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First-Generation, African American Students' Experiences of Persisting at a Predominantly White Liberal Arts College

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FIRST-GENERATION, AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF
PERSISTING AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

by

Candy McCorkle

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Candy McCorkle, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2012

Generational status of students is one of the variables that colleges and universities are starting to track and study in order to gain a better understanding of its impact on retention and persistence of students. This phenomenological study provides narrative from five first-generation, African American students who attend a predominantly White liberal arts college in the Midwest; their stories provide a snapshot of how they experienced college, made meaning of those experiences and the impact of these experiences and meaning-making on their motivation to persist in college. These five students participated in individual audio-taped interviews that were analyzed and coded. Six themes emerged that were descriptive of the students' experiences. In order to demonstrate trustworthiness the themes and description of the themes were reviewed by an external auditor.

The first-generation, African American students in this study persisted despite facing isolation and discrimination in their predominantly White campus community. The students found mentoring relationships with White faculty, support from other African American students and Black student groups, and finding their own identity as an individual to be significant factors in their persistence.

In addition, limitations of this study are detailed and recommendations for future research on first-generation students are identified. Recommendations for practical applications of the findings of this study are made regarding how colleges and universities might use this study to improve services for all students. The most common recommendation from students in this study was to provide more role models by hiring more Black and African American faculty and staff.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in the United States of America, more

ethnic minorities have taken advantage of pursuing a college education. This has been

particularly true of first-generation, African American college students. Before the 1960s,

most African American students attended historically Black colleges and universities

(HBCUs) because admission into predominantly White institutions (PWIs) was made

difficult by obstacles (Allen, 1992). Since the 1970s there has been an increase of African

American students entering post-secondary education, especially at PWIs. However,

entering higher education has not translated into successful exiting, that is graduation

(Ting, 1998). As a result of this phenomenon colleges and universities are notably

concerned with retention and degree attainment of these and all students. Retention of all

students has proven to be a difficult task. According to the National Center for Education

Statistics (NCES), 50% of the students entering college are leaving before graduating (as

cited in Ting, 1998). Since the retention rate of African Americans at PWIs is one of the

lowest retention rates (Swail & Holmes, 2000), more attention needs to be focused on the

reasons why these students are not remaining in college and obtaining undergraduate

college degrees.

There are many factors that impact the retention and graduation of students. One

of these factors is student persistence. Colleges and universities have invested time and

resources in developing retention programs that will foster persistence in students. Many

of these programs are targeted toward students who are considered at-risk. At-risk

students may meet one or more of the following identified criteria: (a) coming from a low

socioeconomic background, (b) being an ethnic/racial minority, (c) being a first-generation student, (d) being academically underprepared and/or (e) having a learning/physical disability (London, 1996; Ting, 1998). These criteria are often interrelated and are also independent of one another. If a student meets any of these criteria, they may be considered at-risk. Despite the efforts of colleges and universities, retention rates of at-risk students continue to decline. This is especially true for African American students.

The body of research investigating the issue of why students remain or do not remain in college is viewed from two perspectives, student retention and student persistence. The research that explores the perspective of colleges and universities focuses on retention. Retention will be defined in this study as the beliefs and behaviors assumed by colleges and universities to keep students in college. There is an abundance of literature on student retention. Although there is a significant body of literature on student retention which has led to a greater understanding of this issue, institutions continue to struggle to keep students enrolled and attaining degrees, especially African American students.

The literature that explores the perspective of student persistence is not equal in volume to that of the student retention literature, and typically this research investigates students who do graduate. In recent years there has been a growth in the research that examines the persistence of students, especially African American students. The persistence literature presents students' viewpoint as to why they stay or leave college. The significance of this perspective is strengthened by understanding what persistence means. In this study persistence is defined as the beliefs, behaviors, and experiences that motivate students to remain in college and earn a degree. This perspective is important

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because most of the literature investigating students' completion rates is based on the view of colleges and universities. It is evident that both the views of the institutions of higher education and the students are essential to understanding why students remain in school and attain degrees.

In order to make the reasons students enter and remain in college relevant, it is important to explore why individuals pursue a college education. It is safe to assume that students enter college for a variety of reasons. For African American and first-generation students, a college degree is a means to more job opportunities and financial security (Allen, 1992; Oldfield, 2007). These reasons are different than for second-generation students who see college not as a privilege but a rite of passage and a means of learning how to enrich their lives (Oldfield, 2007). It is important to note that there are a disproportionate number of White second-generation students compared to minority second-generation students.

Due to the imbalance in the breadth of the literature of student retention and student persistence, this study seeks to contribute to the literature that examines student persistence. This study will explore how first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their experience and how this influences their persistence. As a first-generation, African American student who attended a PWI as an undergraduate, I am interested in learning more about the experiences of other students like me. The students' experiences and interpretation of their experiences are invaluable to understanding the issue of persistence and may provide essential insights into identifying strengths that allow students to successfully graduate from college.

In the research literature that exists on persistence, many factors have been identified as contributors to students' persistence in college. For first-generation, African American students, persistence is influenced by family support, community support, institutional environment, and the student's sense of belonging (Bui, 2002; Littleton, 2002; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Although these factors have been shown to positively influence persistence, the question still remains as to why these factors are important. For example, Littleton interviewed 24 African American college students attending PWIs and identified two major themes that influenced persistence: the caring and approachableness of the faculty and environmental appeal (2001). These themes speak directly to the importance of institutional environment, that is, how the students perceive the school and its reception of non-White students. The students shared that if the faculty appears genuinely interested in their success and the college appears to address the needs of minority students, the students feel as if they can trust the environment and are more likely to stay in school (Littleton, 2001).

Although the students in Littleton's study viewed faculty support as positive, typically African American students find it difficult to form relationships with White faculty. The absence of faculty support makes it even more important for African American students to have family and/or community support (Littleton, 2001). It is apparent that these factors have significance to the students. If students are able to experience a few of these factors the chances of them persisting increases.

