community**

Although the participants shared that it was important for them to find and interact with the Black community, they also spoke of the challenges they believe impact the student experience. Participants indicated that based upon marketing materials and where the university is located, they believed there would be more diversity among the student body. They also thought there would be greater unity among Black students especially as students at a PWI. Additionally, participants shared disappointment regarding the lack of interpersonal relationships with Black males.

**Where is everybody?** Several of the participants commented on the diversity of the student body. Based upon admissions brochures, conversations with university
representatives, and the institution’s location they assumed the percentage of students of color would have been much higher. Nola shared her feelings after discovering the student demographics did not necessarily reflect what she believed they would be.

Yes, I thought it would be a lot more of you know African-American females for one. This was before, before I got here for example. They showed us like you know charts, like when they were introducing me to the school they show us like charts and like the number and I'm looking. And I was like wow that's amazing because it just so happened like for African-Americans that the percentage was very, very low and I was, I was honestly shocked for some reason because you know this is supposed to be the South (Nola).

Amber further explained her perception of campus diversity including being the only student of color in some of her classes. She wonders if the lack of representation in her courses is attributable to the type of classes she is taking.

I did expect the campus to be more diverse, like its diverse already. But still when I walk into some of my classes I am the only minority and like walking through passing I'm the only minority sometimes too. So it isn't as diverse as it's advertised I think, but maybe it's just the classes I take, I don't know (Amber).

Naomi also thought there would be greater representation of students on campus. She spoke about diversity in terms of race and socioeconomic status. Naomi shared that she was initially excited to come to the university and have an opportunity to develop friendships with students from different backgrounds. She found connecting with peers challenging due to differences in socioeconomic circumstances. Naomi believes class differences is to blame.

I thought the Black student community would be more united at a PWI. In addition to discussing the diversity of the student body, participants shared concerns about the lack of unity within the Black student community. Although all eight agreed
regarding the lack of cohesion, six of the freshmen participants attributed it to differences between freshmen and upper-class students.

Naomi and Joy spoke about their disappointment upon realizing that there were issues within the Black community. Both indicated that class differences and personality traits are responsible for the divisions. Naomi shared what she hoped would be the relationship between Black students.

But before we came in I had the chance. I felt like we have this group of Black people. I feel like I want to be secure. I feel like I'm going to have like a good group of friends. But as it's been like so much drama in the group and it's just, it's just sad (Naomi).

Joy also stated that she hoped for more interaction among Black students. She believed Black students would be more supportive of one another, especially as students at a PWI.

Sunday dinner, you see all of us will be united as one because at the end of the day we are at the PWI, a predominately White institution, so I'm thinking that we all gonna stick together, you and I as one. No, it's not like that. It's every man for themselves basically (Joy).

Naomi also thought there would be more support within the Black student community, especially among Black females. She shared the following about interacting with Black female students:

And I feel, and I just thought that at a PWI you would feel more you know closer to your Black female counterparts. But it's almost like they, they go out of their way not to be seen with us or not to be associated with us (Naomi).

Bailey has a different perspective on unity and support within the Black student community. She shared that several upper-class students continue to serve as mentors and role-models to her. Bailey stated the following about her peers. “I feel like a lot of it has to do with the peers that are older than me. Because they do a great job, like some of the mentors students that I have do a great job with like providing samples” (Bailey).
Bailey’s admits there are issues that should be addressed, but overall her experience with the Black student community has been positive.

**Black men, especially the athletes don't date Black girls.** When discussing social interaction among peers, several of the participants spoke about dating and interpersonal relationships with Black male students. There was consensus among the participants that most of the Black men, especially the athletes, do not date Black female students. There was some expectation from participants that being at a PWI would help establish a connection to their Black male peers.

Naomi, Joy and Kali spoke specifically about challenges related to dating and their perception that Black males would prefer to date White female students. Naomi thought dating options would be more abundant and expressed frustration at not seeing athletes with more Black female students. She indicated the following:

> Yeah like, I you know I'm thinking I'm coming to college it's going to be like a bigger pool when it comes to dating. But it's just all these athletes and they're just, yeah it's just they just like White girls and I just feel like it's because, they think it may be either White girls are easier or they're just not as outspoken as we are (Naomi).

Kali also voiced concerns about relationships between Black students and believes Black female students are not viewed in the same manner as their White female counterparts.

Kali stated:

> I don't hate, if anybody thinks like this but, I realize that usually like the Black males would go for like the White girls here. I guess but it's not like I'm not saying there's something wrong with that. But it's just like they feel like, I just really feel like the Black girls just don't get attention or anything (Kali).
Joy also believes dating at the university is challenging. She spoke about social interactions within the Black student community and her perspective regarding Black male students.

And it's just the fact that not all of these males and stuff here. I mean there might be some socially when it comes to like these athletes they might. They feel the need to go with the White girl or something like that rather than like a Black girl (Joy).

It’s All On Me

I have to succeed for myself and my family because I am the piece that is tying everything together. Each of the participants shared stories of resiliency, strength, and fortitude in navigating various life experiences that affect their ability to succeed in college. The participants placed much of the onus on themselves to succeed because of and despite their circumstances. Success in college for the participants is imperative. Each communicated that there are others depending on them. The participants feel a sense of responsibility to their families to be the first to complete college and to set an example for their siblings. Additionally, all eight participants spoke about their own desire to make something of themselves. Family, challenges, barriers, and various influences serve as motivation for pursuing and persisting in college. Participant narratives underscore a higher order sense of self that each must access in order to persevere.

Although Nia indicated that she feels pressure to succeed, her story reveals a strong sense of determination. Nia takes responsibility for finding answers and solving problems. When asked if there was anything the university could do to help contribute to herself. Nia responded, “for me, I'm like. I am the type of person I go find out for myself. So everything that I know, is because someone told me or out I went out and
found out for myself” (Nia). Nia’s response is demonstrative of how she views her role in contributing to her overall collegiate success.

When asked about what motivates her, Kali indicated “um, I think it's just me. Seeing my situation at home really pushes me to just get out of it even more” (Kali). She feels a sense of responsibility to her family and stated “…I can’t fail”. Kali attributes her success in high school and desire to be successful in college to her resiliency.

Here? At this school? Just, I don't know. I'm just like really, Resilient? It's just how I am. I think the most success comes from me, myself. Because if you don't. If you don't like, I don't know. There are other people that cause like my situation at my house, but like I don't know, just being me I guess. It pushes me more. My family, some of my family members are proud of me. They are like oh my gosh you are the first person to go to college and everything. So they push me more, my more cousins (Kali).

The show of strength and commitment to not give up has helped Kali to navigate college.

Amber indicated as a Black female she often feels overlooked but uses those experiences as motivation to prove others wrong. She feels a sense of responsibility to her mother and would like to return home to help her family.

Amber stated that her intelligence and sense of wonder are two personal characteristics that are helping her to be successful. These attributes along with the desire to help her mother serve as motivating factors in achieving collegiate success.

I feel like my intelligence that helps. I feel like for me. I am, I'm pretty smart but I think it's because I like to question a lot of things. And just asking a lot of questions always helps you understand something more. And also I am pretty motivated. Like I said, I want to be successful. I want to get to a point where I can help my mom. Where I can go back “home” and just help my friends and family you know (Amber).
Nola conveyed that she is self-motivated. She also shared that her family, specifically her siblings, inspire her to persist in college. Nola views herself as a piece that can connect her siblings to higher education. She said the following about her motivation to succeed in college.

So I feel like I'm a piece that connects sports, that connects academics, that connects to my parents, that connects to my sisters, and all of my siblings in general, like a piece. And without this piece. If I was like to break down or something then and like freak out because I'm a first-gen student and you know African-American at university on a full ride scholarship then, I don't know what would happen. So, I'm the piece (Nola).

Bailey spoke about her desire to achieve the goals she has set for herself. She reveals one of the biggest obstacles she has encountered is overcoming self-pressure related to being a Black female and first-generation student. She also wants to serve as an example for her younger sibling and encourage him to attend college. Bailey’s narrative revealed early on that she was adamant about pursuing a collegiate degree. When asked what is helping her to be successful in college, Bailey identified upper-class peers as well as herself.

And then me too because I feel like. I want to make a difference. Like I just want to be. I want to achieve my goals that I set for myself. So I try to push myself to do different things that I want to do (Bailey).

Joy reflected on her family upbringing. She indicated that her personality and commitment to obtaining a college degree are influenced by childhood experiences. Joy uses those experiences to motivate her.
Ah, looking back on how I was raised and looking about how like the things that I've went through. And also strong-willed I'm very, I am very strong-willed and I'm driven. And like I'm very I'm very serious about my education and being successful because, I do not want to go through what I went through when I was younger. And I don't want to go through what I'm going through now even to this day I'm still going through things in my family household (Joy).

Joy’s narrative revealed hardship, disappointment, and an unparalleled will to succeed despite obstacles and challenges. She shared the following about why college is an important part of her educational journey.

My thing is that. I did this for two or three reasons. First reasons I do this for myself because you try going to your house and having a frig that's empty. You try going to your house and not see your mom there because she got to work literally a 12 hour shift and then work another job another. You try coming to your house and you have to raise your sisters at the age of 10 and stuff. Because we're all five years apart (Joy).

Joy’s story demonstrates that she is self-reliant. She works hard to resolve her own problems and spoke passionately about sparing her mother from worrying about her welfare. These attributes help Joy navigate challenges associate with attending college.

Naomi spoke about the additional challenges associated with navigating college as a Black student. Like many of the participants, she feels pressure to succeed. Naomi’s narrative reveal the familial strain of being the highest achieving family member.

And also being, being like Black I just feel like there's, there's a lot on us to succeed, there's a lot on me to succeed. Cause you know I feel like, well I'm not. I don't want to say I'm the most successful Black in my family. I kind of am the most successful, like I did a lot in high school. So I feel like, there's all this pressure to do (Naomi).

The pressure to meet expectations serves as both stress and motivation for Naomi.

Each of the participants are self-motivated and see college as an opportunity for upward mobility. Gia indicated that college represents a chance to change her life. She stated that her motivation is “my want for a better life for
myself. And my want to make my mom happy and yeah. I just want to have a good life” (Gia). Gia has high standards and sets equally high expectations for herself. The desire to surpass these self-determined goals provides the incentive needed to succeed in college. Gia shared the following about herself:

Because I like, I like things to be a certain way. Like I don't like Bs. I only like As. I don't like, ugh I hate B’s. I like things a certain way I like things a certain like criteria and if doesn't fit that I'm just like, hmmm ok (Gia).

Core Strengths: #BlackGirlMagic

The women’s narratives revealed personal attributes such as intelligence, resourcefulness, determination, resilience and collective consciousness, that contributed to their perceptions on persistence and collegiate success. Each of these core strengths are embodied in the term #BlackGirlMagic which was created by CaShawn Thompson and became a cultural movement that celebrates “the beauty, power and resilience of Black women” (Wilson, 2016). Since the hashtag was created it has become a phenomenon and is regularly cited on social media and in mainstream magazines.

Intelligence. Each of the participants were confident in their intellectual ability and were cognizant that their intelligence would provide an advantage in applying to college and succeeding in academic environments. For the women, this part of their identity was important because it created a pathway for succeeding in college and achieving future life goals. When Amber was asked, what is helping her be successful in college she replied, “I feel like my intelligence, that helps”. Naomi also shared that during high school she tended to have class and participate in extra-curricular activities with the same group of students who were all regarded as smart.
So when I was in the AP class it was like all the smartest kids in the school. People have been with my law program because in our high school there's only like a small group of smart people and like we all have the same class (Naomi).

Confidence in their cognitive abilities helped the women approach academic and social challenges with an inner strength and sense of determination. Belief in their intellectual capabilities contributed to their sense of belonging and reinforced that they could achieve collegiate success.

**Resourcefulness.** Each of the women shared stories of purposely looking for individuals, organizations and support services that could be helpful in mitigating obstacles and challenges. Although unfamiliar with how college worked, they recognized the potential for difficulties and the need to find community. Joy shared that she regularly visited the writing center as one of her strategies for academic success. She stated the following regarding successfully managing her academic requirements. “How you are going to be able to pass? And it's just like, I, I made it though I still try because I work hard and I use my resources like the writing center is my best friend” (Joy).

Nia also indicated that she frequently connected with peers and sought out campus organizations and university departments that could provide support and encouragement.
Um, having like different organizations and having different offices you can go to. Such as MSA, just having them around and being able to attend their events, it’s really been like I can do this. There have been organizations and there are clubs out there for people like me. Um having adults who are diverse and who are there to help you and welcome you, I feel like it has really been very helpful thing. And just really having peers who welcoming as well has really been good. And I just feel like because of like the different programs, because of the different offices that our campus does have, it does help with you know feeling like the outlier, the outsider. It makes you feel like you can do this, you are capable of it despite what others might think or feel. Just go for it and see what happens (Nia).

The participants took the initiative to locate people and resources that could help them transition to the university and acclimate to the campus culture. These actions are representative of core strengths and indicative of persistence behaviors.

**Determination.** All eight women were committed to achieving their collegiate goals and dreams. They shared personal narratives that demonstrated ambition, grit and tenacity. The women described themselves as hardworking, strong-willed, outgoing, driven and motivated. They each possessed a fierce determination and self-confidence that contributed to their persistence behaviors. Joy stated the following about herself. “I'm very hard working and outgoing” (Joy). Amber indicated “and also I am pretty motivated. Like I said, I want to be successful” (Amber).

The women revealed that their resolve was not only influenced by family and friends, but by a desire to make a difference in their own life. Bailey said the following about challenging herself.

And then me too because I feel like. I want to make a difference. Like I just want to be. I want to achieve my goals that I set for myself. So, I try to push myself to do different things that I want to do (Bailey).

Kali stated that “you have to really think about the value of being here, to actually do good here” when asked what motivated her to succeed in college. Joy also shared that
she felt a sense of obligation to achieve her personal goals and wanted to avoid adding any additional burden to her family. “I have the responsibility because I've got to make sure that I am trying my hardest right now” (Joy). For Amber, negative comments regarding her identity as a Black female served as motivation. She stated the following on why she was determined to be successful.

I feel like being a Black female I'm sort of like overlooked. I'm not expected to be smart or to want to do something that's challenging you know with my life.” “Yeah it makes me want to work harder because I want to prove them wrong. I want to show that I can succeed. I'm more than what's on the outside. It's not all about like what you look like you can be something completely different you know (Amber).

Resilience. Although each of the women had a positive outlook regarding their futures, they shared several stories of hardship, frustration, sadness, and pain. Some grew up in communities with poverty and crime, others came from single-family homes and struggled to make ends meets, at a young age most were responsible for their younger siblings, and those who attended predominately White high schools often felt as if they did not fit in that environment. Despite each of their different circumstances, the women were strong-willed and possessed an inner strength that helped them to navigate different life experiences.

When asked what contributed to her success, Kali stated “I'm just like really, resilient. It's just how I am. I think the most success comes from me, myself”. She also stated that she had to be strong and retold an experience overhearing insensitive comments from peers.
I heard it when I was applying for college. Oh yeah, you're going to get money because you're Black and you're female and all that stuff. What is it called again, affirmative action? Yeah. People really believe that. I feel like most people, they wouldn't say it but they really believe that like just because you're Black you're going to get money and you're going to get in not cause you're smart or anything. I just ignore it basically. I am like, whenever. I got in here just like you got in here, that type of situation, and I just keep doing my thing (Kali).