While these factors have been shown to positively affect persistence, the question still remains as to why these factors are important to student persistence. The importance of these factors may be revealed by examining the students' process of making meaning of these factors. The identification of the factors that influence persistence provides a

surface level understanding; I wish to explore the issues that lie below the surface. These issues I feel can be revealed by exploring the students' interpretation of their experiences and how those interpretations in turn fuel their persistence. The research that currently exists on student persistence provides a solid foundation but in order to build on our understanding of persistence we must learn more about how the students understand their experiences. Student persistence can be examined from a variety of perspectives. This study will focus on the perspective of first-generation, African American students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college. African American students are not persisting to degree attainment at the same rates as White students. In order to assist African American students in persisting to graduation, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence the African American students who are persisting.

As evidenced by most of the literature referenced in this study, student persistence has typically been viewed from the framework of student development theory. However, student persistence is a multifaceted issue which can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Often to understand an issue with many layers, it is necessary to employ various perspectives. For this study, I have chosen to employ cognitive theory to explore the issue of student persistence. Cognitive theory is focused on understanding how an individual makes meaning of an experience and how that meaning influences the individual's emotional and/or behavioral response to the experience (Halbuar & Vess-Halbur, 2006; Lemke, 1999).

Since I am seeking to understand how first-generation, African American students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their experience and how that influences their persistence, the use of cognitive theory is

congruent with that purpose. By using a cognitive theoretical framework, I will be able to investigate how the individual makes meaning. Instead of looking at first-generation, African American students as a homogenous group, I am examining their individual experience and how the individual makes meaning of the experience.

Statement of the Problem

Although African American students' matriculation into college has increased, they still remain underrepresented in the attainment of bachelor's degrees. The traditional means to understanding this issue has been through the use of cognitive variables to explain the gap between the number of students entering college and completing college. Researchers now challenge this traditional view of a student's success in college being dependent upon SAT/ACT scores, GPA, the amount of financial aid, or the number of campus programs to assist students (Fries-Britt & Griffin; Naumann, Bandalos & Gutkin, 2003; Sedlacek, 1987; Sedlacek, 1989). If these variables were strong determinants of success in college, then the rate of degree attainment would be consistent with the matriculation rate. This discrepancy between matriculation and completion indicates that there is something else that is contributing to student persistence.

The concept that non-cognitive variables are influencing student persistence is further evidenced by the number of African American students who enter college as honor students with strong GPAs, high SAT/ACT scores, sufficient financial aid and actively participate in campus programs. Yet, these students are leaving college because they do not feel a sense of belonging or feel their presence is not appreciated and valued (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). The foundational values of higher education are reflective of the White middle class; for many African American

students entering college, there is often a conflict between their values and those of the schools they attend. The lack of congruency in values can be like traveling to a foreign land for these students; they do not know the language or the culture. First-generation, African American students attending PWIs enter the land of higher education lacking cultural capital (Kiser & Price, 2008; Oldfield, 2007; Saunders & Serna, 2004). Oldfield defines cultural capital as "the knowledge, skills, education and other advantages a person has that makes the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily" (2007, p. 2). In other words, first-generation, African American students do not have parents who attended college and can therefore assist them in navigating the culture of higher education. Consequently, these students enter college with inadequate instruction on how to navigate higher education and achieve success.

Some of the factors that help predict student retention are evident but what is not clear is how students understand these factors in relationship to their desire to graduate. There is research that has explored the experience of first-generation, African American students attending PWIs to try to gain more insight into the students' perspective. However these studies have failed to explore how these students make meaning of their experiences and how this in turns affects their decision to persist in an environment that is often perceived as isolating, alien and hostile.

There is a gain in the current research exploring how first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their college experience and how this affects their persistence. This phenomenological study focuses on describing how these students make meaning and how this meaning impacts their experience.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their college experience and how this meaning affects their persistence. This study provides a platform for the voices of these students to be heard regarding why they are persisting in an academic environment that can be isolating, alienating and hostile.

Research Questions

In order to gain a clear understanding of how first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their college experiences and how it influences their persistence, I was guided by the following research questions with this study:

1. How do first-generation, African American students experience college?

2. How do they interpret their experience?

3. What is the impact of the interaction of race and generational status on their college experience?

Definition of Key Terms

The focus of this study is how first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their college experiences and the impact of that meaning on their persistence. The term first-generation refers to students whose parents did not attend college or did not complete college (Bui, 2002; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; London, 1996; Oldfield, 2007; Richardson & Skinner,

1992; Ting, 1998; Saunders &Serna, 2004; Zalaquett, 1999). The term predominantly White institution (PWI) in this study is defined as a college and/or university in which the majority of the students are White, non-Hispanic. The term persistence in this study is defined as the beliefs, behaviors, and experiences that motivate students to remain in college and earn a degree. A secondary term used in this study will be at-risk student.

Significance of the Study

The number of first-generation, African American students entering colleges and universities continues to increase. This increase is a result of the prerequisite of a college degree for many forms of employment (Duggan, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Orbe, 2003; Swail & Holmes, 2000). If these students are to persist until degree attainment, universities and colleges must be prepared to assist them in this goal. Because the retention rate of first-generation, African American students is lower than that of their White counterparts (Duggan, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Orbe, 2003; Swail & Holmes, 2000), institutions of higher education have a considerable challenge in addressing the needs of this student population. In order to begin to meet this challenge it is crucial that undergraduate institutions increase their knowledge of the needs of first-generation, African American students and develop training to prepare faculty and staff on how to appropriately serve this student population. Colleges and universities do not need to focus solely on first-generation students but must expand its efforts to better serve all student populations.

There is a body of research literature that has identified needs and persistence of African American students and first-generation students respectively attending PWIs. The research is lacking in regards to how first-generation, African American students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their college

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experiences and how it impacts their persistence. This study offers an opportunity to hear the stories of students who have persisted beyond their sophomore year of college, as well as, their understanding of why and how this persistence has occurred.

Since this study seeks to understand the first-generation, African American students' perception on what their college experiences mean and how the meaning influences their persistence, the research method must be consistent with the purpose of this study. A phenomenological approach is used. This method is also reflective of the theoretical framework of cognitive theory, which is a psychological theory that focuses on how an individual makes meaning of his or her experiences and how that meaning influences his or her response or reaction to the environment. Phenomenology is a good fit for the purpose and theoretical framework because the goal of phenomenological analysis is to probe how individuals make sense of their experiences (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1998). Therefore, this qualitative approach is appropriate for the purposed study presented.

The knowledge gained from this study may benefit colleges and universities. For example, colleges and universities may gain a better understanding and appreciation for the experience of first-generation, African American students. By having a better understanding of the needs of this student population, institutions of higher education can more adequately meet the needs of these students. This study demonstrates the importance of valuing the individual experiences of students and how this contributes to the overall campus climate.

This study does not attempt to develop new theories of persistence, test current theories of persistence or measure the effectiveness of retention programs designed to encourage persistence. However this study is designed to contribute to the understanding

of how first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college interpret their college experiences and explore how this process of making meaning influences their persistence.

Delineation of Research

In order to make the scope of this study more manageable a small predominantly White liberal arts college in the Midwest was selected. The population of first-generation students is significant and consists of multiple ethnic groups, socioeconomic groups, and academic abilities. Time does not allow for an in-depth exploration of this vast group of first-generation students; therefore this study focuses on African American, first-generation students. These limits have intentionally been placed on the study in an attempt to have a manageable focus. These limits may also provide the opportunity for greater depth in understanding the experiences of first-generation, African American students. A possible limitation that has been placed on this study is the selection of the type of school from which participants were chosen. My reason for selecting a private liberal arts college with rigorous admission requirements was to ensure that I could identify participants who possessed high academic achievement. The academic achievement of the first-generation, African American students who applied to this private liberal arts college met the rigorous admission requirements. The average GPA for students admitted to the college that these students attend is 3.65, the average critical reading SAT score is 626 and the average math SAT score is 632.

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to this study. For example, this study is limited by the narratives of the participants in that their experiences are necessarily unique and may not be representative of other students with similar characteristics. Although each participant is a first-generation, African American college student attending a predominantly White liberal arts college, all students do not interpret their experience the same way. Since the participants are not all the same sex, the influence of gender on meaning-making is also unknown. As stated in the delimitations of this study, the students who sought to attend this private liberal arts college may be more similar to their White counterparts in regards to being academically prepared and the desire to earn a college education.

The study seeks to provide alternative explanations of why first-generation, African American students persist in college. Despite the delimitations and limitations of this study, it possesses the potential to enrich our knowledge of how an individual's understanding of an experience influences how the person responds emotionally and behaviorally. In essence this study contributes to understanding the persistence of first-generation, African American students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college. The narrow focus of this study does not negate the importance of the experiences of other student populations. Instead it may encourage further investigations into how other student populations make meaning of their college experience and what impacts that meaning.

Researcher's Perspective

As stated earlier in this chapter, the research method employed by this study is phenomenology. Because phenomenology does not assume that research is value-free

and unbiased, it is essential that I present my biases and personal experiences with first-generation, African American college students attending a PWI. This process is called bracketing or the epoche, in which I make clear my biases and attempt to limit their influence on how I hear the stories of the participants of this study.

Because I am a first-generation, African American student who attended a PWI, my experience may influence my ability to hear the participants' stories openly and without bias. If I do not attempt to suspend as many of my assumptions as possible, I can potentially risk distorting the essence of the stories which might muffle the voices of the participants. Acknowledging my biases is a means of limiting the barriers to hearing the richness of the participants' stories.

My story begins as I entered a medium-sized research university as a first-year student majoring in psychology. My older brother attended a four-year college for a semester and my mother attended a four- year college for three years. However, neither obtained their bachelor's degree. I should note that due to the time span between their college experience and mine, there had been a significant change in college academic programs, students and approaches to higher education.

Although my mother did not complete her education, she was a strong proponent of education. It was definitely my mother's support and encouragement that influenced my persistence in college. As a young African American woman living in a predominantly African American, poor, working class neighborhood, my attending college became a source of pride for my community. So I not only had my family's support but the support of neighbors, business owners and churches as I pursued college.

This abundance of family and community support gave me a sense of purpose and responsibility. I felt that because others were sacrificing for my education, it was my duty

to do well and earn my degree. I also felt that I was obligated to be a symbol to dispel the negative stereotypes of African Americans held by the dominant White culture as well as by other African Americans. At times this responsibility and pride were overwhelming but the alternative was devastating. I was willing to succeed not only for me but for my family, community and race.

As a college student, I quickly got involved on campus. I was employed as a campus tour guide, a student coordinator for new student orientation, and a teaching/research assistant in my academic major. I also became active in student organizations that appealed to my interest and ethnicity. By becoming a part of the campus community, I was able to broaden my support base. My supervisors and faculty members began to encourage me to continue my education by considering graduate school.

My campus involvement provided me with an authentic sense of belonging. I was able to personally invest in my school. I felt that my university was reciprocating by investing in me not only by personal support of faculty and staff but financially through scholarships. Since I developed a sense of ownership of my academic institution, I wanted to do well because I now saw myself as the face of my school. If I performed well the school would be perceived as a place that minority students were accepted and could achieve.

As described by researchers (Kiser & Price, 2008; Oldfield, 2007; Saunders & Serna, 2004), I entered college with minimal cultural capital. In order to gain capital I sought assistance from faculty, staff and other students on how to access services, what classes to take, how to identify financial assistance to pay for college and opportunities that would allow me to develop new skills. My resourcefulness paid off through the

many individuals on campus who mentored me. A psychology professor I worked for took me under his wing and guided me through my entire college career. My supervisor in student development mentored me in the art of networking.

The support and guidance I received was internalized as "this environment is helpful and positive;" therefore, I responded by successfully completing my undergraduate degree and went on to pursue and complete a graduate degree.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter one introduced the focus of the study. The focus of the study is how first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of this experience and how it impacts their persistence. Chapter one identified the problem with how this topic has been addressed in that traditionally the students' voices have not been clearly heard. Chapter one outlines how this study provides a platform for the students' voices to be clearly heard and understood. Chapter one further introduces factors that focus the study, such as the theoretical framework and research questions.

Chapter one also defines key terms and provides imposed limits and natural limits to the study. The chapter concludes with a rationale for why this study is needed and the researcher's perspective of how first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their experience and how it impacts their persistence.