Joy shared several stories regarding challenges she encountered throughout her childhood that continue to impact her college experiences. At one point during the interview Joy began to cry while remembering some painful moments. She quickly gathered her thoughts and explained that her personality was a direct result of a tough childhood. Joy indicated that the challenges she and her family encountered made her ambitious and focused. She shared the following about her upbringing.

I went through a lot and if I tell you what I went through you would, you would see this is your personality. Now I see that's why you like this. I see that's why you're so driven. I see that's why you go through and it tears me up because like, it's the fact that what I grew up around what I grew up to be and it's like no one. Like this school, it kind does make me feel bad in a way. Cause it's like, it's like. I went through a lot. And I may have like a happy go lucky personality but like, it's really hard (Joy).

In response to the challenges Joy encountered as a young Black girl, growing up in a lower-class neighborhood, where she often had to fight to survive, Joy acquired skills and attributes that contributed to her resiliency. She stated the following about her personality.

There's two sides of it, um driven. Ah, looking back on how I was raised and looking about how like the things that I've went through. And also strong-willed I'm very, I am very strong-willed and I'm driven. And like I'm very I'm very serious about my education and being successful because, I do not want to go through what I went through when I was younger. And I don't want to go through what I'm going through now even to this day I'm still going through things in my family household. So it's just like that is what's driving me to be successful and that's what shaping me and my personality (Joy).
The personal narratives of each participant illustrated an ability to get back up, adjust and keep going. The women demonstrated resiliency in responding to different life circumstances and used that same tenacity to achieve college success.

**Collective Consciousness.** Each of the women shared personal narratives that clearly exhibited a collective consciousness about the importance of collegiate achievement for the Black community. They also possessed tremendous racial and ethnic pride at attending a top tier institution. Each looked for friendship and support from Black student organizations. They also actively sought guidance and mentorship from Black faculty and administrators and recognized that their success in many ways was connected to the success of their Black peers. The women felt a sense of responsibility for being a productive member of the Black community and positively contributing to society’s perception of Black people.

Nola actively looked for spaces where she could interact with other Black students. She was inspired by her peers and garnered additional confidence in her academic abilities from those relationships. Nola shared the following about the Black students.

Add it's inspiring because they're not just, they're not your average if you could if you know if I could say. They're not your average like you know people. They're you know extraordinary people and it helps to push me, it helps me, be like hey I don't want to fail that test tomorrow no one else is failing the test (Nola).

Nola saw herself as part of a community of ambitious scholars and felt it was her responsibility to keep pace with her peers. This unifying experience served as motivation to be a positive representation of the Black community.
So, it's almost like OK. I got to stay, if I want to be in the group, I gotta stay with the group. You gotta, we all gotta do this together. So, that's you know one of the things that helps me keep going. To you know represent. I guess that's what it's like, representing (Nola).

Nia also spoke about the importance of her social circle and the mutually supportive relationship they established. She found comfort in connecting with students who shared similar identities and collegiate goals. Nia’s shared the following about her friends.

And because I am not the only one within my social group it kind of pushes me. Ok I am not alone. I can do this. Yes, we are a small number but because I know some, because I know others who are just like me, it's like alright, if they can do it so can I (Nia).

Each of the women exemplified core strengths that encompasses the ideals of #BlackGirlMagic and contributes to their persistence behaviors. The women recognized their intelligence, exhibited resourcefulness and determination, demonstrated resilience and a collective consciousness regarding the importance of achieving collegiate success.

**Grounded Theory Model: The Piece**

Each of the participants shared details and personal experiences of how they navigate college as a Black first-generation, female college student. Initially, seven overall themes were obtained that captured the lived-experiences of all eight participants. These themes centered around pre-collegiate experiences, family influences, challenges and barriers, and motivating factors that ultimately come together like a puzzle. The collective experiences of participants resulted in the following themes: Resources that Impact My College Experience, I Had to do it on My Own, Preparing for and Navigating College is Emotionally Taxing, It Always comes Back to Finances, I Always Count the
Number of “Mes” in the Room, Challenges within the Black Student Community, and It’s All On Me.

After determining that the initial themes did not adequately answer research question two, a second data analysis was conducted and revealed an additional theme that more accurately captured participant perceptions on their persistence. The theme, Core Strengths: #BlackGirlMagic provided an explanation for the research phenomenon and was a more accurate description of the behaviors that contributed to each student's ability to persist.

Figure 1 located below represents the student as the core, several salient identities and personal background characteristics. It highlights the pre-college and collegiate experiences of participants as well as skills and competencies acquired while navigating college. Additionally, Figure 1 depicts how each of the “pieces” interact with one another and ultimately fit together to describe the collegiate experiences and persistence behaviors of the women.
Study participants are located at the center of the model. The surrounding pieces represent salient identities of the women and are labeled core identities. These include race/ethnicity, gender, first-generation status, and socioeconomic background. Each of these identities were built in to the research questions and are representative of core identities that continually interact and respond to the various experiences participants encountered. The third circle, labeled core strengths: #BlackGirlMagic include
intelligence, resourcefulness, determination, resilience, and collective consciousness. They represent characteristics that are closely connected to each participant’s salient identities. Participant core strengths impacted how the women experienced college, and provide an explanation for their persistence behaviors. The outer circle labeled experiences, contain the seven salient experiences of participants. These collective themes answer research question one and explain how Black, female, first-generation students experienced college.

The model is comprised of puzzle pieces and is shaped like a roulette wheel. The shape is significant because it illustrates that there is a “chance” that one or more of a participant’s identities may influence and impact how the women view, experience and respond to different life circumstances. Study participants encountered a variety of pre-college and collegiate experiences that were either access and/or barriers to college success. As the women encountered each of these experiences, they utilized strategies, competencies and innate characteristics to help navigate and negotiate higher education processes. Participant experiences were not always linear but interacted and fit together like puzzle pieces. These experiences occurred at various intervals, had different consequences and reappeared in different forms throughout the student’s collegiate career. As a result, the women developed the capacity to persist despite challenges.

How the women viewed themselves affected all facets of their college experience. Pre-collegiate experiences in high school that influenced their academic preparation, college knowledge and college transition, how participants felt about college, their cognitive growth and self-esteem, as well as their academic and social engagement were all important factors. Each of these influences interacted and were connected to their
salient identities, specifically race, gender, first-generation status, and socioeconomic background. Core strengths: #BlackGirlMagic served as an alternative form of capital for the women and is an example of the strength and resiliency that each participant utilized to mitigate historical challenges and societal constructs of Black women identities.

These identities and self-concepts were paramount in helping the women to access and a higher order sense of self. A higher order sense of self helped participants to navigate, integrate and respond to different life experiences. The utilization of this sense of self was important to each person’s overall collegiate experiences and ability to persist. Central to the model always, is the participant, who holds all the pieces together and is influenced in various ways by each of the experiences. Ultimately the pieces of the model fit together, interact and were illustrative of the shared experiences of Black female, first-generation student study participants.

**Vignette**

In phenomenology, vignettes are the researcher’s interpretation of the phenomenon and help put into context the lived-experiences of research participants (Wertz, Nosek, McNiesh, & Marlow, 2011). Kathryn’s Story is a fictitious narrative used to illuminate challenges, obstacles and resources used in navigating college. The following vignette serves as a vehicle for helping the reader gain a better understanding of the research phenomenon regarding the lived-experiences of Black, female, first-generation college students.
Kathryn’s Story

“Kathryn” is a 19-year-old freshman in college. She was born and raised in a large urban city located in the mid-west and is the first in her family to attend college. Kathryn is the oldest of three children and comes from a single-parent household. Kathryn’s mother works two jobs and relies on her daughter to care for her younger siblings when she is not home. She grew up in a lower-class, predominately Black neighborhood where violence, drugs and crime were often seen. Kathryn’s mother set high expectations for her daughter and often spoke about how their lives would change after Kathryn went to college.

Kathryn attended the local high school where she took advanced placement classes and was considered a high achieving student. The high school lacked resources and was often understaffed but school was the one place where Kathryn’s sole responsibility was her schoolwork. In the eleventh grade, Kathryn’s AP literature teacher encouraged her to think about attending college. Her teacher spoke about college entrance exams and tried to help her make sense of the admissions process. Kathryn wanted to take an SAT prep class but they were not offered at her high school and paying for one was out of the question. Kathryn knew her mom could not afford it and she refused to even ask. Kathryn worked part-time after school and on the weekend. The money she made was used to pay for basic necessities and the rest she wanted to save for college, but she always ended up giving it to her mother for household bills.

Because Kathryn could not afford the SAT prep course she studied on her own. The guidance counselor, at the request of Kathryn’s literature teacher, provided a fee waiver for the SAT which Kathryn was grateful for the help. During the summer before Kathryn’s senior year she spent much of her free time searching Google for tips on what was required for the college application. She filled out the college applications and asked her mom for tax documents in order to complete the FAFSA. Her mom wanted to help but was unfamiliar with what was required and was frequently exhausted from working long hours. Although her mom couldn’t help as much, she expected Kathryn to know what to do and get everything done on time.

Kathryn was often frustrated and stressed because she did not have anyone that could give her advice or help her to complete paperwork. Kathryn’s literature teacher reviewed her essays but everything else fell on her shoulders. The guidance counselor was overwhelmed and Kathryn had to stop by the office every day just to make sure the counselor remembered to submit her transcript and letters of recommendation. Kathryn was relieved when she was accepted and couldn’t wait to start college.

Kathryn’s mother and siblings dropped her off at college but could not stay for orientation because her mom had to get back home for work. The first few weeks of college were exciting. She did not have a lot in common with her wealthy roommate, but luckily on the first day of classes a member of the Black Student Union (BSU) invited her to attend their first meeting where she met several other Black students. Kathryn was
grateful that she connected with the BSU because it was one of the only places where she could interact with students from similar identities and backgrounds.

Kathryn enjoyed her classes and fortunately felt academically prepared due to her high school AP courses. In most of her classes, Kathryn was one of the only Black students. She wanted to make connections with the other students but it was difficult because they did not have a lot in common. Her peers all seemed to talk about going out to dinner and parties that were taking place during the weekend. Kathryn knew she would not be able to attend. Her scholarship covered tuition, room and board plus fees, but she could not afford to pay for an Uber, dinner and cover charges. Kathryn always sent half of the money she made from her on-campus job back home because she knew her mother needed it. Hanging out was not a priority so she found cheaper things to do around campus.

At an on-campus event Kathryn was introduced to two other Black female students who were also first in their families to attend college. They developed an immediate bond and became a source of comfort to one another. Kathryn shared that she overheard some students making derogatory statements about Black people and she wondered if others felt the same way. Not all of her friends had that experience but because similar incidents were periodically discussed in the BSU office, they all knew there was the potential for something to happen.

The BSU was the largest Black student group on campus but not everyone was involved. There were several other organizations that focused on Black student programming and Kathryn was disappointed to see the lack of unity within the Black student community. Kathryn also noticed there were fewer Black males than females at the university and of those most were athletes. At parties and social events she observed that many of the Black males dated women of other races. This was disappointing for Kathryn because she was excited about dating in college.

Kathryn knew she had to succeed and worked hard to focus on her academics. It was important for her to set a good example for her siblings and to eventually help her mother. Kathryn wanted a better life for her family and placed a significant amount of pressure on herself to succeed. Her brothers and sisters looked up to her and she wanted them to see college as option. Kathryn knew college was one of the only ways to change the trajectory of not only her future but her immediate family’s as well.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of how Black, female, first-generation college students experience college and ascertain their perceptions on factors that contribute to their college persistence. A qualitative approach, informed by phenomenology and grounded theory, was used as it allowed participants to share rich and descriptive data that captured the complexities of Black women’s lives. A grounded theory approach also allowed the researcher to make sense of the data and develop a mid-level theory that explained the research phenomenon.

Based upon in-depth qualitative exploration, 7 themes and 21 categories were obtained that provided an explanation for how the women experienced college. The collective results revealed the following themes: Resources that Impact My College Experience, I Had to do it on My Own, Preparing for and Navigating College is Emotionally Taxing, It Always comes Back to Finances, I Always Count the Number of “Mes” in the Room, Challenges within the Black Student Community, and It’s All On Me. Each of the themes answer research questions on the salient experiences of study participants and factors that contributed to their persistence in college.

Resources that Impact My College Experience pertained to pre-collegiate experiences that participants stated affected their preparation and transition to college. These experiences included high school classes, interaction with mentors and role-models, and access to college preparatory courses. Advanced placement courses were important because participants indicated that these types of classes provided a foundation that impacted their academic preparation. Although not all participants had positive interactions with high school teachers and guidance counselors, they all stated it was
important to have someone serve as a source of information and encouragement. Additionally, participants indicated that the lack of access to college preparation courses impacted their knowledge and performance on SAT and ACT tests.

As a first-generation student, each of the participants shared that they had to navigate the college admission process on their own. Participants stated that they did not have someone in their families who could provide information on the college admissions process, they did not know how college works and that they had to advocate for themselves. Additionally, their parents expected them to get everything done but did not have the knowledge or resources to help. These collective experiences resulted in the theme, I Had to do it on My Own.

Participants described experiences that resulted in the finding; Preparing for and Navigating College is Emotionally Taxing. Each of the women stated that figuring out what to do and getting tasks accomplished on time, often with little or no guidance, was a source of stress. They also shared that being a first-generation student was lonely because most of their peers were often insensitive to challenges associated with not having a parent who understood the rigors of college. Participant families also had high expectations of their daughters, wanting them to be successful in college, but lacking social and cultural capital that is often needed to help their student navigate college. Additionally, participants indicated that class differences between themselves and their peers was a source a frustration and conflict.

Study participants shared that access to money was a major obstacle for their families. For each of the women, receiving a scholarship was essential in being able to attend the university. They also indicated that unlike their peers they did not receive
financial support. Work for most of the participants was not optional and much of the time they were not sure how they would make it through college. The lack of financial resources impacted each of the women throughout the entire college admission process and continues to be a source of constant concern and stress. Participant experiences regarding economic capital is captured in the theme, It Always Comes Back to Finances.

For each of the study participants, their race and ethnic identities were an important part of their college experience. The theme, I Always Count the Number of “Mes” in the Room, highlights the salience of racial and ethnic identity for each of the women. Students shared that they automatically take note of Black students in each of their classes. For most, this was an unconscious and instinctual response to the lack of representation in academic spaces. Students also shared that although they had not directly experienced a discriminatory act, they always felt as if something could happen. One of the ways in which students combated this feeling, was by finding their community and interacting with others who share similar identities.

Several of the participants indicated that interacting with members of the Black community was a vital part of their college experiences. The women entered the university expecting to not only see more Black students represented in the student body, but that there would be more unity among the Black student community. Each assumed attending a PWI would result in greater cohesion among Black students. Participants also expressed concern for the lack of interpersonal relationships with their Black male counterparts. The women stated that “most of the Black men, especially the athletes do not date Black girls”. This sentiment resulted in disappointment at the prospect of dating and developing relationships in college. For each of the participants, the theme
Challenges within the Black Student Community captured concerns they experienced in interacting with their Black peers.