Chapter two provides a review of relevant literature of how African American students experience college, the experience of first-generation college students and their persistence, and cognitive theory approach to meaning-making. I offered an in-depth

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analysis of the research on African American students' college experience; first-generation college students' experience, as well as what is known about first-generation, African American students. This chapter also presents literature on the use of cognitive theory as a framework for understanding meaning-making. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of this information and its application to this study.

Chapter three outlines the philosophy of phenomenology and provides a rationale for using a phenomenological approach for this study. A description of participants and how they were selected is included in this chapter. It concludes with an explanation of how the data was collected and analyzed.

Chapter four describes the information gained from the interviews and the process of phenomenological reduction. The process of reduction reveals major themes identified from the students' experiences. Excerpts of the participants' interviews are used to support the themes identified in the process of analysis. Chapter five provides an exploration of the researcher's speculations of what the findings mean and how this information can be used by colleges and universities to further accommodate diverse student populations. Chapter five acknowledges the need to further level the playing field for minorities entering PWIs. This chapter concludes by acknowledging the implications for new research and innovative ways of investigating issues related to first-generation, African American students. Chapter six provides reflections of the researcher's experience.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Historically, institutions of higher education have subscribed to the following cognitive variables as being the most significant predictors of academic achievement in college: high school GPA, admission exams scores (i.e. ACT/SAT), pre-college academic preparation, and overall intellectual ability. The variables are typically referred to as cognitive variables because they attempt to assess a student's ability to think and process information. Tinto and Astin challenged the idea of cognitive variables being an accurate indicator for academic success. Tinto suggested that students are more likely to be retained in college if the student is integrated academically and socially into the institution (1987). Astin reiterates Tinto's perspective with his theory of student involvement which indicates that the more a student is involved physically and psychologically, the greater the likelihood the student will be retained until graduation and degree attainment (1984). Although Tinto and Astin were looking at retention of students in higher education, they recognized a psychological aspect to understanding retention (Rodgers & Summer, 2008). The essence of this psychological approach to investigating retention was that a student's outcome was based on the student's perception of his or her connection to the institution and the institution's response to the student's needs. By recognizing the role of the student in his or her academic outcome, they inadvertently introduced the concept of student persistence, which is defined in this study as the beliefs, behaviors, and experiences that motivate students to remain in college and earn a degree.

Neither Tinto nor Astin focused their theories on the persistence of at- risk students, notably first-generation and African American students. However, subsequent research has supported the principles of their theories in regard to African American and first-generation college students. The absence of these student populations from early retention research is reflective of how the uniqueness of minorities' experiences in higher education and society as a whole has been ignored (Ryland, Riordan, & Brack, 1994). As in many areas of research, we have attempted to generalize findings as if all populations are homogenous. It is this assumption of homogeneity that has led to the belief that African American and first-generation students are likely to drop out of college because their high school GPAs, ACT/SAT scores, academic preparedness, and overall intellect appear different from their White peers. This difference suggests, as Tinto and Astin did, that cognitive variables are not accurate indicators of college performance across the board for all students. Because of these differences more investigation needs to be done to find out more about the variables that influence retention or success in other student populations.

There has been an increase in research that states that the use of cognitive variables is inaccurate in predicting the academic outcomes of African American and first-generation college students. Instead, personal characteristics and environmental factors have been shown to be stronger predictors of how African American students and first-generation students achieve academic success (Allen, 1992; Bui, 2002; Ting, 1998). Although there is adequate research that currently explores persistence in first-generation and African American students, the literature is lacking in the investigation of first-generation, African American students attending PWIs and how these students make meaning of their experiences. This new research has begun to allude to student perception

as significant to academic outcome but has not clearly demonstrated the connection between the student's perception of his or her experience and the student's response to that perception. It is the goal of this study to demonstrate that connection by exploring how first-generation, African American students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their experience and how that influences their persistence.

It is evident in the literature that first-generation, African American students attending PWIs face more challenges than do their White peers attending the same schools. The most prominent area of difference is academic outcome (i.e. persistence, degree attainment) (Bui, 2002; Dorsey & Jackson, 1995; Love, 1993). In order to gain a clear understanding of why these differences are present, it is necessary to examine the literature on the experience of African American students in college, especially at predominantly White institutions. Since first-generation students are fairly new to the research radar, a sufficient look at the literature on the experience of first-generation students is essential to laying the ground work for why this study is necessary. Despite the overlap in the persistence of African American students and first-generation students, each population has distinct issues. In this review of the literature I will explain how African American and first-generation college students experience college and the factors that influence their experiences respectively.

In addition to providing more in-depth information about African American and first-generation college students' experience, I will also provide a brief review of literature which describes the theoretical framework from which I will examine these populations. The purpose of this study is to explore how first-generation, African American students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their experiences and how that meaning impacts their persistence. Since the focus is on

the students' individual perception of their college experience I chose to use a theoretical

perspective that emphasizes how we make meaning. As a doctoral student who has

training in psychology, counseling and student affairs, I will employ cognitive theories

from these disciplines. This approach is based on how I understand and view human

thought, emotion and behavior. Cognitive theory will provide the framework for

understanding meaning-making.

<center>African American Student College Experience</center>

A major impact on the African American students' college experience has been

the outcome of the Brown v. Board of Education case. Prior to 1954, traditionally the

majority of African American students attended historically Black colleges and

universities (HBCUs). Although the Brown v. Board of Education decision was aimed at

desegregating secondary education systems, it had a positive impact on African American

matriculation into higher education (Allen, 1992; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harvey,

Harvey & King, 2004). African Americans were excluded from non-HBCUs by law in

the south and *de facto* in the north before this monumental Supreme Court decision

(Harvey et al., 2004). Following the case, predominantly White institutions saw a sharp

increase in African American students. Between 1980 and 2001 there was a 56.3%

increase in African American student enrollment at PWIs. Despite this influx of African

American students in PWIs, they remain underrepresented, especially in degree

attainment as compared to White students (Harvey et al., 2004). However, HBCUs

award more bachelor's degrees to African Americans than PWIs despite the increase of

African Americans enrolling in PWIs.

As a means of understanding this difference in graduation rates, Harvey and others compared the academic outcome of African American students attending PWIs and HBCUs. African American students felt a sense of belonging and community and were able to be mentored by African American faculty at HBCUs which positively impacted their academic outcome (Harvey et al., 2004; Latiker, 2003). This sense of connection motivated the students to persist. The African American students attending PWIs found developing a sense of community challenging because of the small number of African American students on campus.

African American Student Experience at PWIs

The students who attended a PWI described the small number of African Americans present on campus made them feel their perspectives were not reflected in the decision-making process of the campus. Instead the decision-making process was representative of the White point of view (Harvey et al., 2004). Students in this study also found themselves avoiding racially integrated student activities because they did not feel as if their interests were represented. Instead, these students formed organizations and groups that reflected African American attitudes and interests. These students also shared that their frustrations with PWIs went beyond the social activities into the classroom. Because they were often the only African American student in class, it was assumed that they would be the spokesperson for the African American race. The students described this as tiresome. They found themselves becoming angry because they felt as if they had to justify their presence to White students and faculty.

Other research studies exploring the experiences of African American students at PWIs revealed that the students often felt as if they were invalidated by others on

campus, including White faculty. Students in a study conducted by Fries-Britt and Turner described feeling isolated at PWIs because there is a lack of African American students, faculty, staff and administrators (2001). Because of the low number of African American in any capacity at PWIs, students felt compelled to create social and cultural networks with any other African Americans on campus (Allen, 1992).The lack of a significant African American presence at PWIs has resulted in a negative perception of cultural validation by some African American students.

In their study Fries-Britt and Turner identified some variables that contribute to the negative experiences that African American students have on PWI campuses. One of the most significant distractions to African American students' academic performance is the presence of racial/cultural stereotypes. Students find themselves expending energy that should be spent on learning, on combating stereotypes (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). In this same qualitative study, Fries-Britt and Turner reported that African American students were surprised by the boldness with which White peers would verbalize the stereotypes they held regarding their African American classmates (2001). Some of these stereotypes painted African American students as lazy, financially poor, and less intelligent. Students then found themselves, as in Harvey, Harvey and King's (2004) study, feeling as if they had to prove that they were intelligent. This process of proving oneself further detracted energy from learning.

The Significance of Support for Retention and Persistence

The distractions discovered in Fries-Britt and Turner's study in 2001 led them to conduct another study to gain insight into how these distractions impacted the college experience for African American. In order to learn about the experiences of these

students, they compared African American students at HBCUs and PWIs. In this study there were 34 students (19 HBCU & 15 PWI). It is interesting to note that the majority of the HBCU students in the study had transferred from a PWI. Fries-Britt and Turner found that students felt supported and connected at HBCUs, but the PWI students felt isolated and a lack of support (2002). The second theme that emerged was energy. At HBCUs students perceived positive role models as energizing them to learn and meet challenges, whereas at PWIs students felt as if they were a token and not valued (2002). The essence of this study was that HBCUs facilitate the development of self-confidence which motivates students to persist. The challenge is then for PWIs to develop a means of supporting students on a personal level as well as on an institutional level.

Although Fries-Britt and Turner studied the college experiences of African American students at both HBCUs and PWIs, they were not the first to identify that the impact of college on African American students is different depending upon the type of institution attended. Fleming (1984) presented the findings of her study comparing the impact of college on Black students attending both HBCUs and PWIs. She found that Black students perceived their experiences as positive at HBCUs and reported difficulties both socially and academically at PWIs. Fleming's research demonstrates that the challenges experienced by African American students at PWIs is a historical issue and as evidenced by Fries-Britt and Turner's (2002) study continues to be an issue for institutions of higher education

Latiker (2003) was able to demonstrate in his study how HBCUs support of students provides a positive impact on student persistence. Latiker investigated the persistence of African American students at an HBCU. The study consisted of in-depth interviews with four students attending a small HBCU with less than 1,000 students. The

students identified strong faculty-student relationships and cultural relevance as significant factors in their persistence. The students described the activities on campus to be oriented to their interests and inspired them to get involved. Something that was not identified in other studies discussed in this review, that appears unique to Latiker's study, is that students reported being instilled with a sense of obligation to give back to the African American community, in general, and specifically to their college. The students were taught that they had a responsibility to give back to their cultural and educational community as a means of promoting growth and providing opportunities for other African American students to excel (2003).

The importance of providing support to students is reiterated in a study conducted by Negga, Applewhite and Livingston (2007) that examined stress and African American college students. As in other studies they compared stressors experienced by African American students at HBCUs and PWIs. Instead of a qualitative study, they used several quantitative instruments to measure self-esteem, stress and social support. The major stressors for students at HBCUs were academic stress (i.e. low grades, time management or missed classes) and interpersonal stress (i.e. family relationships). Despite the type of school, academic stress was highest for all students. Students at PWIs rated the lack of social support as a significant source of stress. The more stressors a student has to manage, the more likely he or she will not persist. In addition academic stress students at PWIs identified feelings of isolation and discrimination as stressors. By receiving support in developing effective cope skills to manage stressed caused by social isolation and discrimination, the students demonstrated an increase in their motivation to persist.

Cognitive Variables Related to Persistence

In all of the studies discussed thus far, variables have been identified that have had a significant impact on the experiences and persistence of African American students attending PWIs. In addition to the studies reviewed, Sedlacek introduced the concept of non-cognitive variables that influence how minority students succeed or fail in college. Sedlacek's (1989) eight variables are as follows:

1. Positive self-concept,

2. Realistic appraisal,

3. Understands and deals with racism,

4. Demonstrated community service,

5. Preference for long-range goals to short-term/immediate need,

6. Availability of strong support person,

7. Successful leadership experience,

8. Knowledge acquired in a field.

Sedlacek's work suggests that the more variables a student possesses, the more likely that student is to persist in college. His work suggests that non-cognitive variables may provide a more realistic view of what influences success in college. These variables have been supported in subsequent research as more accurate predictors of academic success for minority students than the use of traditional cognitive variables. Non-cognitive variables have been proven to be imperative in understanding how African American students attending a PWI manages the challenges they face on predominantly White campuses across the country.