The theme It’s All On Me expresses a shared sentiment among the women that they are responsible for setting a good example and achieving the collective educational goals for their entire family. Each of the participants were resolute in stating that they had to succeed for themselves and for their families. Excelling in college was not optional, as each had siblings and parents who were depending on them to change the trajectory of their family’s future.

A second data analysis using grounded theory was conducted to more adequately answer research question two. Whereas the first research question addressed what are the experiences of Black, female, first-generation college students, the second research question addressed the how does this population persist in college. The collective results revealed the overarching pattern given the moniker Core Strengths: #BlackGirlMagic. Intelligence, resourcefulness, determination, resilience and collective consciousness were identified as factors that contributed to the persistence behaviors of the women. The uncovering of these patterns helped to highlight participant strengths and provided a more accurate explanation of how these women successfully navigate their college experiences. To illustrate the persistence strategies and behaviors participants used to prevail in college, a mid-level theory was developed and model titled “The Piece was created.

Findings illustrated challenges encountered while navigating college for Black, female, first-generation college students. They also highlighted the tenacity, determination and resiliency of the women, and the ways in which these characteristics
contributed to their persistence behaviors. Participant stories demonstrated challenges which often required them to choose between salient identities, particularly race/ethnicity and gender. This is important to note because higher education institutions are often underprepared to assist students in negotiating the complexities of intersecting identities such as those held by the women in the study.

Each of the themes represented collective experiences of the women. These findings are significant because they speak with specificity about Black female experiences. They also add to existing literature pertaining to students who are Black, female, and first-generation. Furthermore, findings contribute to gaps in the literature, highlight barriers to college success and enhance the discourse on the intersectionality of Black female students who are first in their families to attend college. Additionally, by reframing variables this study contributed to the knowledge-base on college persistence. Participant stories also provided guidance on developing recommendations, policies and best practices that impact the persistence and retention of the study population.

The remainder of chapter five links research findings to existing theory and research. Next implications are provided for institutional practice, faculty, pre-college preparation and experiences, policy, and research. Finally, limitations of the current study are discussed and final thoughts are shared.

**Study Findings and Links to Theory and Research**

The following section links current study findings to existing theory and research. Although the sections are subdivided by the overarching salient identities of the women, it is important to recognize the intersectional relationships that coexist between each of identities. The women did not experience college solely as a Black person, or simply as a
female, or because they were first-generation or because of their socioeconomic background. Their identities were constantly reshaped and became salient based upon the situation and context of the experience. However, because the literature tends to segment discussions about collegiate experiences into aspects of identity, the following discussion follows suit and evaluates how the current findings pertain to the existing literature. Thus, below are salient identities that affected participants’ experiences and their perception on college persistence.

**Race and ethnicity.** For each of the study participants, race and ethnicity was one of the most defining factors of their college experience. This was captured in four of the themes which included: I Always Count the Number of “Mes” in the Room, Challenges within the Black Community, It’s All on Me, and Core Strengths: #BlackGirlMagic. Participant narratives underscored the importance of identity and race in academic spaces and social environments. Each of the women had a strong sense of racial and ethnic identity that served as a compass and provided a foundation for how they experienced higher education. They entered college expecting to connect with the Black community and actively looked for opportunities to develop relationships with others of similar backgrounds. Meaningful relationships with peers is one of the ways in which Strayhorn (2012) argues students can thrive within the university. Study participants desire to connect with members of the Black community supports Strayhorn’s (2008, 2012) research on the importance of belonging and its impact on student experiences.

Participant perceptions of unity and support, campus diversity and establishing interpersonal relationships were an important part of their college experience.
Connecting with others who shared similar identities was not just important to study participants but essential to who they are as individuals and the ways in which they negotiate racialized environments. Although the students were disappointed with the lack of unity within the Black community, they valued and needed Black spaces. These environments helped to build self-worth, self-love and the commitment and energy to keep pushing forward. The women’s desire to connect with peers served as an example of persistence behavior, which according to research, reduces the risk of departure.

A healthy racial identity is also important in navigating campus environments where micro-aggressions and macroaggressions occur. Although students indicated that they did not personally experience discrimination, they shared stories of subtle and sometimes overt incidents of racial bias. Their peers regularly made race-based comments, although the participants indicated that they “don’t say it in a racist type of way”. There was also a pervasive feeling that some type of discriminatory act could happen at any time and Black students needed to be alert. For participants, race was a part of daily conversations within the Black community, and most of their Black peers believed they “could feel it coming” referring to a discriminatory incident. These findings were consistent with previous research that highlights the additional burden Black students who attend PWIs reported feeling (Strayhorn, 2008). Findings also affirmed research by Banks (2009) and McCoy (2014) which indicated that Black students are often marginalized and experience discrimination in college.

In addition to navigating intergroup challenges associated with race, each of the women shared stories pertaining to academic experiences in and out of the classroom, interactions among peers and lack of connection to faculty. Participants expressed
frustration with the lack of diversity and being in academic spaces with little or no Black representation. Several reported being one of a few Black students in their classes saying it was sometimes uncomfortable. One participant specifically recounted her experience walking into her class and noticing that the room was segregated. She went on to say, “it’s just not enough Black people and there’s not enough integration”. This finding was consistent with Shavers and Moore (2014) who found that negative racial climates are particularly harmful to Black female students.

This study’s findings regarding race, challenges within the classroom environment and experiences with campus climate were consistent with Strayhorn and Terrell’s (2010) research that argued it can be more onerous for first-generation students of color to navigate college and that Black first-generation students who attend PWIs report feelings of culture shock and alienation (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Banks-Santilli, 2014). This finding also affirmed research by Williams and Nicholas (2012), who indicated “present-day discrimination is often more subtle, but no less insidious and impactful then blatant, overt racism” (p. 89). Although the participants were hesitant to label these occurrences, their experiences with the campus climate could affect their sense of belonging, academic persistence and well-being, as well as their ability to connect with the university community. Concerns about the classroom environment and challenges interacting with peers could also negatively impact students’ perceptions, academic engagement and ultimately their ability to be retained.

Critical Race Theory provided a framework for understanding how participants were affected by their college environment, acute racial experiences and social interactions. Disparities in representation and a racialized campus environment
contributed to additional challenges each of the women encountered. These issues represent retention and persistence challenges that are unique to the study population.

The women entered college with a strong sense of racial and ethnic identity, which Shabazz (2015) and McCowan and Alston (1998) argued may be heightened due to racial climates at PWIs. The impact of race and ethnicity was significant because it contextualized the importance of understanding the ethnic and racial identity development of students as they navigate campus environments (Patton et al., 2016).

Phinney’s Model of Ethnic Identity (1995) consists of three stages which explain the ethnic identity development of students. In the first stage, individuals have yet to examine their ethnic identity or understand it based upon information collected from family and friends. In stage two, ethnic identity search/moratorium, individuals become more aware of their ethnic identity and begin to search for more information. In the third stage, ethnic identity achievement, individuals are aware of their own identity and develop an appreciation for the ethnic identity of others (Jones & Abes, 2013).

Participant experiences aligned with stage two of Phinney’s Ethnic Identity Model (1995). Several of the woman spoke with an immense sense of pride for their country of origin, culture and traditions. Furthermore, despite challenges, participants sought opportunities to connect with others of similar background which is also demonstrative of stage two of the ethnic identity model.

Students of color experience college differently and the intersectionality of identity is often ignored. For each of the study participants, race and ethnicity were salient identities that affected how they internalized, responded to and incorporated various collegiate experiences. Based upon this finding, race and ethnicity are significant
factors in understanding the persistence behaviors of the study population. This finding also highlights the need for colleges and universities to address structures, campus climate and policies that negatively impact the identity development of Black students and consequently their persistence.

**Gender.** Participant stories demonstrated a keen understanding of their gender role in their families and within the Black community. The women shared that they were responsible for being a positive role-model for their siblings and felt that their communities were depending on them. Each demonstrated a collective consciousness and took on the burden of being a positive representation of the Black community. This finding regarding the socially constructed concept of Black women, affirms Shavers and Moore’s (2004) research that indicated students utilized coping mechanisms related to the cultural notion of the strong, independent and resilient Black woman. Participants considered themselves strong Black women who had no choice but to persevere. This finding also supports research by Watt (2006) who found that race and gender are sources of additional stress for students.

It is also important to note comments by study participants regarding interpersonal relationships with Black male students that highlight the intersections of race and gender. Four of the eight participants spoke directly about the lack of connection with their Black male counterparts. They indicated that the “Black men, especially the athletes don’t date Black girls”. The remaining participants expressed agreement with this observation during the focus group. This finding is consistent with Cuyjet (2006) and Henry’s (2008) research indicating challenges associated with the imbalance of male/female enrollment and its impact on the social adjustment, racial and
cultural identity of Black female students. Henry (2008) states that regarding interpersonal relationships between Black women and men “the grave imbalance between Black women and Black men in college raises several issues that have been ignored regarding the social adjustment and psychological well-being of Black women college students” (p. 17).

Black women face societal views that impact their image and self-perception (Banks, 2009). They also encounter challenges associated with being a successful Black woman in an environment with disproportionate Black male representation (Banks, 2009; Henry, 2008, 2013; Garibaldi, 2014). These factors affect dating, relationship building and the future prospect of finding a mate with a comparable educational background within the Black community (Henry, 2008, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Bartman, 2015). Black women who are interested in dating Black men are further marginalized by the limited number of collegiate Black males who prefer to date outside of their racial/ethnic background (Henry, 2008, 2013). Interracial dating for many Black women is not an option as they often feel responsible for uplifting and continuing the Black race (Cuyjet, 2006; Henry, 2008), are viewed negatively based upon stereo-types which depict Black women as less desirable (Henry, 2008), are considered angry, assertive or ghetto (Banks, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2009), and overall are devalued within a societal context (Henry, 2013).

There was much concern regarding interpersonal relationships and dating between Black women and men on campus. These issues added to the sense of isolation, loneliness, and other psychological and identity challenges some of the women
experienced. They also contributed to participant perceptions of challenges within the Black community (Henry, 2013).

Patton et al. (2016) indicated that notions of gender identity are often challenged or reinforced during college. Although the women shared stories that ascribe to traditional gender roles, they also expressed frustration at the reinforced stereo-typed notions of Black women identities. Participant’s self-perception, societal views, and family expectations each influenced how the women viewed their gender identity. Because gender identity is continually formed, it is important for colleges and universities to understand how Black women navigate college and negotiate environmental and interpersonal interactions which may impact their developmental outcomes and persistence behaviors.

**Socioeconomic status.** Participant experiences were impacted by their socioeconomic background. Students experienced financial challenges associated with not only preparing for college, but also navigating an institution and interacting with peers, they believed were uninformed about socioeconomic differences. Two of the study themes captured student experiences related to economic capital. Resources that Impact My College Experience and It Always Comes Back to Finances, encompass many of the financial difficulties shared by the women. These findings affirmed existing research which specifically highlight student demographics, preparation and transition to college challenges, as well as economic capital concerns for Black and first-generation students.

Overall, money was a point of concern for each participant in balancing educational and familial obligations. Receiving a scholarship proved to be essential in
their college choice (Tierney, 1980) and the ability to work was important in being independent and self-reliant. These study findings were consistent with existing research that indicated, first-generation and Black students tend to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The lack of economic capital as documented by Sasso and DeVitis (2015) presented an ongoing challenge for study participants who shared that they could not rely on their parents for financial support and avoided discussing money in order to not cause additional stress for their families.

Of note, were participant narratives related to feeling inferior because of differences in social class background. The overall impact of this finding and frequency mentioned by participants must be acknowledged. Rice et al. (2017) recently documented that first-generation students experience challenges associated with transitioning and adapting to college because of differences in social class. The authors argue that this imbalance created by differences in social class perspectives can result in engagement difficulties. Study participants described similar challenges in connecting with members of the campus community. Socioeconomic differences were cited as a significant factor that impeded developing connections with their peers. This finding was noteworthy because many of the preeminent retention and engagement theories do not necessarily account for socioeconomic and class differences that can affect students’ collegiate experiences and persistence behaviors.

**First-generation student status.** Many of the stories shared by participants centered on challenges associated with being the first in their family to navigate higher education. Although students said they were not ashamed of being first-generation, they were hesitant to share this information with others, often saying “it never comes up”.
The absence of role-models and authority figures who could provide assistance, along with being reticent to share information, led to difficulties applying to and navigating college. Current study findings were consistent with research that denoted first-generation and Black students often lack intergeneration information that is helpful in navigating college. Participants also described experiences that corroborate existing research that states, the lack of social and cultural capital contributes to social and academic transition difficulties (Pascarella et al., 2004; Strayhorn, 2010b).

Research also suggests that first-generation students feel less supported by family (Pascarella et al., 2004; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Study participants shared stories that exemplify a family structure with close family bonds and supportive environments. The women were fiercely protective of their parents, particularly those who were raised by single mothers. Participants were also determined to ensure that their status as a first-generation student did not inhibit their ability to be successful in college. Although study participants reported feeling additional pressure, none indicated they felt unsupported by their families. This finding is significant because it challenges the dominant narrative on the lack of support first-generation and Black students receive from their families.

Each participant shared stories that demonstrated tenacity, fortitude, strength, and perseverance despite challenges and barriers. Life circumstances and family served as additional motivation to succeed. This finding is noteworthy because it is demonstrative of self-efficacy and its importance to college persistence. Each participant utilized core strengths and accessed a higher order sense of self in responding to challenges. This finding was consistent with Próspero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) who found motivation to
be a strong determining factor for first-generation students. It also was consistent with research that found first-generation students displayed resilience that helped them to navigate college.

Retention and persistence. According to Tinto (1993, 1995) and the preponderance of research, the first six weeks are critical as students are more likely to withdraw from college. It is important to acknowledge this critical time frame and its potential impact on the study population. The women shared a substantial amount of information regarding their academic and social engagement experiences. This information can be used by educators to develop initiatives that help students acquire skills and competencies that positively impact their persistence behaviors. Pre-collegiate experiences, performance on college entrance exams, student background characteristics and demographics, as well as the lack of intergenerational information were also found to be significant contributing factors in how the women experienced college. These findings underscored challenges of negotiating the balance between academic and social engagement (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993).

Tinto’s (2012) updated departure theory acknowledge that a student’s social identity may impact their persistence and departure habits. It is the researcher’s belief that individual identities as well as the intersectionality of identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, may have more of an impact on the persistence behaviors of study participants then acknowledged in much of the retention and persistence research. This viewpoint is supported by several of the findings regarding representation and community. The women clearly articulated the importance
of their own identities and the need to share spaces with peers and faculty with similar backgrounds.

Furthermore, environmental factors such as campus climate and institutional structures were found to be significant to the study population. The women expressed concern regarding microaggressions, discrimination and socioeconomic differences which affected their college experiences. Unfortunately, structural challenges are rarely acknowledged in the literature although they impact persistence behaviors of students. Astin (1993) and Tinto’s (1993) theories are no exception, as they do not adequately address structural issues like those experienced by the women in this study. Tinto (1993) argued that students were more likely to succeed if they are integrated into the academic and social fabric of the institution. Alternatively, this study argues that the institution must also adapt to meet the needs of Black, female first-generation students to help them thrive within the university community.

It is important to note, that seven of the eight participants were freshmen. This is significant as it clearly connects the current study and findings to existing retention and persistence literature. It also emphasizes the overall importance of the first six weeks of the academic year. Overall, each of the themes derived from participant stories are demonstrative of experiences that can affect the persistence behaviors of students.

**Implications for Practice**

Students who are Black, female, and first-generation are members of multiple marginalized groups. They are also a diverse demographic with nuanced needs. The current study addressed the complexities of being a Black female student, contributed to existing literature and answered research questions regarding the lived experiences of the
study population. Educators can affect and impact student experiences by affirming student’s identities, removing barriers and increasing access to resources, and coordinating programs and purposeful interventions that help students acquire skills and competencies that foster greater resiliency. These strategies serve to empower students in developing a greater sense of self which contributes to persistence and ultimately college success.

Several recommendations are made based upon the current study findings that highlight the need for continued exploration both qualitative and quantitative. Implications for student affairs, faculty, research, theory, pre-college experiences, and policy are provided. Considering study participants were mostly freshmen, implications outlined in the discussion are most relevant to new students transitioning to college.

**Student Affairs.** At the onset, there are several opportunities to assist students who comprise the study population. From transition programs for students and their families, to psychological well-being support, to developmentally and culturally relevant programming, higher education professionals can create programs and services that encourage and support this student demographic in navigating the complex processes of college.

**Orientation.** Several of the participants indicated that pre-orientation programs were helpful in easing some of their transition concerns. Orientation and college transition programs are critical in helping new students acclimate in the first few weeks of college. Existing programs should be expanded to help incoming students and their families adjust to the demands of college and become familiar with college norms, campus services and institutional resources. Extended orientation and second semester
orientation programs can also serve as refreshers on important institutional information and an additional check-point to ensure students have adjusted to college life.

Additionally, summer visitation programs will also provide an opportunity for students to become college ready, experience the campus environment, develop connections with peers, and facilitate mentoring relationships with faculty and staff. These strategies and early intervention programs can impact the persistence behaviors of students and contribute positively to retention efforts.

Residence life. Participants described challenges associated with interacting and connecting with their peers. Residence life offices can play a significant role in helping students to develop a greater capacity for understanding, empathy and appreciation of diverse backgrounds and life situations. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) indicated that these types of co-curricular programs help students to develop connections with their peers. Additional efforts should be made to encourage students to engage in dialogue across difference, including socioeconomic status. Residence life staff can coordinate floor programs that help students establish rapport and build community. Informal social gatherings such as dinners, study sessions, and movie nights can help students develop connections that facilitate social engagement.

Participants shared stories of loneliness, the desire to connect with other first-generation students, and challenges associated with navigating institutional culture. To address many of these challenges, residence life can create living and learning communities which focus on supporting first-generation students. Upper-class student staff, who are also first-generation, can assist in the transition process of students by
serving as peer mentors, connecting students to university resources, and providing information regarding campus traditions and norms.

It is important that residence life staff reflect the social identities of residents and the diversity of the institution. Residence life can implement hiring strategies that encourage more first-generation, Black female students to apply for positions within housing. It is also important to provide culturally relevant programming and services. This can be accomplished in several ways. Residence life staff should regularly attend trainings and meetings with campus partners such as enrollment management, first-generation student services, multicultural student affairs and identity-based offices, to discuss student characteristics and demographics. These educational conversations can help residence life staff coordinate culturally relevant programming options that meet the needs of their diverse resident population. Creative partnerships and collaborative programming with identity-based student organizations can also provide opportunities for students to explore different social identities and membership within various student groups.

Furthermore, study participants indicated that concern about money often impacted their ability to socialize with their peers. Educators should be mindful of programming that inadvertently exacerbate differences in socioeconomic background and limit participation of low-income and underrepresented students.

**Multicultural student affairs, identity-based services, and counseling centers.**

Study participants shared sentiments of being “the only one” and highlighted disparities in Black representation on campus. It was important for the women in the study to connect with the Black community at the institution. Several participants also indicated
that their peers were unaware of their first-generation status. Efforts should be made to provide opportunities for students to engage with others from similar identities and backgrounds. Formal and informal student engagement programs may help students transition to college, acclimate to the campus community, and develop connections with faculty and staff who can serve as mentors and role-models. These efforts support a culture of belonging which Strayhorn (2008) indicates is particularly important for students of color.

Additionally, programming that addresses the intersectionality of race and gender should be developed. Several of the participants described experiences that impacted their race and gender. Although students were hesitant to label these occurrences, it is important to acknowledge and support students in developmentally appropriate ways that reaffirm their place and importance within the university community. Multicultural student services and counseling centers can be helpful in creating spaces that are mutually beneficial and supportive environments where students have an opportunity to develop connections with peers and university staff, engage in meaningful dialogue and feel valued, and ultimately be empowered in navigating higher education. For example, institutionally funded and supported sister circles that are publicized to cultural organizations, can serve as a safe and affirming spaces where Black female students can form friendships, share experiences, discuss challenges, and receive encouragement from peers. Furthermore, additional programs and networking events should be coordinated and marketed to encourage multicultural faculty and staff, especially Black female and male staff, to be more visible within inclusive and supportive spaces where students are typically found. This strategy supports efforts to encourage academic and social
engagement between students and members of the university community and facilitate the acquisition of skills associated with persistence.

**First-generation student services.** First-generation student support services should be expanded by establishing a designated office and enhancing services and programmatic efforts. Study participants spoke about peer interaction, academic expectations, family obligations, stress and the pressure to succeed. Educators should be cognizant of these factors and create programming and one-on-one sessions that are useful in helping students better manage their health and well-being. Programming should address college norms, academic expectations, and institutional policies. Students should also be assigned an upper-class peer mentor and a faculty or staff advisor who is familiar with first-generation student concerns. These types of initiatives and environmental supports are critical to the persistence of first-generation college students because they help develop skills and competencies which build knowledge and empower students.

Familial relationships were important to each of the participants. Each shared stories of family expectations, obligations and lack of parental understanding for educational challenges. First-generation student services should provide support services and programming that help students cope and navigate familial and social influences.

In addition to developing support services for students, a communication strategy should be created for first-generation students and their families. Important information, deadlines and opportunities should be shared. This will help keep students and their families informed and facilitate acquiring additional college knowledge.
Furthermore, university-wide programming and services which typically targets parents should be titled and marketed to include family and friends. Colleges and universities should also create alternate programming that is inclusive of students whose parents and families are unable to attend university-wide campus events.

**Student organizations.** Identity-based student organizations such as the Black Student Union played an important role in the social integration of the study population. Additional support and resources should be allocated to student organizations that help develop diversity, equity and inclusion programming that is reflective of Black culture. Student leaders should facilitate events that encourage peer to peer interaction and mentoring that help participants feel more connected to the Black community. Furthermore, identity-based programming such as cultural celebrations, educational forums and informal social get-togethers will also allow students to discuss concerns related to race, ethnicity and gender.

**Other institutional practices.** Each of the participants indicated that they did not know how college works and had to figure out college on their own. They continually made decisions that impact their educational trajectory and future with limited guidance. Because of this finding, colleges and universities should do more to support Black female students and address racial and gendered environments. Institutions should also address policies, procedures and structures that serve as barriers to first-generation student persistence and college success.

A centrally located office with a synergistic relationship among institutional offices to include multicultural student affairs, enrollment management, academic advising, financial aid, student employment, and student accounts is needed. Increased
funding should be allocated to support programmatic efforts, additional institutional research is needed to collect and track retention data, and advocates who can serve as a resource should also be identified.

It is also vital that colleges and universities recognize the diversity of students who identify as Black, female, and first-generation. There are several opportunities for institutions to provide resources, information and support that help students gain additional social and cultural capital needed to navigate higher education. Enrollment Management strategies should include comprehensive measures for recruiting, enrolling, and retaining Black, female, first-generation college students. Beginning with admissions and high school visits, universities have an opportunity to partner with high school administration and alumni affinity groups in developing workshops for students and their families. Import details regarding the admission process, financial aid, student employment, academics, and student life can provide much needed context for students. Each of the study participants spoke about high school resources, classes, and college entrance exams. These are areas where colleges can help dispel myths and provide guidance so that students are better prepared to make decisions regarding college choice and can more successfully transition to college.

Financial aid programs and workshops specifically designed for first-generation and underrepresented student populations are also important. All study participants commented that it was difficult to complete required admissions paperwork and financial aid forms. Several also shared that they completed much of the college admission process with little or no guidance. Enrollment Management should coordinate ongoing workshops and information sessions that help students and their families gain college
knowledge and understand the FASFA and financial aid processes. Additionally, colleges and universities should designate additional financial resources to support this student demographic. Cohort based programs that cover the total cost of attendance would lessen the financial burden and mitigate some of the stress study participants experienced. It would also give students an opportunity to interact with peers from similar backgrounds and identities, which study results revealed was important to participants.

Each of the participants expressed concern regarding class and socioeconomic status differences among their peers, and over 80% commented on the lack of Black male representation in the student body. Enrollment Management should look for ways to continue diversifying their student body. The recruitment of Black males outside of athletics and students from different socioeconomic backgrounds should be important considerations of the student enrollment profile. In addition, it is important for institutions to be mindful of the escalating costs associated with attending college. For each participant money was a concern. Enrollment management practices should ensure that adequate financial resources are available to students. For low-income students, the cost of books, supplies and incidentals causes additional stress and may unintentionally foster exclusive environments and fractions within the campus community.

Several of the participants spoke about institutional marketing materials and their perception of diversity within the student population. Students also identified differences in social and academic spaces. It is important for the university to be mindful of how diversity and student demographics are communicated in marketing materials to
prospective students. This is particularly important for Enrollment Management and University Communication offices.

Furthermore, participants shared that they believe a discriminatory act or experience could happen at any point in their collegiate experience. This sentiment may impact a student’s perception of the campus climate and serve as a precursor for a potential underlying issue that administrators should address. Enrollment Management should advise institutional leaders on enrollment trends which might necessitate the hiring of additional diverse faculty and staff. Enrollment managers should also be mindful of demographic changes within the student body that might affect the campus climate. Institutional representatives should be informed of variations within the student profile and be encouraged to coordinate additional programs, leadership development opportunities, and intergroup dialogues that meet the needs of the current student population. These initiatives can provide an opportunity for students to engage in meaningful conversations across differences, foster a sense of belonging, build community through intercultural exploration and engagement, explore commonalities and differences, and develop an understanding of social justice, diversity, equity and inclusion. Multicultural student affairs and identity-based offices can serve an important role in helping students transition to college and navigate the campus climate specifically as it relates to race and ethnicity, diversity, inclusion and developing a sense of belonging.

Finally, institutions should allocate additional financial resources to increase the representation of Black, female faculty and staff. This effort can assist in creating a more representative learning environment, can impact the campus climate, facilitate mentoring
relationships that support student growth and development, and have a positive impact on the persistence behavior of students.

**Faculty.** Study participants were reluctant to share with professors their status as a first-generation college student. Each however agreed that it might be helpful for their instructors to be more aware of issues and challenges that many first-generation students encounter. Not all first-generation students are comfortable sharing this information, but overall it is beneficial for the academic community to be more cognizant of the diverse student populations that are on college campuses. Diversity and inclusion trainings and workshops can help faculty stay abreast of changing student demographics, assist in developing multicultural skills and competencies, and facilitate understanding of their role in maintaining a diverse and inclusive environment. Additionally, it is important to cultivate a faculty climate that encourages and recognizes the importance of identity-related experiences. The faculty manual can outline expectations and core cultural competencies, that faculty can utilize and demonstrate in creating a diverse and inclusive environment that fosters a sense of belonging in and out of the classroom.

It is also important to establish parameters for communicating with students early in their classroom experience. Faculty should set clear expectations, be accessible and approachable to students. It is important to develop familiarity by asking questions and providing an opportunity to share and get-to-know students. Be cognizant of the ways in which students learn and assist them in developing academic capital. This is especially relevant for underrepresented students who may be reluctant to engage with faculty. Interacting with professors during office hours and at out of class events can greatly benefit students by helping them to develop positive relationships with faculty members.
Financial constraints were also a source of concern for study participants. Academicians can obtain a greater awareness of differences in socioeconomic status of students through annual updates and presentations by enrollment management administrators. Additionally, academic departments can encourage instructors to increase the accessibility of class materials, textbooks, and computer programs necessary for academic success. Professors can also serve as a resource in directing students to scholarships, internships and research opportunities that are related to their field of study.

Collectively, participants shared stories regarding the impact of race and gender in academic spaces. Several of the students described racial microaggressions specifically related to being Black and female. These experiences in academic settings, particularly at PWIs, have an impact on student’s academic persistence. Faculty should be cognizant of classroom demographics including racial and gender imbalance in the classroom. Additionally, faculty should examine pedagogy that guides classroom instruction and seek ways to update curriculum so that missing voices and diverse perspectives are included. Professors should also find ways to manage classroom activities and interactions, encourage conversations among peers and minimize hostile environments. Diversity, equity and inclusion trainings may help faculty recognize when the classroom environment discourages students from contributing to the discussion. It will also arm professors with techniques for creating a more open and inclusive environment that promotes the genuine exchange of ideas and perspectives.

The lack of Black faculty impacts the experiences of Black female students. Research participants indicated that they look for Black representation in academic spaces. Academic units can implement strategies to recruit, hire, train and retain
additional Black female faculty. This approach can help foster academic connections and engagement with Black students. Positive faculty interactions and mentoring relationships can aid in Black student persistence and success.

Given the limited number of Black faculty, it is equally important that non-Black faculty serve as mentors and role-models. Faculty with cross-cultural competence can help students increase their ability to interact and engage with others of different backgrounds and identities. An increased awareness of the study population can alert professors to issues related to classroom dynamics and race, to students who may experience difficulties adjusting to academic expectations, and to financial constraints that may prohibit academic engagement and success.

**Pre-college preparation and experiences.** Research participants spoke candidly about their high school classes, teachers, counselors, and available resources. Several indicated that their high schools adequately prepared them for many aspects of college, but more can be done to academically and socially prepare all students for postsecondary education. Findings from the current study illuminated the importance of college preparatory programs. Participants clearly articulated that these types of pre-collegiate experiences helped to prepare them for academic expectations of college. High schools should do more to foster programs that encourage first-generation and Black students to participate in advanced placement courses by providing a variety of course options and regularly meeting with students starting in ninth grade to discuss advanced curricular options.

It is also important that instructors who are charged with teaching advanced classes are adequately prepared. This includes having extensive knowledge in the subject
area and participation in advanced training regarding best practices for classroom instruction. Teachers should attend mandatory workshops and seminars that provide guidance on curriculum development that better prepares students for the rigors of college academics.