Sedlacek found students to have the most difficulty with realistic appraisal, which allows a student to monitor his or her progress, identifying strengths and areas which

need improvement. African American students at PWIs find it difficult to accurately appraise their performance because they are evaluated by different standards than their White peers (1987). The problem arises when the differences in these standards are not made clear to students. One reason African American students are evaluated differently is that White faculty do not always understand the students' way of gaining knowledge. The acquisition of knowledge is the eighth of Sedlacek's non-cognitive variables. He states that minority students often acquire knowledge in ways that are culturally unique (1989). This culturally distinct method of gaining information is not validated in PWIs which, in turn, suggests that by White standards African American students are not as intelligent. Sedlacek's work suggests that there may be more culturally appropriate ways of measuring intelligence for African American students.

A study by Love on the retention of African American students attending PWIs supports Sedlacek's research. Love examined the problems of Black student retention at PWIs by reviewing the literature that identified factors that affected retention and evaluated the responsiveness of current retention programs to the identified factors. She made recommendations for universities and colleges to invest less resources in trying to change Black students, and instead increase resources to address the inherit racism in their institutions. In her research she identified factors that appeared to influence African American student retention at PWIs. In order to identify these factors, Love compared African American students attending PWIs and HBCUs. The factors found to be unique to the African American students related to retention were: (a) White racism, (b) institutional leadership, (c) student finances, (d) social interaction/cultural dissonance/environmental incongruence, (e) faculty-student interaction, (f) access to student services, and (g) student characteristics (Love, 1993). African American students

attending PWIs indicated that they felt unsafe due to racial stereotyping and negative attitudes toward them. This research reiterates the idea that PWIs were established by Whites, and continue to reflect the dominant culture's values, goals and aspirations.

Factors that Influence Persistence and Retention of African American Students

If an institution's leadership is not sensitive to how racism might affect minority students' abilities to function on a White campus, this increases the likelihood of attrition of minority students. All students, especially those who enter college with limited resources, are concerned about the cost of college. Because African American families earned on average less than White families, they are less able to contribute to their students' educational costs (Love, 1993), rendering African American students more dependent upon financial aid packages. Love found that African American students at PWIs were receiving less financial aid than their White counterparts. Finances continue to be a concern for most minority students regardless of the type of institution they attend.

Love's research also supports Astin's theory of student involvement as influential on African American students' experiences. African American students in her study perceived campus activities as not inclusive of their interests, cultural values, or needs. Since those students did not perceive there were adequate opportunities for involvement, they were less likely to be retained. African American students attending PWIs viewed the White faculty with suspicion, assuming them to be insensitive and unavailable.

Similar to Bui (2002) and Ting (1998), Love (1993) found that certain characteristics were predictive of African American student persistence at PWI. Students' sense of academic preparation, self-image and locus of control all influence

students staying in college. If the students saw themselves as being academically prepared, having positive self-image and an internal locus of control, the students were more likely to remain in school. She also indicated that if students are capable of coping with negative experiences, maintaining solid support systems, find a meaningful way to become involved, and participate in leadership roles, their persistence increases (Love, 1993). In essence this study found that African American students can succeed in PWIs if they have a means of culturally relating their experiences and knowledge. Following Love's lead, other researchers began to study the phenomenon of African American students successfully navigating the White institutions of higher education.

Dorsey and Jackson (1995) contributed their findings to the research while investigating the factors associated with academic performance of African American students attending predominantly White colleges. Their goal was to isolate the factors that improved persistence instead of hindering it. The desire was that the findings would lead to an interest in the successes of students and not their presumed risks so that schools could improve retention by nurturing the strengths of students.

Dorsey and Jackson surveyed 86 African American students attending a large Midwest university with a population of 25,000. The students were of junior and senior standing with a mean GPA of 2.6 on a 4.0 scale. It is significant to note that 88% of the students had a GPA between 2.0 –3.0 and 3.26 % of the sample were first-generation. Of the successful students, an increase in academic satisfaction and faculty relationships were important to their persistence. In addition to their academic success, the participants scored high on personal motivation, positive self-concept, and aspirations for success measures. Getz (2000) defined the latter three characteristics as the students having a spirit of hope. She attributes this spirit of hope as a result of the life experiences

of African Americans as minorities in our society. Both Dorsey and Jackson and Getz suggest that African American students are entering college with considerable strengths and, if supported, will be successful in their college careers.

Rowser (1997) was interested in the factors that impacted the retention of African American. A survey was given to 1,107 new freshman enrolled in a Freshman Seminar course. Rowser assessed the participants' perceptions of their academic preparation, expected college GPA, expected year of graduation, personal/social preparation of managing adjustment to college life, and areas in which the student needed assistance to succeed in college. Since Rowser was interested in discovering how African American students' perception impacted their retention rate, it is interesting to note that less than half of the participants were African American. Despite the imbalance in the numbers, Rowser's results demonstrated little difference between the African American and White students related to their perception of their academic preparedness.

Rowser (1997) found that African American students' perception of their academic preparation was positive. Rowser found that although the African American students' perception of their academic abilities was optimistic, in actuality the perceptions were somewhat unrealistic as evidenced by most of the students beginning their college careers in remedial courses that did not apply toward graduation. It appears that in Rowser's study the students' perceptions were not consistent with the reality of their actual academic performance in their first year of college.

Littleton also investigated the perceptions and persistence of African American students attending a PWI. Littleton was interested in flushing out the experience of African American students on White campuses from their perspective (2001). He used as his sample African American students attending four predominantly White small liberal

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arts colleges in Appalachia. He did not explore the generational status of the participants. The study utilized a qualitative semi-structured interview with 24 students. The results added richly to the limited data on African American student retention at small White liberal arts colleges. In other studies, Littleton's participants shared that caring, approachable faculty were significant to their level of comfort at an institution (2001). Like Love (1993) and Dorsey and Jackson (1995), Littleton found that students often experienced racial stereotyping from White faculty and students (2001). African American students who chose to engage in campus activities not specifically aimed at African Americans were stereotyped by their ethnic peers and pressured to disengage (2001). It appears that the African American students believed it was okay to attend a PWI but remained distant so as not to become a part of the White system and diminish their Blackness. The sense of caution was continued in Littleton's finding that many participants viewed the college experience as a transitional phase to the next step in life and did not see the need to invest a lot of personal energy (2001). A new finding suggests that African American students found having African American role models on campus in the form of faculty and administrators as significant in their motivation to remain in school. These role models can facilitate the students' task of creating an identity bridge of belonging both at home and on campus. The communities in which many African American students originate are distinctly different from the campus community. The stress created by transitioning from home to college can be elevated by these differences.

Littleton continued to increase his contribution to the limited body of research by narrowing in on one factor identified as significant to persistence and that is involvement. In his 2002 study, Littleton again used a qualitative approach in order to gain insight on

the importance of involvement to African American students in connecting to their college campuses. In addition to the students, Littleton interviewed five administrators from the four colleges to compare the administrators' perceptions to that of the students regarding the importance of involvement for African American students' persistence. As administrators they are charged with assisting the students in being successful so the question becomes how administrators are utilizing the students' input to ensure success. Forty-six percent of the participants were student athletes and 42 % were first-generation students. However, the role of being a first-generation student was not explored. A theme that evolved throughout the student interviews was that involvement was a substantial factor in the students staying in school. Most of the students found athletics to be their means of connecting to the campus. Also, African American student organizations and other campus activities were an effective means of getting involved and developing a connection to campus.

Students perceived the Black student organizations as a place to feel validated and supported (Littleton, 2002). These students are affirming that Astin's position, on the importance of involvement as important to persistence, is true for African American students as well. The athletes reported that athletics had not just been a means of involvement but taught them discipline and diligence. The students attribute the increase in their persistence to feeling validated and being involved (2002).

The non-athletes shared that many of the campus activities did not appeal to them because they focused on the interests of the majority student population. The African American students did not have African American fraternities or sororities on the campuses and did not feel welcomed by the White fraternities and sororities. Understanding the importance of involvement and a need to belong, some of the African

American students participated in campus activities at the risk of being ostracized by their peers (Littleton, 2002). African American females who were not athletes described feeling as if they were a minority within a minority on their campuses. This description suggests that the African American student experience on a predominantly White college campus varies greatly.

The administrators in Littleton's study consisted of four White administrators and one African American administrator. Administrators, despite their ethnic background, were frustrated in their attempts to get African American students involved in campus activities outside of athletics and those directed toward African American students. According to Littleton, the administrators were aware of the peer pressure faced by African American students to remain within their own ethnic community and the decreased level of comfort in engaging with the majority student body (2002). However, one administrator shared that if African American students got involved in campus activities, they could increase the awareness of their interests (2002). Both the students and administrators recognized that involvement was imperative to retention, but neither appeared to be cognizant of the other's perspective.

Resiliency

The idea of exploring the students' experiences as a means of improving retention continues to be the pattern for studying persistence of African American students on predominantly White campuses. Getz (2000) provides additional insight into how and why African American students persist on predominantly White campuses. Getz focused her research on the influence of life experience on success in college. She was particularly curious as to how resiliency and self-efficacy contributed to retention. Getz's

assumption was that as a result of the challenges that African Americans face in life, they developed a sense of resiliency that improved their ability to cope with difficult experiences (2000). She interviewed eight students from six colleges in the San Diego, California area. Three of the schools were predominantly White, one was predominantly Hispanic, one was predominantly African American and the sixth was diverse in its student population's ethnicities. The life challenges the participants experienced ranged from gang involvement, to violence in the home, to homelessness, to incarceration. Getz wanted to know how surviving these events transferred to success in college.

The participants attempted to share how their challenges prepared them to deal with college, especially a college in which they were the minority. Some of the coping methods identified by the participants were blocking out negative things, ignoring discrimination, and learning to choose their battles (Getz, 2000). By overcoming harsh obstacles on a routine basis, the participants developed an attitude of survival. This attitude played a role in their decision to pursue college as well as aspire to degree attainment. The participants summarized that by overcoming difficulties, they realized they possessed the ability to do other things (2000). They viewed college as a means of altering their destiny. The students shared that despite their positive self-efficacy, they still became frustrated because of feeling devalued and misunderstood. Getz credited the participants' spirit of hope for their success (2000). As evidenced by the findings of the research on African American college students attending predominantly White institutions, this population appears to be able to temper their deficits with hope and perseverance.

First-Generation Student Experience

First-generation students exist on college campuses, but little is known about this population especially in four-year institutions. A substantial amount of the research on first-generation retention is focused on those students attending two-year community colleges (Bui, 2002). Bui examined the background characteristics of first-generation college students and their impact on student persistence in college. Bui noted that there were differences in the backgrounds of first-generation students compared to their second-generation counterparts. Second-generation students are those students who have at least one parent with a baccalaureate degree (Bui, 2002; Zalaquett, 1999). Sixty-four first-year students participating in a student support service program at a large university in California (first-generation students) and 68 second-generation students in an introductory psychology course were utilized in one study. A questionnaire was used to collect data on the participants' family/cultural background, reasons for pursuing a college education, and a description of their first-year experience.

Primary Concerns of First-Generation Students

The most significant difference first-generation students stated as their reasons for attending college was to assist their families financially and bring honor to the family, whereas the second-generation students pursued a college education as a means to leave home and because it was expected of them (Bui, 2002). Bui's finding of family as being an important issue for first-generation students is supported by other researchers. Richardson and Skinner focused on a broader sample of first-generation minority students and found that for African American, first-generation students, college was

perceived as a means of improving both social and economic status for self and family (1992).

Other issues of concern for first-generation college students were (a) feeling unprepared for the academic expectations of college, (b) concern over financial aid, (c) fear of failing, and (d) anxiety about unfamiliarity with the college environment. African American, first-generation students shared these issues and echoed these same concerns as reported by Richardson and Skinner's research. The second-generation students did not report these concerns. Although Bui's (2002) study found a difference in why students pursued a college education, it was limited in that the first-generation sample consisted of no African Americans. It consisted mainly of Latino (31.25%) and Asian (53.13 %) students. The absence of African American students may have influenced the differences in participants' rationale for pursuing college.