High schools should also have information sessions, a structured workshop series and dedicated college counselors to serve as a resource for students. Workshops should cover a variety of topics to include academic preparation, the college admission process, scholarships, financial aid, and social engagement on college campuses. Furthermore, students should discuss realistic timelines for completing the college admission process, financial aid and personal financial management, as well as, strategies for overseeing their health and psychological well-being. These information sessions present a unique opportunity for high schools to develop partnerships with local colleges and universities. High school alumni could also contribute by participating in school sponsored programs that encourage students to explore the possibility of attending college. These initiatives provide opportunities for students to gain social and cultural capital which research has demonstrated is important to college choice and transition to college experiences.

**Implications for Policy**

Policy implications based upon study findings include provisions for additional funding and institutional resources, creating guidelines for the FASFA that improve the financial aid process, strengthening high school curriculum and programming, universal access to college preparatory exam classes, and creating greater synergy between secondary and postsecondary education.
There should be higher education policies for allocating additional funding and resources that address disparities in access, retention and attainment rates for first-generation, underrepresented students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It is also imperative that financial aid education workshops are provided by all high schools and higher education institutions. This should start as early as the 10th grade and will ensure students and their families receive much needed guidance in completing and submitting required documentation and forms. It will also help students make better informed decisions regarding college choice.

Study participants indicated that advance course work was an important part of their high school experience. The opportunity to take advanced classes is essential to developing a solid academic foundation and understanding collegiate expectations. There should be policy that requires high schools to offer or provide access to advanced placement curriculum. Additionally, high schools in low-income and underrepresented communities should be incentivized to enroll students and achieve a 60% successful completion rate per advanced placement class.

Secondary education can serve an important role in providing access to college preparatory classes for different populations of students. Study results underscore disparities in access to courses, workshops and skills-based trainings that familiarize students with standardized tests and provide guidance to improve one’s test performance. Participants indicated that SAT, ACT and other types of college preparation programs are often out of financial reach. From a social justice perspective, women’s voter groups, educational lobbyist organizations, and Black advocacy associations should pressure governments to establish policies that mandate universal access to college entrance exam
preparation classes. Access to these types of courses should not be tied to a student’s ability to pay. Finances should not serve as a gatekeeper for this important college requirement. Additionally, there should be policy that requires high schools to offer programming that helps students become familiar with college expectations, the admissions process, and transitional challenges that incoming students may experience.

For many students, college is a time where identity exploration becomes part of their collegiate experience. This was also true for the current study population. Identity was an important factor in how each participant experienced college. Race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status often influenced how the study participants perceived themselves and interacted with their peers. Because of these findings, there should be policy that requires high schools to offer introductory classes that provide an opportunity for students to learn about their own identity and the identities of others. These types of conversations which center around commonalities and differences may help students to transition to college and facilitate social engagement. Moreover, these types of dialogues and identity exploration may be particularly important for Black students who enroll in PWIs.

Finally, policy is needed that requires high school district curriculum specialists and counselors to meet annually with higher education representatives. The primary goal would be to help high schools gain a better understanding of collegiate academic expectations and to share important details regarding admissions requirements. These sessions should provide much needed information and guidance that high school staff can share with their students. Accordingly, academic and financial management programming can demystify the admissions process and clarify academic expectations.
resulting in better prepared students. These efforts will provide additional context regarding higher education which ultimately should benefit high school students who pursue a college degree.

**Future Directions for Research and Theory**

Additional research regarding the experiences of Black female, first-generation, college students is needed as current studies tend to emphasize individual factors in college persistence, examine students of color in aggregate, and inadequately consider implications of race and gender. Racial/ethnic and gender differences are ignored as students are often analyzed as a monolithic group. Scholarly endeavors that examine Black students and Black female students are needed. Furthermore, research that highlights the positive accomplishments of diverse student populations should also be pursued. Several recommendations are made based upon the current study findings that highlight the need for continued qualitative and quantitative exploration.

**Research.** Based upon the current study’s findings, persistence, engagement and departure literature should be expanded to incorporate nuances of first-generation and non-traditional student populations. The current study suggests race/ethnicity as well as gender play a more significant role in determining student outcomes than initially identified in predominate theories. Consequently, the researcher posits that social identities are more connected to persistence, retention and departure habits of students. Because most theories are gendered, new retention and persistence theories that are applicable to women, specifically Black women, must be adjusted or developed.

Participants shared detailed accounts of pre-collegiate experiences that affected their preparation and transition to college. Consistent with previous research, this study’s
findings also indicated that pre-collegiate experiences, specifically prior schooling, have a significant impact on the educational experiences of students. Additional inquiry is needed to examine primary and secondary education and its impact on Black female college persistence.

Furthermore, quantitative research which can be extrapolated to larger populations should be conducted to develop retention strategies within colleges and universities, as well as policies for local and federal governments. This research should include longitudinal studies on the relationship between self-efficacy, persistence and academic progress that can be utilized to develop future interventions.

There is limited research pertaining to low-income students and even less studies that are specifically related to intersectionality and the impact of class and socioeconomic status, as well as race and gender. Further research is needed to provide additional context and understanding of student experiences.

Moreover, studies pertaining to the psychological well-being of this population is also scarce. The lack of research results in limited understanding of what factors account for transition to college and adjustment difficulties. It also contributes to ineffective policy and programs that do not adequately address the needs of students. Additional studies that are cultural relevant and explore the psychological well-being of students is needed.

Many developmental theories describe student success as a linear process. Based upon research finding, the researcher posits that student experiences are interconnected, occur at different intervals and reappear in different iterations. The way students navigate and integrate different life experiences does not follow a sequential order, but
each ultimately affects their cognitive and developmental growth. A new line of inquiry that helps to explain student achievement based upon first-generation status as well as by racial and ethnic group is needed to better understand student outcomes.

According to Patton, et al. (2016), there are no developmental theories related to class and college students. Socioeconomic status and class were salient experiences for research participants. New research is needed to better understand how socioeconomic status and class impact student outcomes related to persistence and retention.

**Theory.** It is imperative that additional developmental theories relevant to Black students, Black female students, and Black, female first-generation students are created. It has been well documented that these populations will continue to comprise a significant portion of undergraduate students. It will be important to have theories on Black female identity development, psychological development, and interpersonal development, which help educators better understand and support this growing demographic.

There are several opportunities for further development of theories that explain student behavior. Much of the prevailing theories center upon traditional students which often do not adequately consider differences within non-traditional student populations, racial/ethnic groups, or gender. There is also limited research related to socioeconomic status, class differences and student engagement. A recent study by Rice et al. (2007) highlights transition challenges faced by first-generation students, but there is a need for additional inquiry on the impact of social class and student persistence based upon compounding factors of gender and race. There is also a need for additional inquiry on the adjustments of Black, female first-generation students broken down by ethnicity.
This will help to determine if other factors or cultural nuances facilitate student persistence.

Further research is also needed on the coping strategies and strengths of Black female students. Research findings indicated that participants utilized various methods, which may be culturally derived, to navigate college. This finding is consistent with “Superwoman Schema” which was highlighted in the work of Woods- Giscombé (2010) and Shavers and Moore (2014). It also affirms the findings of O’Connor (2002) who referenced “educational capital” to describe strategies used by Black women to thrive and persist within higher education. The cultural phenomenon of #BlackGirlMagic has not yet been explored but may yield important insight on the development of Black female students. In an effort to implement appropriate interventions, a better understanding of how this diverse and dynamic student population negotiate the additional stressors related to race and gender is needed (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Further examination of environmental factors that affect student perceptions and impact persistence decisions are also needed. Davis (1991) argues that often research on the environment devalues Black voices and experiences. Institutional context, structures and processes that have an impact on intersectionality of race, class and gender should be studied as current research may not necessarily capture the unique experiences of Black women.

The data also suggests study participants accessed a higher order sense of self to mitigate challenges, address issues, and navigate personal and institutional obstacles. Development of theories that explore race and ethnicity, and how students’ sense of self
impact cognitive gains and non-cognitive experiences will help expand our understanding of self-authorship and autonomy theories.

Research findings from the current study highlighted challenges associated with interacting with peers of different identities as well as unity within identity groups. Race and ethnicity theories serve as a foundation for understanding racial and ethnic identity development of students. Many studies on Black students have been historically adapted for Black male and female students and tend to group sexes together. Racial and ethnic identity theories must be updated to better understand the development of Black women. Adapted theories should also further our understanding of race and ethnicity salience by exploring interaction (or the lack of interaction) among and between identity groups.

Limitations

Although the current study achieved its outlined objectives, there are some limitations associated with qualitative inquiry and this study. First, participants were primarily freshmen which may prevent the findings from being transferrable to upper-class students. First year students have limited experience with the institution and may need additional time to acclimate to their new environment. Upper-class students can draw upon their years of experience as a member of the university community, thereby providing a greater variation of experiences. The inclusion of more senior voices may also result in data that reflects different levels of identity salience as well as developmental and cognitive growth that students experience while in college. Furthermore, detailed data may contextually be relevant solely to the study site. Consequently, research findings and recommendations may only be applicable to the research site.
The current study examined Black, female first-generation college students where Black was an overarching racial category. This was done in congruence with institutional data where students self-identify and have limited ability to indicate ethnicity. The researcher acknowledges the diversity of ethnicities within the African diaspora and the diversity of experience of Black female students (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). For example, Griffin, Cunningham and George Mwangi (2015) suggest that there may be racial and ethnic differences in the way in which Black students, particularly Black immigrants, engage and experience the campus climate. As a group, Black women are dynamic, and several participants shared details regarding their ethnicity and its impact on their pre-collegiate experiences and parental expectations. The current study, however, did not examine ethnic identity development. Examining Black women experiences as a static group neglects nuances of ethnicity and is a limitation of this study. Ethnic identity salience, which may have impacted participants’ perception of self and influenced how they experienced and navigated college was not a part of the current research inquiry.

Additionally, other students not considered first-generation according to national definitions, may have similar experiences to first-generation students. Caution should be taken in over-generalizing research findings.

Finally, as an African American, female who also attended a predominantly White institution, I share several identities in common with the research participants. While this may have helped to build rapport, it may also have influenced participant responses. Additionally, as a university administrator with over 20 years of experience in higher education, 10 of which are in diversity and multicultural student services, I hold certain beliefs about resources and support that should be provided for underrepresented
and marginalized student populations. This perspective was the lens from which data was reviewed, analyzed and synthesized. Finally, the researcher is employed full-time at the research site. Although I was familiar with only one research participant, my role as an administrator at the research site may have an impact on their comfort level and ability to be forthright about their experiences. Participants may have been concerned that contributing would negatively impact their student experience or ability to be socially involved in the future. They may also worry that my administrative role would necessitate the sharing of confidential information. Furthermore, students may be apprehensive about sharing details about their families and personal life.

To mitigate potential participant concerns, several precautions were taken to safeguard each participant’s identity, communicate in advance study parameters and expectations, and ensure a safe and comfort environment for students to share their experiences. From the beginning, it was important to establish a rapport with each of the participants. I accomplished this by sharing information about my personal background, educational experience, and professional goals. I also gave students an opportunity to ask me any questions.

Students were provided advance, detailed information regarding the study which may have helped to qualm any initial apprehension. Consent forms were provided and reviewed at every meeting to ensure participants were knowledgeable of their rights within the context of the study. Participants were also able to select the date, time and location of interviews to accommodate them in a quiet, confidential and welcoming space of their choosing. Finally, during the interviews, I observed verbal and non-verbal reactions and redirected the conversation when appropriate.
Conclusion/Final Thoughts

First-generation, Black female college students face a multitude of obstacles in preparing for and navigating college. The current study found that pre-collegiate factors, socioeconomic status, race, and gender had an impact on each participant’s educational journey. The lack of resources and knowledge, campus climate, psychological concerns, interpersonal difficulties with peers, and pressure from self and others affected each participant at different times and in different ways. The study reframes the lens in which first-generation, Black female students are examined and fills a gap in research by highlighting the way student participants accessed a higher order sense of self in integrating, navigating and responding to challenges. Despite the challenges encountered by study participants, each used the experiences as motivation to persist and succeed in college.
References


Winkle-Wagner, R. (2008). Putting money in the right places: Supporting first-


Appendix A

Black, Female, First-Generation College Student Interview Protocol

Section I:
1. Tell me about your story and how you got to UM?
2. Describe your transition from high school to college?
3. What has been your experience at the university?
   a. Academically and socially (What is your academic and social life like at the university? (please explain)
   b. As a FGCS please discuss any barriers or challenges you have encountered as a first-generation student?
   c. How has being a Black female student affected your college experience?
      a. Please discuss any barriers or challenges you have encountered as a Black, female student?
4. What is helping you be successful here?
   a. What on-campus resources (academic and social) have you utilized and how have they been helpful to you?
   b. Who would you identify as most influential in helping you navigate college? Specifically, how have they assisted?
   c. What are some of the personal attributes that help you overcome challenges? (please explain)
5. What are your expectations of college and have they been met?

SECTION II:
1. What could your university do to better assist you and other FGCS?
2. Do you have any advice for other Black female first-generation college students?

Section III: Demographics
1. Participant: _________________________________________________________
2. Year: __________________________
3. Gender Identity: ___________________________
4. Race/Ethnicity: _______________________________________________________
5. Sexual Orientation: _______________________________________________
6. Live on-campus, off-campus or with family: _______________________________
7. Social Class: _______________________________________________________
8. Type of High School attended: __________________________________________
9. Major(s): ___________________________________________________________
10. Minor(s): ____________________________________________________________
11. G.P.A.: __________
12. Full Time or Part Time: ________________
13. Do you have any siblings that attend or have attended college? _____________
Appendix B

Black, Female, First-Generation College Student Follow-up Interview (1x1 and Focus Group)

Section I: Pre-collegiate Experiences
1. During the initial 1x1 interviews college preparation programs such as high school classes, SAT/ACT prep classes, and/or Dual Enrollment were identified as important pre-collegiate experiences. Does this accurately capture your overall perspective?
2. Your high school, neighborhood/community, participation in an outside organization, money, and/or sports were identified as resources that impacted your college choice. Does this accurately describe your experience?
3. Receiving a scholarship was identified as a determining factor in your college choice. Does this accurately capture what influenced your decision to attend the university?
4. Interactions with high school staff, outside organizations, parents, peers, university representatives, college fairs, and/or college/university marketing were identified as influencing or impacting your college choice. Did I understand this correctly?

Section II: Transition to College Experiences
5. Finances, high school experiences and knowledge are identifies as impacting your transition to college. Does this accurately capture your transition to college experience?
6. Campus programming such as orientation, campus events and student organizations were identified as impacting your transition to college. Do these types of activities accurately represent your transition to college experience?

Section III: Collegiate Experiences
7. Interactions with others was identified as affecting your college experience. These include interactions with university faculty, staff, your peers, and/or family members. Does this accurately capture influences that affect your college experience?
8. Academics including experiences in the classroom was identified as impacting your college experience. Does this accurately reflect your experience?
9. Race and culture was identified as impacting your college experience. Examples include experiencing discrimination, campus climate, interpersonal relationships (dating), and the Black student community. Does this accurately capture things that impact your college experience?
10. Extra-curricular activities such as participation in student organizations, on- campus and off-campus events, and athletics are identified as
impacting your college experience. Do these things accurately describe activities that impact your college experience?

11. Resources are identified as impacting your college experience. Resources include university departments/offices/services, student employment (work), money, and financial aid. Does at least one of the areas listed accurately reflect an area that has impacted you while at the university?

Section IV: Barriers & Challenges
12. Several barriers or challenges were identified as having an impact on your collegiate experiences. These barriers included money, family, work, completing paperwork, access to information/knowledge, perceptions of institutional support, feelings of isolation, pressure to succeed, lack of confidence; being first-generation, and mental health and well-being. Do one or more of these areas accurately reflect your experience?

Section V: Resources that Support Student Success
13. Resources that support the success of Black students, first-generation students, and women were identified as influencing your collegiate experience. Does this accurately reflect your experience?

Section VI: Motivation to Succeed
14. The possibility for upper mobility, family, yourself, your peers, family circumstances, your status as first-generation, and your home community were identified as things that influence your motivation to succeed in college. Does at least one of the items listed accurately reflect your motivation to achieve collegiate success?

Section VII: Advocacy
15. Advocacy or advocating for yourself is identified as impacting your college experience. Does this accurately reflect your experience?

Section VII: Emotions
16. Frustration, sadness, stress, isolation, hope, determination, strength, purpose, and fortitude/resilience are identified as emotions that impact your collegiate experience. Do at least one of these emotions capture a sentiment you have experienced as you navigate college?

Section III: Demographics
14. Participant: _______________________________________________________
15. Race: ___________________________________________________________
16. Ethnicity: _________________________________________________________
17. Pseudonym: ______________________________________________________
Appendix C

Recruitment Document

Hello,

My name is Renée Dickens Callan and I am a doctoral student, working under the supervision of Dr. Professor Debbiesiu Lee, PhD., in the Higher Education Leadership program in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami. I am conducting a research study on Black female students who are also the first in their family to attend college. I am recruiting individuals to be interviewed about their college experience.

Participation in this study involves meeting for a 1x1 interview that will take approximately 1.5 hours of your time. The interview will be audio-recorded, transcribed by a 3rd party vendor, and used for my research dissertation. Participants, if interested, will have an opportunity to review the interview transcription and analysis to provide feedback. I would like to assure you that all participant names are confidential. Please note, there is no compensation for participating in this study.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at [redacted] or [redacted]. I will then send you an email indicating available interview time slots and provide you with further information concerning the location of the study.

Thank you for considering this request to participate in my research study.

Sincerely,

Renée Dickens Callan
Doctoral Student
Appendix D

Participant Descriptions

Eight Black, first-generation, female college students participated in the study. The ethnic identities of study participants include five African Americans, two Haitians and one Jamaican student. All participants grew up and attended high school in the United States, although one participant immigrated to the U.S. in the ninth grade. Seven of the participants attended public high schools, one a public charter school, and one was home-schooled beginning in the 3rd grade. Four of the study participants are 18-year-old freshmen, three participants are 19-year-old freshmen, and one participant is a 20-year-old junior. Additionally, each of the participants live in on-campus housing. All participants grew up in predominately Black neighborhoods except for one participant who lived in a predominately White state after her family relocated just before her ninth-grade year.

Participant #1: Nia is a 19-year-old African American female, first-generation college student. She is a currently enrolled full-time freshman student who resides in on-campus housing. Nia is majoring in Psychology with a minor in Biology. She attended a public high school in the same city as the university. Nia was in a dual enrollment program and during her junior year and participated in a summer medical scholars program at the university where she is currently enrolled. Nia indicates that her socioeconomic status is middle-class.

Participant #2: Kali is a 19-year-old Haitian female, first-generation college student. She is a currently enrolled full-time freshman student who resides in on-campus housing. Kali is majoring in Biochemistry with a minor in Business. Kali attended a
predominately White public high school in a predominately White suburban community which is different from the mostly Black urban neighborhood where she lives. Kali indicates that her socioeconomic status is lower-class.

**Participant #3:** Amber is a 19-year-old African-American female, first-generation college student. She is a currently enrolled full-time freshman student who resides in on-campus housing. Amber is double majoring in Accounting and Advertising. She attended one of the top public high schools in her county under the school choice program where most of her classmates were from upper middle-class backgrounds. Amber was adopted as a child and indicates that her socioeconomic status is lower-class.

**Participant #4:** Nola is an 18-year-old African American female, first-generation college student. She is a currently enrolled full-time freshman student athlete and resides in on-campus upper classmen student housing. Nola is undeclared but interested in Human Social Development. Religion is an important part of Nola’s family identity and consequently she was home-schooled starting from 3rd grade through high school. Nola indicates that her socioeconomic status is middle-class.

**Participant #5:** Bailey is a 20-year-old African American female, first-generation college student. She is a currently enrolled full-time junior who resides in on-campus housing. Bailey is majoring in Psychology with a minor in Spanish and International Studies. She attended a public high school in a predominately White state after her family moved from a large urban city in the mid-west. Bailey indicates that her socioeconomic status is middle-class.

**Participant #6:** Joy is an 18-year-old Haitian female, first-generation college student. She is a currently enrolled full-time freshman student and resides in on-campus housing.
Joy is on the Pre-Med track and majoring in Athletic Training with a minor in Sports Administration. She attended a public high school and participated in a dual enrollment program. Joy indicates that her socioeconomic status is low/middle-class.

**Participant #7: **Naomi is an 18-year-old, Jamaican, female, first-generation college student. She is a currently enrolled full-time freshman student who resides in on-campus housing. Naomi is majoring in Journalism and Sociology with a minor in Africana Studies. She immigrated from Jamaica in the ninth grade and attended a public high school in the same city where she attends college. Naomi indicates that her socioeconomic status is lower/middle-class.

**Participant #8: **Gia is an 18-year-old, African American female, first-generation college student. She is a currently enrolled full-time freshman student who resides in on-campus housing. Gia is majoring in Psychology. She was a member of the first graduating class in her public charter high school. Gia indicates that her socioeconomic status is lower class.
Appendix E

Themes and Categories with Quotes
Research Question 1

High School Resources that Impact my College Experience

High School Classes the Foundation:
“Having AP classes and it really helps you because, I've known students back in high school that went to regular, like that regular classes from different schools, and it was just like they didn't learn anything” (Kali).

“Academic wise, I think it's pretty nice since I was challenged in high school. I don't really find the work here to be too overwhelming at all” (Amber).

“That's why they pushed me to the honors classes and AP classes. And I feel as though the teachers did a very good job of preparing students if they didn't want to go to college. I don't feel like now that I've gotten here that I'm lost and I didn't learn anything to help me prepare to go here as far as education goes” (Bailey).

“But um yeah, so like the social aspect wasn’t that bad um the educational aspect, in certain courses is not that bad but in other courses I wish I had a different experience in high school. I feel like it would have helped me more when I got here” (Nia).

Someone at my High School Encouraged Me and Served as a Resource/I Lacked Resources:
“They were all very helpful. So you know she was still there for me helping me with the ACT, SAT type things. I hadn't taken them until senior year even though I should've taken them before that. But I didn't know and my parents didn't know” (Nola).

“We also had a college advisor who was amazing. If you needed anything in regards to college, how to get there, how to apply things and that sort- you could always go to her and she a was a great resource” (Nia).

“My school pretty much provided information and I had a really good guidance counselor. So that was pretty helpful. She would help me with application and I had teachers who would also help me with my essays. I was very close with my teachers in high school so that was very helpful when it came to the application process” (Amber).

“Like college preparedness class. Like after school maybe or a program for that. But they only, they cater a lot to the kids going to the community college so they didn't really need. Most of the school didn't go away so they weren't going to make a class for me to go to. And they really also didn't asked me if I needed it or not. I think they just assume that since I was, um, my, I was so like. What's the word I'm looking for? Adamant about
going to an away, away school that they just figured I knew what I was doing. They were like, she probably, she clearly wants to go away so she knows what she is doing. So Yeah” (Bailey).

“Yes. And she just, she actually did me pretty messed up. She didn't send in like recommendations when she should of and like just different things that you need from your counselor at the high school. She never sent it in on time and I had to constantly ask her like can you, did you send in my transcript, did you do this and it's just she wasn't very organized and I think it was also because she just. She was only counselor for like the grade. But she also, I think they just didn't take into account the other steps that are needed when you go to like a far away school and maybe a bigger school” (Bailey).

“But um they, like we lost, we changed counselors so many times I just stopped going to the counselor. You know what, I'm going to have to figure this out for myself” (Gia).

**I Couldn't Afford to take a College Prep Course:**

“No, you had to pay for those. I didn't have money so I had to teach myself. Most of the kids in my school did, they could afford it so they did” (Kali).

“My family couldn't afford to provide me with SAT classes or tutors or anything along that line. So that was actually kind of hard. I had a study on my own and then figure out like what I was doing wrong on my own” (Amber).

“A lot of the teachers actually taught prep courses, like $500 I think they were for just a weekend so I could not afford that high budget” (Amber).

“Yeah, it was not even a prep. It was like information session. Let me rephrase the word prep in that, it was a workshop” (Joy).

**I Had to do it on My Own**

**I Don't Know How College Works**

“It was hard because like me and my mom were both learning about the process together. So like stuff will pop up. And we didn't know what it was, what was going on. And she tried to help me as much as she could. But, she didn't know, I didn't know. So we were like be asking people like what we should we do with this, what does this mean?” (Gia).

“I have to figure everything out by myself. So that's probably the worst thing. I have to figure everything out. I have to search everything. I have to ask other people, because they know it. I don't know. My mom can't help me, my parents can help me” (Kali).

“I'm just like, I always fill that out by myself because my parents, my mom doesn't know how to do that” (Kali).

“I hadn't taken them [SAT and ACT] until senior year even though I should've taken them before that. But I didn't know and my parents didn't know” (Nola).
“Yes, it's actually a lot like between high school and here that could have been done. Just
the applications in general. Just navigating that, we didn't even really know what the
common application was and what schools accepted it and we literally had to start from
scratch on all of that. And as far as like coming here we didn't know what to expect as far
as what should I bring. What do normal college students bring to college and what would
I need. Do I need to get a job or do I not need to get a job? Is that something that is going
to be too much for me or not like. And I guess a lot of students may have those questions
but I feel like as a first-generation student my mom didn't even have an idea so at least a
parent went to college like they'd have an idea of maybe what you should bring and
what's important maybe in college or not” (Bailey).

**Being first-generation there is no one to Tell Me how it should be Done:**
“I think it has a lot to do with being you know first-generation because there's, there's no
one before me to, that has went through these struggles and can tell me you know this is
what you need to do. Someone that you know can be like I went through this. And also
being, being like Black I just feel like there's, there's a lot on us to succeed, there's a lot
on me to succeed” (Naomi).

“And um, the other thing sad about being I guess first-gen is that I see people with their
parents coming, you can tell their parents have been to a university. You can see their
parents helping them figure out what to do, what's next year after school, after undergrad
and everything to help them apply. I have to figure everything out by myself. So that's
probably the worst thing. I have to figure everything out. I have to search everything. I
have to ask other people, because they know it. I don't know. My mom can't help me, my
parents can help me” (Kali).

“I was like you know, I was always looking forward to someone to look up to and like
show me how it's supposed to be done. I'm like OK you're at school now, you know I'm
here. And you know, tell me how this is going to work, tell me what it's like and then he's
like no. So I'm like OK well that didn't work out” (Nola).

“I don't want to. Yeah I don't want to place an obstacle in front of me when it doesn't
have to be. Like I could wake up every day like, you know thinking about the past or
thinking about my parents and like everyone before me. I'm like man this is a lot on me.
And basically that's me placing a lot on me. When I could just wake up and do what I do.
And I can embrace it and enjoy it like I'm supposed to. It instead of like carrying it like
it's a burden. It doesn't have to be.” (Nola).

**I Have to Advocate for Myself:**
“But me and my guidance counselor like we had a fall out because he wanted me to stay
in IB and I didn't want to stay in IB because I didn't think that was the right choice for
me” (Joy).

“And they really also didn't asked me if I needed it or not. I think they just assume that
since I was, um, my, I was so like. What's the word I'm looking for? Adamant about
going to an away, away school that they just figured I knew what I was doing. They were like, she probably, she clearly wants to go away so she knows what she is doing. So Yeah” (Bailey).

“But it's the fact that I got to take responsibility because one I don't want my mom, I don't want to ask my mom for nothing and if I run out of money” (Joy).

“I told one of my advisor that I don't want to do this major and they tell me wait, you might change your mind, take these classes now and see how you like it. I know what I want just help me out” (Joy).

“Despite that fact that I was the first one to do it and I had to learn how to do those things. Because I already knew about them I was able to do my research beforehand so when the time came for me to apply I wasn’t yelling at my mother to get paperwork. I had already told her in advance mom I am going to need this, I am going to need that” (Nia).

**My Parent(s) Expected Me to get Everything Done:**

“Well specifically like through the application process I know a lot of my friends who weren't first gen their parents were there just like pounding them to do that essay. They filled out the FASFA for them. They told them meet the deadlines. My mom wasn't really there, like she expected me to do that on my own. I filled out the FASFA and I'd ask her for the tax information. I was in charge of making sure I met my own deadlines. And also like I pretty much booked all my own tours and I made all the plans for that whereas my friends like their family members did all of that from them like the year in advance” (Amber).

“Oh yes. I filled them out and even when I needed their information I'm still filling them out. Sitting there typing or writing and filling it out. Like OK. And it was funny because they care a lot. They wanted it done but they just were very sitting back about it. And I don't know if it was me over reacting or tripping. I don't think it was me” (Nola).

“My parents weren't familiar with either of the systems honestly. They were just kind of like. That was the thing that bothered me, it was like, you guys you said it but, you're not showing it. I don't see it. I don't understand. So I kind of did it all on my own. You know that part. Yeah I had to like order transcripts from my classes, even the whole process, the applying process also” (Nola).

**Preparing for and navigating college is emotionally taxing**

**Getting Everything Done and Figuring out What to do Causes Me a lot of Stress:**

“And it went on basically until I got here. Because you know signing up for housing here. Making sure I have the financial aid to together. My stepdad's a veteran he wanted me to get that done. I was like, oh my goodness” (Nola).
“I feel like it's, I put a lot of pressure on myself as being a Black female and a first-generation student cause I don't. I don't have, like my mom doesn't know anything about it so I can't really go to. I go to her she helps me, but I can't really go to her about certain things so I just feel like a lot of pressure on myself to do good” (Bailey).

“I do feel like being an immigrant kind of shapes who I am as a college student. Because I feel like there's even more pressure on me. Because there's pressure in being Black in America and in being female but like. Just adding on top of that being an immigrant, sometimes you feel like you're not supposed to be here. And like am I going to have aid next year” (Naomi).

“It was yeah and I was like piling up on math classes. Like OK, I got to get this in, this has to be done. Because those are your required courses. Add them um. OK what state do I need to take? Because what class tests do I have to take? I had to take like a reading from 10th grade year I had no idea about until I made the call. There's different things like that. It was, it was stressful” (Nola).

“Like OK, you're at college you made here. But you know you have to graduate, you have to do this and everything. You have to be the Black female, you have to be the strong Black female. You can't, you can't break down, you have to do your work. You gotta go to class you can't. It's just. You have to be strong” (Naomi).

**Being a First-Generation College Student can be Lonely:**

“I think it has a lot to do with being you know first-generation because there's, there's no one before me to, that has went through these struggles and can tell me you know this is what you need to do. Someone that you know can be like I went through this. And also being, being like Black I just feel like there's, there's a lot on us to succeed, there's a lot on me to succeed” (Bailey).

“Yeah, that's probably the sad, sad part for me because I never see my mom or anybody with me” (Kali).

“Only my roommate knows. And then this other girl that I talk to when I told her that I was on my way here, other than that no it hasn't really come up in any conversation” (Amber). *in response to who is aware that she is first-gen

“No, but it would be nice to find other people that I can relate with you know in that way because I feel like being a first-generation student it was kind of different from everyone else whose parents like have gone through the process, helping them. For me I pretty much had to do it like on my own. So, finding a friend who also did the same thing would be kind of nice” (Amber).

“And um, the other thing sad about being I guess first-gen is that I see people with their parents coming, you can tell their parents have been to a university. You can see their parents helping them figure out what to do, what's next year after school, after undergrad and everything to help them apply” (Kali).
Class Differences between Me and My Peers

“And I think also it comes in with class. Like I knew I was going to come here and it was going to be like you know a whole bunch of rich White people because that's what the school is” (Naomi).

“Like, I guess maybe sometimes, my friends will want to go out like my upper-class friends. And I kind of have to tell them like I can't afford that it's a little too expensive. And so you feel like, you're making everybody not have fun and try to like find cheaper ways and things. I guess that's the only time I feel kind of bad” (Kali).

“I don't know. It's just the lifestyle they live. It just different. It's too different” (Kali).

-difficult to connect with students at the university

“Yeah, they don't understand. They ask why do you always have to work, why do you have to do this? Why do you have to do that? Oh, can't you just like call your mom, your parents? They say something like that” (Kali).

“It's so much class difference. Cause it's like, even my roommate. That's why we can't really get along because she makes me feel like. I'm sorry to say she makes me feel like shit sometimes. Like that what I go through. I be like damn lady, you for tune, and I'm unfortunate but here, but at the end of the day we still meet at the same place” (Joy).

“Me, I'm first-generation, she's, I don't know how many generations. Cause her brother went to this school and it's just like, when it comes to her. She is. How do I say this? Actually, I ain't gonna sugar coat it. She is just, to me she's just like it's just different for her, like she don't understand. She says things and it makes me feel below and it's not intentionally” (Joy).

“I feel like it's the same type of people that are here. Like when it comes to about people it is always, it's these private school and athletes, private school athletes there's no diversity in opinions and background and socio” (Naomi).

“I guess I could fit in because of my high school. It allows me to know how to talk to other people of different classes and socially” (Kali).

My Parent(s) Want Me to Succeed but Can't Really Help Me:

“I feel like it’s, I put a lot of pressure on myself as being a Black female and a first generation student cause I don't. I don't have, like my mom doesn't know anything about it so I can't really go to. I go to her she helps me but I can't really go to her about certain things so I just feel like a lot of pressure on myself to do good” (Bailey).

“I mean it’s really just for that, to take care of myself like my parent, my mom doesn't help me whatsoever, she probably can't afford to help me anyway. So just take care of myself” (Kali).
“Um, being a first-generation student, um. It's definitely a lot more pressure. Because your parents are looking at you and you are like you have to accomplish what they didn’t” (Nia).

“I have nine siblings total so I feel a lot of pressure. One for them and because I want to be, I want to be what I wish my brother could have been for me. I basically just want to be there for like my sisters and my brothers for them to look up to and see that it is possible that you can do it. And also be able to give them the information” (Nola).

“Oh yes. I filled them out and even when I needed their information I'm still filling them out. Sitting there typing or writing and filling it out. Like OK. And it was funny because they care a lot. They wanted it done but they just were very sitting back about it. And I don't know if it was me over reacting or tripping. I don't think it was me. Because my coaches, even they were like, your parents, they have to get it. And they were just like, la de la de da” (Nola).

**It Always Comes Back to finances**

**I was able to Attend the University because I Received a Scholarship:**
“I did everything they told me to do and through that I was able to get a scholarship which funded the tuition aspect of coming here. And because it covered my full tuition, that really, made, that made a great difference as to coming here or going somewhere else” (Nia).

“And so I ended up at "the institution" because they gave me the most scholarship money. So that was really nice I didn't really want to have to worry about student debt and I didn't want to have my mom worry about that” (Amber).

**I Don't Know How I would Make it if I Didn't Work:**
“And I took it like I always have to work, if I don't work like the work-study or anything. I don't think I can make” (Kali).

“So thank God I got on the job I get paid like only $100 for two weeks to last me. So that I'm trying so hard right now so my mom don't gotta. I don't have to call my mom, like hey mom I'm hungry can you please bring food. Or hey mom I need something or hey mom like this or that. I'm trying so hard to go away from that. But to other people it's like my mom is a phone call away” (Joy).

“Yeah, if I can't maintain a job I can't buy anything, no books, no clothes, no food, no nothing” (Kali).

“I am to the point like, I only had one penny in my pouch. And like I have to literally work for my stuff. It is not like my mom is paying my for my tuition. My mom is literally not paying nothing. There's, my mom don't even know what's, what's going on with my school stuff right now” (Joy).
I Don't have Money like the Other Students:
“Most of the students are like I am just going to get a plane ticket outside. I'm just like, Some of us are like, it just like I just never seen it before. We just we're just taking the train or were getting rides or something. A plane ticket out that would be super expensive just out of nowhere” (Kali).

“I mean it’s really just for that, to take care of myself like my parent, my mom doesn't help me whatsoever, she probably can't afford to help me anyway. So just take care of myself. Books usual things but I've been lucky enough to have full financial aid like I have a room and everything so it's just like the other essential needs” (Kali).

“And I'm like, we don't have the money to like pay for this. So it's like, it always goes back to finances” (Gia).

“And sometimes I'm like, like I want to like buy something but I'm like I can't ask my dad because my dad really does not have the money. Like he is struggling. Like I had a scholarship and I had gotten the money and I had to like give it to him so he could pay rent” (Naomi).

“Usually the main encountered barrier is just money and stuff” (Kali).

“They can just call their parents and they'll get anything. like I remember I was struggling to buy my books and everything” (Kali).

I Always Count the Number of "Mes" in the Room

I Always Notice the Black Students in My Class:
“I have noticed this semester that in my psychology class all of the Black kids are sitting in the same row and literally all of the Black students are sitting in the same area of the classroom and all the White students are just everywhere else. So it's, it looks very segregated and I don't know, I don't know if it's because of us or because of them. I don't know. I don't know if it's the university environment that's bringing that on but it's just I do notice that it's just a lot of segregation in classrooms sometimes for example” (Bailey).

Other than being like the only Black girl in the classroom and because of that it makes you hesitate as what you say you know or answering questions because you don't want others looking at you like, oh my gosh she is so dumb or what is she even talking about” (Nia).

“I'm the only African-American in the room in that class. So I invited them into my life. I'm like I feel kind of naked. It's almost like they're looking at me. What are they, what are they thinking about me? I'm more like the African-American, you know. Do they notice I'm [the] only African-American in this room, or is it just me? I keep looking around like, we have our first paper was called like Black men in public spaces. And every time something is mentioned that is Black or African-American or, I just look
around and I'm just like OK. I can feel other people look around and it's not even just in that class but like in general” (Nola).

“When I first went to like the first Black Student Union meeting. You know I was like oh my goodness this is exciting. There was a lot of us. It was comfortable. We were dancing, we were vibing. It was like nothing was wrong. And then the next day we like you know went back into classes and all that and it was like wow. Here we are, again. Where did everybody go over. Yeah, where did everybody go? Where, where are you guys? Then we meet back up in the room we're like oh here we are again. We meet back up at a friend's house. Then next day again we just poof, all over the place” (Nola).

I Haven't Personally Experienced Discrimination on Campus but I Always Feel Like Something Could Happen:

“Sometimes I feel like people only think you're there because you're black and your female. So they think they just gave you money to be here and stuff. So it makes you feel like you're not as smart as others” (Kali).

“Well one person called me the N-word” (Naomi).

“She got called a n***** slut. So yeah. Which is, a hot mess. But. Yikes” (Gia).

“Yeah it makes me want to work harder because I want to prove them wrong. I want to show that I can succeed. I'm more than what's on the outside. It's not all about like what you look like you can be something completely different you know. And also, it also makes me like very cautious you know in class I'm sort of like scared to speak out sometimes because you know people judge me immediately and just making friends sometimes can be kind of hard because I'm just always cautious I always have my guard up” (Amber).

“You can tell what they're thinking. Or you could tell by their actions and like exactly, what they say, they don't say in a racist type of way. It's kind of like hidden within a message. Or hinting at something” (Kali).

“...I haven't actually had to experience it one-on-one but sometimes it feels like it could happen at any moment like I can feel it coming” (Nola).

“For example we had to get up in class today and we had to do it like we had to recite a sonnet. And how different African Americans sound from Caucasians or the Asians or whatever other race was in the room. It was always like we sounded different and you could hear like the giggles or the snickers in the room and it's almost like what's funny? I don't understand why we're laughing. Or when there is you know an African-American that can, he recited his perfectly. He recited his with like you know really well. And the surprising looks on people's faces is like, like we can't do that. He's not supposed to do that. Or where did he learn how to do that” (Nola).
“Um but like as far as people saying hurtful comments to me and things of that sort, I haven’t experienced those yet. And because I am not the only one within my social group it kind of pushes me. Ok I am not alone. I can do this. Yes we are a small number but because I know some, because I know others who are just like me, it's like alright, if they can do it so can I” (Nia).

You Have to Find your Community:
“Orientation, I actually moved in early with the “Multicultural U” program. So, I did that and that was really nice. Immediately I felt like the community was very welcoming and like this was going to be home you know” (Amber).

“No it's pretty much all the time. I can pretty much feel something all the time as far as being an African-American female on the campus whether it's in the weight room, whether it's in the training room or there's just in the lunchroom. I always seem to like count. Count the number of me's in the room. Or just like where ever I just seem to count” (Nola).

“There have been organizations and there are clubs out there for people like me. Um having adults who are diverse and who are there to help you and welcome you, I feel like it has really been very helpful thing. And just really having peers who welcoming as well has really been good. And I just feel like because of like the different programs, because of the different offices that our campus does have, it does help with you know feeling like the outlier, the outsider. It makes you feel like you can do this, you are capable of it despite what others might think or feel.” (Nia).

“So I involve myself in that group because it's, because I can for one. You know it's, it's fun we do different activities we go different places. You know we bonded, and we you know just to make the Black community get I guess stronger. And you know we, it's different you know, we’re always comfortable around each other” (Nola).

“I think that I was blessed because over the summer. I um, I got into a group chat with a lot of other, other Black people. So you know I made friends and stuff. And I just think it's good to have that connection here. Especially going to a PWI. Because this isn't an HBCU, like you're not going to have like, all like all Black friends all the time. You're not going to be in a class with all Black people all the time. So I think that it's good to, to, to like find your people and know where they are” (Gia).

Challenges within the Black student community

Where is Everybody?
“I did expect the campus to be more diverse like its diverse already. But still when I walk into some of my classes I am the only minority and like walking through passing I'm the only minority sometimes too. So it isn't as diverse as it's advertised I think, but maybe it's just the classes I take, I don't know” (Amber).
“Yes, I thought it would be a lot more of you know African-American females for one. This was before, before I got here for example. They showed us like you know charts, like when they were introducing me to the school they show us like charts and like the number and I'm looking. And I was like wow that's amazing because it just so happened like for African-Americans that the percentage was very, very low and I was, I was honestly shocked for some reason because you know this is supposed to be the South” (Nola).

I thought the Black Student Community would be more United at a PWI
“But before we came in I had the chance. I felt like we have this group of Black people. I feel like I want to be secure. I feel like I'm going to have like a good group of friends. But as it's been like so much drama in the group and it's just, it's just sad” (Naomi).

“Sunday dinner, you see all of us will be united as one because at the end of the day we are at the PWI, a predominately White institution, so I'm thinking that we all gonna stick together, you and I as one. No, it's not like that. It's every man for themselves basically” (Joy).

“I feel like a lot of it has to do with the peers that are older than me. Because they do a great job, like some of the mentors students that I have do a great job with like providing samples” (Bailey).

“And I feel, and I just thought that at a PWI you would feel more you know closer to your Black female counterparts. But it's almost like they, they go out of their way not to be seen with us or not to be associated with us” (Naomi).

Black Men, especially the Athletes don't Date Black Girls:
“I don't hate, if anybody thinks like this but, I realize that usually like the Black males would go for like the White girls here. I guess but it's not like I'm not saying there's something wrong with that. But it's just like they feel like, I just really feel like the Black girls just don't get attention or anything” (Kali).

“And it's just the fact that not all of these males and stuff here. I mean there might be some socially when it comes to like these athletes they might. They feel the need to go with the White girl or something like that rather than like a Black girl” (Joy).

“Yeah like, I you know I'm thinking I'm coming to college it's going to be like a bigger pool when it comes to dating. But it's just all these athletes and they're just, yeah it's just they just like White girls and I just feel like it's because, they think it may be either White girls are easier or they're just not as outspoken as we are” (Naomi).
It’s All On Me

I Have to Succeed for Myself and My Family because I am The Piece that is Tying Everything Together:

“And I just want to help my family out. I know that like, I have to help my family out, so I have to do, I have to do good here. I can't fail” (Kali).

“Ah, looking back on how I was raised and looking about how like the things that I've went through. And also strong-willed I'm very, I am very strong-willed and I'm driven. And like I'm very I'm very serious about my education and being successful because, I do not want to go through what I went through when I was younger. And I don't want to go through what I'm going through now even to this day I'm still going through things in my family household” (Joy).

“So feel like I'm a piece that connects sports, that connects academics, that connects to my parents, that connects to my sisters, and all of my siblings in general, like a piece. And without this piece. If I was like to break down or something then and like freak out because I'm a first-gen student and you know African-American at university on a full ride scholarship then, I don't know what would happen. So, I'm the piece” (Nola).

“My want for a better life for myself. And my want to make my mom happy and yeah. I just want to have a good life” (Gia).

“Because if I didn't do good here, I would have to go back. I mean it's not like awful to go back but just like seeing how my other sisters who goes to public college and how my mom is on her. It's like that pushes me, and my family, my sisters push me to do better. Because we know and we see our parents or other family members struggling” (Kali).

“Um, I think it's just me. Seeing my situation at home really pushes me to just get out of it even more” (Kali).

“For me, I'm like. I am the type of person I go find out for myself. So everything that I know, is because someone told me or out I went out and found out for myself” (Nia).

“Here? At this school? Just, I don't know. I'm just like really. Resilient? It's just how I am. I think the most success comes from me, myself. Because if you don't. If you don't like, I don't know. There are other people that cause like my situation at my house, but like I don't know, just being me I guess. It pushes me more. My family, some of my family members are proud of me. They are like oh my gosh you are the first person to go to college and everything. So they push me more, my more cousins” (Kali).

“I feel like my intelligence that helps. I feel like for me. I am, I'm pretty smart but I think it's because I like to question a lot of things. And just asking a lot of questions always helps you understand something more. And also I am pretty motivated. Like I said, I want to be successful. I want to get to a point where I can help my mom. Where I can go back to Tampa and just help my friends and family you know” (Amber).
“And then me too because I feel like. I want to make a difference. Like I just want to be. I want to achieve my goals that I set for myself. So I try to push myself to do different things that I want to do” (Bailey).

“My thing is that. I did this for two or three reasons. First reasons I do this for myself because you try going to your house and having a frig that's empty. You try going to your house and not see your mom there because she got to work literally a 12 hour shift and then work another job another. You try coming to your house and you have to raise your sisters at the age of 10 and stuff. Because we're all five years apart. And then my mom” (Joy).

“Yeah I, um my sisters look up to me. Especially like my little one like she really looks up to me. And like, to be honest. It's the fact I make my mom so proud. It's because like. There could have been two routes. I could have been, I could have ended up like no I don't care about school and like it is nothing to me, like it's whatever. But it's the fact that I chose the route of naw I'm going to make better of myself. Because I could have just be lazy and just say forget it. I don't need to do this. Like I'm a find. I'm be just working and stuff like that and make a living out of that. But now I'm going with the education aspect it” (Joy).

“I'm trying so hard and I feel like that's there's a difference too because not many people really have that responsibility and some people rely on their parents. And me, I don't rely on my mom and I love my mom to death like don't get me wrong. I love her to the death of me. But I love her too much that I. I know she's trying to be the best mom that she can be. I know she wants to support me and like you know I feel like it's a mom thing. They want to support their child the best that they could because they put you on this earth. They carried you and like. She really. Like she wants to support me and I'm like. I don't want her to. Because like mom like it's ok like. Just go to work. Try to find a job, like you go to work. And like now she's having a job and stuff. Just go to work, you got other people to worry about. And I feel like that's when the difference is of being a first-generation because my mom has to now find a way. Rather than send something to the school. Not only that she's a first-generation for many things. Like I'm a first-generation for many things. American, and school related” (Joy).

“Because I like, I like things to be a certain way. Like I don't like Bs. I only like As. I don't like, ugh I hate Bs. I like things a certain way I like things a certain like criteria and if doesn't fit that I'm just like, hmmm ok” (Gia).

“My want for a better life for myself. And my want to make my mom happy and yeah. I just want to have a good life” (Gia).

“And also being, being like Black I just feel like there's, there's a lot on us to succeed, there's a lot on me to succeed. Cause you know I feel like, well I'm not. I don't want to say I'm the most successful Black in my family. I kind of am the most successful, like I did a lot in high school. So I feel like, there's all this pressure to do” (Naomi).
## Appendix F

### List of Themes, Categories and Code Family Descriptions

#### Research Question 1

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<tr>
<th>Resources that Impact My College Experience</th>
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<td>“But um yeah, so like the social aspect wasn’t that bad um the educational aspect, in certain courses is not that bad but in other courses I wish I had a different experience in high school. I feel like it would have helped me more when I got here” (Nia).</td>
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<td><strong>Someone at My High School Encouraged Me and Served as a Resource/I Lacked Resources</strong></td>
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<td>“My school pretty much provided information and I had a really good guidance counselor. So that was pretty helpful. She would help me with application and I had teachers who would also help me with my essays. I was very close with my teachers in high school so that was very helpful when it came to the application process” (Amber).</td>
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<td>“But um they, like we lost, we changed counselors so many times I just stopped going to the counselor. You know what, I'm going to have to figure this out for myself” (Gia).</td>
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<td><strong>I Couldn't Afford to take a College Prep Course</strong></td>
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<td>“My family couldn't afford to provide me with SAT classes or tutors or anything along that line. So that was actually kind of hard. I had a study on my own and then figure out like what I was doing wrong on my own” (Amber).</td>
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<td>“Yeah, it was not even a prep. It was like information session. Let me rephrase the word prep in that, it was a workshop” (Joy).</td>
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<td><strong>I Had to do it on My Own</strong></td>
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<td><strong>I Don’t Know How College Works</strong></td>
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<td>“I hadn't taken them [SAT and ACT] until senior year even though I should've taken them before that. But I didn't know and my parents didn't know” (Nola).</td>
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<td>“I have to figure everything out by myself. So that's probably the worst thing. I have to figure everything out. I have to search everything. I have to ask other people, because they know it. I don't know. My mom can't help me, my parents can help me” (Kali).</td>
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<tr>
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<td>“I think it has a lot to do with being you know first-generation because there's, there's no one before me to, that has went through these struggles and can tell me you know this is what you need to do. Someone that you know can be like I went through this. And also being, being like Black I just feel like there's, there's a lot on us to succeed, there's a lot on me to succeed” (Naomi).</td>
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“And um, the other thing sad about being I guess first-gen is that I see people with their parents coming, you can tell their parents have been to a university. You can see their parents helping them figure out what to do, what's next year after school, after undergrad and everything to help them apply. I have to figure everything out by myself. So that's probably the worst thing. I have to figure everything out. I have to search everything. I have to ask other people, because they know it. I don't know. My mom can't help me, my parents can help me” (Kali).

“I have to Advocate for Myself

“But me and my guidance counselor like we had a fall out because he wanted me to stay in IB and I didn't want to stay in IB because I didn't think that was the right choice for me” (Joy).

“And they really also didn't asked me if I needed it or not. I think they just assume that since I was, um, my, I was so like. What's the word I'm looking for? Adamant about going to an away, away school that they just figured I knew what I was doing. They were like, she probably, she clearly wants to go away so she knows what she is doing. So Yeah” (Bailey).

“My Parent(s) Expected Me to get Everything Done

“Well specifically like through the application process I know a lot of my friends who weren’t first gen their parents were there just like pounding them to do that essay. They filled out the FASFA for them. They told them meet the deadlines. My mom wasn't really there, like she expected me to do that on my own. I filled out the FASFA and I'd ask her for the tax information. I was in charge of making sure I met my own deadlines. And also like I pretty much booked all my own tours and I made all the plans for that whereas my friends like their family members did all of that from them like the year in advance” (Amber).

“Oh yes. I filled them out and even when I needed their information I'm still filling them out. Sitting there typing or writing and filling it out. Like OK. And it was funny because they care a lot. They wanted it done but they just were very sitting back about it. And I don't know if it was me over reacting or tripping. I don't think it was me” (Nola).

Preparing for and Navigating College is Emotionally Taxing

“Getting Everything Done and Figuring out What to do Causes Me a lot of Stress

“I feel like its, I put a lot of pressure on myself as being a Black female and a first-generation student cause I don't. I don't have, like my mom doesn't know anything about it so I can't really go to. I go to her she helps me, but I can't really go to her about certain things so I just feel like a lot of pressure on myself to do good” (Bailey).

“Like OK, you’re at college you made here. But you know you have to graduate, you have to do this and everything. You have to be the Black female, you have to be the strong Black female. You can't, you can't break down, you have to do your work. You gotta go to class you can't. It's just. You have to be strong” (Naomi).
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<td>“Yeah, that's probably the sad, sad part for me because I never see my mom or anybody with me” (Kali).</td>
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<td>“No, but it would be nice to find other people that I can relate with you know in that way because I feel like being a first-generation student it was kind of different from everyone else whose parents like have gone through the process, helping them. For me I pretty much had to do it like on my own. So, finding a friend who also did the same thing would be kind of nice” (Amber).</td>
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<td>“Like, I guess maybe sometimes, my friends will want to go out like my upper-class friends. And I kind of have to tell them like I can't afford that it's a little too expensive. And so you feel like, you're making everybody not have fun and try to like find cheaper ways and things. I guess that's the only time I feel kind of bad” (Amber).</td>
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<td>“It's so much class difference. Cause it's like, even my roommate. That's why we can't really get along because she makes me feel like. I'm sorry to say she makes me feel like shit sometimes. Like that what I go through. Be like damn lady, you fortune, and I'm unfortunate but here, but at the end of the day we still meet at the same place” (Joy).</td>
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<td>“I'm the only African-American in the room in that class. So I invited them into my life. I'm like I feel kind of naked. It's almost like they're looking at me. What are they, what are they thinking about me? I'm more like the African-American, you know. Do they notice I'm [the] only African-American in this room, or is it just me? I keep looking around like, we have our first paper was called like Black men in public spaces. And every time something is mentioned that is Black or African-American or, I just look around and I'm just like OK. I can feel other people look around and it's not even just in that class but like in general” (Nola).</td>
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<tr>
<th>Challenges within the Black Student community</th>
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<tr>
<td>I Haven't Personally Experienced Discrimination on Campus but I Always Feel like Something Could Happen.</td>
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<td>“...I haven't actually had to experience it one-on-one but sometimes it feels like it could happen at any moment like I can feel it coming” (Nola).</td>
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<td>You have to Find your Community</td>
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<td>“Well one person called me the N-word” (Naomi).</td>
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<td>&quot;I always seem to like count. Count the number of me's in the room. Or just like where ever I just seem to count” (Nola).</td>
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| “Orientation, I actually moved in early with the Multicultural U program. So I did that and that was really nice. Immediately I felt like the community was very welcoming and like this was going to be home you know” (Amber).
I thought the Black Student Community would be more United at a PWI

“Sunday dinner, you see all of us will be united as one because at the end of the day we are at the PWI, a predominately White institution, so I'm thinking that we all gonna stick together, you and I as one. No, it's not like that. It's every man for themselves basically” (Joy).

“I feel like a lot of it has to do with the peers that are older than me. Because they do a great job, like some of the mentors students that I have do a great job with like providing samples” (Bailey).

Black Men, especially the Athletes don't Date Black Girls

“I don't hate, if anybody thinks like this but, I realize that usually like the Black males would go for like the White girls here. I guess but it's not like I'm not saying there's something wrong with that. But it's just like they feel like, I just really feel like the Black girls just don't get attention or anything” (Kali).

“Yeah like, I you know I'm thinking I'm coming to college it's going to be like a bigger pool when it comes to dating. But it's just all these athletes and they're just, yeah it's just they just like White girls and I just feel like it's because, they think it may be either White girls are easier or they're just not as outspoken as we are” (Naomi).

It's All On Me

I have to Succeed for Myself and My Family because I am The Piece that is Tying Everything Together

“And I just want to help my family out. I know that like, I have to help my family out, so I have to do, I have to do good here. I can't fail” (Kali).

“So I feel like I'm a piece that connects sports, that connects academics, that connects to my parents, that connects to my sisters, and all of my siblings in general, like a piece. And without this piece. If I was like to break down or something then and like freak out because I'm a first-gen student and you know African-American at university on a full ride scholarship then, I don't know what would happen. So, I'm the piece” (Nola).

My thing is that. I did this for two or three reasons. First reasons I do this for myself because you try going to your house and having a frig that's empty. You try going to your house and not see your mom there because she got to work literally a 12 hour shift and then work another job another. You try coming to your house and you have to raise your sisters at the age of 10 and stuff. Because we're all five years apart” (Joy).
Appendix G

Theme and Categories with Quotes
Research Question 2

Core Strengths: #BlackGirlMagic

Intelligence:
“I feel like my intelligence, that helps” (Amber).

“So when I was in the AP class it was like all the smartest kids in the school. People have been with my law program because in our high school there's only like a small group of smart people and like we all have the same class” (Naomi).

Resourcefulness:
“How you are going to be able to pass? And it's just like, I, I made it though I still try because I work hard and I use my resources like the writing center is my best friend” (Joy).

“Um, having like different organizations and having different offices you can go to. Such as MSA, just having them around and being able to attend their events, it’s really been like I can do this. There have been organizations and there are clubs out there for people like me. Um having adults who are diverse and who are there to help you and welcome you, I feel like it has really been very helpful thing. And just really having peers who welcoming as well has really been good. And I just feel like because of like the different programs, because of the different offices that our campus does have, it does help with you know feeling like the outlier, the outsider. It makes you feel like you can do this, you are capable of it despite what others might think or feel. Just go for it and see what happens” (Nia).

Determination
“I'm very hard working and outgoing” (Joy).

“And also I am pretty motivated. Like I said, I want to be successful” (Amber).

“And then me too because I feel like. I want to make a difference. Like I just want to be. I want to achieve my goals that I set for myself. So, I try to push myself to do different things that I want to do” (Bailey).

“You have to really think about the value of being here, to actually do good here” (Kali).

“I have the responsibility because I've got to make sure that I am trying my hardest right now” (Joy).
“I feel like being a Black female I'm sort of like overlooked. I'm not expected to be smart or to want to do something that's challenging you know with my life.” “Yeah it makes me want to work harder because I want to prove them wrong. I want to show that I can succeed. I'm more than what's on the outside. It's not all about like what you look like you can be something completely different you know” (Amber).

**Resilience:**
“"I'm just like really, resilient. It's just how I am. I think the most success comes from me, myself” (Kali).

“I heard it when I was applying for college. Oh yeah, you're going to get money because you're Black and you're female and all that stuff. What is it called again, affirmative action? Yeah. People really believe that. I feel like most people, they wouldn't say it but they really believe that like just because you're Black you're going to get money and you're going to get in not cause you're smart or anything. I just ignore it basically. I am like, whenever. I got in here just like you got in here, that type of situation, and I just keep doing my thing” (Kali).

“I went through a lot and if I tell you what I went through you would, you would see this is your personality. Now I see that’s why you like this. I see that’s why you’re so driven. I see that’s why you go through and it tears me up because like, it’s the fact that what I grew up around what I grew up to be and it’s like no one. Like this school, it kind does make me feel bad in a way. Cause it’s like, it’s like. I went through a lot. And I may have like a happy go lucky personality but like, it’s really hard” (Joy).

“There's two sides of it, um driven. Ah, looking back on how I was raised and looking about how like the things that I've went through. And also strong-willed I'm very, I am very strong-willed and I'm driven. And like I'm very I'm very serious about my education and being successful because, I do not want to go through what I went through when I was younger. And I don't want to go through what I'm going through now even to this day I'm still going through things in my family household. So it's just like that is what's driving me to be successful and that's what shaping me and my personality” (Joy).

**Collective Consciousness**
“Add it's inspiring because they're not just, they're not your average if you could if you know if I could say. They're not your average like you know people. They're you know extraordinary people and it helps to push me, it helps me, be like hey I don't want to fail that test tomorrow no one else is failing the test” (Nola).

“So, it's almost like OK. I got to stay, if I want to be in the group, I gotta stay with the group. You gotta, we all gotta do this together. So, that's you know one of the things that helps me keep going. To you know represent. I guess that's what it's like, representing” (Nola).
“And because I am not the only one within my social group it kind of pushes me. Ok I am not alone. I can do this. Yes, we are a small number but because I know some, because I know others who are just like me, it's like alright, if they can do it so can I” (Nia).
Appendix H

Theme, Categories and Code Family Descriptions
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Resilient

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Collective
Consciousness

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