Zalaquett (1999) also examined the differences between first- and second-generation students. Like Bui, Zalaquett assumed that a difference did exist between first-generation and second-generation students. As a result of the disadvantages of first-generation students that some researchers have identified, first-generation students are expected to achieve less than other students (Bui, 2002; Naumann, Bandalos & Gutkin, 2003; Richardson & Skinner; 1992, Ting; 1998; Zalaquett, 1999).

By reviewing the records of 839 students who participated in a counseling center's first comprehensive assessment of first-generation college students, Zalaquett found that first-generation students' grade point averages (GPAs) were not significantly different than those of second-generation students (1999). It was revealed in the study that a higher percentage of first-generation college students were from ethnic minority groups. First-generation student research strongly indicates that first-generation students

are more likely to be members of an ethnic minority group and be of a lower

socioeconomic status than their second-generation counterparts (Bui, 2002; Richardson &

Skinner, 1992; Ting, 1998; Zalaquett, 1999).

Factors that Influence Persistence and Retention of First-Generation Students

It is difficult to identify the role of ethnicity in first-generation students' abilities

to progress in college as evidenced by the limited number of minorities in Bui's (2002)

study and Zalaquett's (1999) failure to breakdown results based on ethnicity as well as

generational status. The results of both studies indicate that first-generation students had

different reasons for persisting in and pursuing college. Researchers have attempted to

explore the variables that are unique to first-generation students.

Naumann and others (2003) focused their research on identifying variables that

would effectively predict success in first-generation college students. Naumann and

colleagues found that in subsequent research, the American College Testing (ACT)

scores were not consistently foretelling of academic success of all student populations

(2003). In order to explore the relationship between ACT scores and other predictors of

success for this population of student, 155 first-year students at a large Midwestern

university were administered the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire

(MSLQ). Naumann and colleagues divided the nine learning variables into two

categories: motivational variables and strategy variables. The motivational category

consisted of five factors: a) intrinsic goal orientation, b) task values, c) expectancy of

success beliefs, d) control beliefs, and e) self-efficacy. The four strategy variables were

study skills, goal setting, seeking assistance from others, and time management. These

were measured using the MSLQ.

The students' ACT scores were also obtained from the registrar. In addition to the ACT scores, the other independent variables were generational status and nine learning variables. ACT scores and the expectancy of success belief variable were the most significant predictors of success for first-generation students. The researchers suggested that the limited sources of support accessible by first-generation students may affect their motivation and ability in overcoming obstacles to succeed in higher education (Naumann et al., 2003).

Ting (1998) reported the ideas of other researchers that academic ability was not the sole predictor of success in college for any student, first-generation students in particular. Ting (1998) used the Non-Cognitive Questionnaire (NCQ) developed by Tracey and Sedlacek (1987) to explore the psychosocial variables that influence performance. The eight factors measured on the NCQ were: a) positive self-concept, b) realistic self-appraisal, c) ability to cope with racism, d) preference for long -range goals, e) availability of a strong support person, f) successful leadership experience, g) demonstrated community service and h) acquired knowledge in a field of study. The study was conducted at a large public university in the Midwest. The sample consisted of 44 Caucasian and 10 ethnic minority students. The responses on the NCQ, high school rank, and ACT composite scores were analyzed.

Ting, like Naumann and others, found that ACT scores were not as strong as other predictors. The high school rank was a more accurate predictor of first-semester GPA than were ACT scores. The factor of successful leadership experience and high school rank were better indicators of second semester grades. Positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal and acquired knowledge in a field of study were found to be strong predictors of academic performance of first-generation, African American students.

Despite some of the discrepancies in the research, assumptions are being made about first-generation college student retention. It is evident that first-generation students face challenges that other students do not, but those challenges are not hindering the ability of these students to progress and exceed expectations. The research on first-generation students provides some encouraging information, but it is limited by the small sample sizes that tend to be regionally focused. These narrow samples eliminate the ability to generalize the findings. The historical research on this population concentrates on how the students compare to other student populations, mainly White second-generation students. Using standards created to evaluate White second-generation attitudes and concerns to evaluate minority first-generation students may call into question the validity of these assessments. It is clear that the understanding of this population is in its infancy because the research has yet to assess this population using means that accurately examine their needs and attitudes. It is evident by the research findings that first-generation college students have unique characteristics and respond to the college experience differently, but is this difference a deficit as the research appears to be indicating? The research examining both African American students and first-generation college students suggests that there are challenges to their retention and persistence in college. Like other at-risk student populations there is overlap in the issues these students face but there are some distinct differences as well. It has been implied that despite the deficits, such as a lack of cultural capital, these two student populations may face in persisting to degree attainment, their interpretation of their experience has a significant impact on their success in college.

Cognitive Theoretical Approaches

In reviewing the literature on the experience of African American and first-generation college students, there is sufficient support regarding the influence of perception on the students' responses (outcomes). There are several theories that endeavor to explain how individuals organize their experiences (Kunnen & Bosma, 2000). This process of assigning meaning to experiences can be described in general using developmental stages. However, the factors that influence the process and why experiences are interpreted in certain ways are unique to each individual. Although the focus of this study is not to introduce a new theory of how people make meaning of their experiences, it is necessary to discuss some theories that examine this process of meaning-making. The focus of this phenomenological study is how first-generation, African American students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their experiences. In trying to find a theoretical approach that would serve as the lens from which to explore how these students make meaning, it was evident that a cognitive theoretical approach would be a good fit. The relationship between persistence and meaning-making is the essence of this research project. Since persistence is a based on the individual's beliefs and motivation, it was imperative to use a theory that examined how individuals interpret their experiences. A cognitive theory, from a psychological perspective, provides a means of understanding the individual process of making meaning of experiences.

In addition to persistence, this study also focuses on how first-generation, African American students in a college setting make meaning of their experiences. The focus on college students as population indicates a particular psychosocial developmental stage. In order to understand how college students make meaning it was necessary to provide a

theoretical foundation that outlined the process of how college students make meaning.

Two student development cognitive theories were used: the Reflective Judgment Model

(RJM) and the Model of Epistemological Reflection (MER). Cognitive student

development theories were also used because the study is looking at how meaning is

made from the student's perspective. Using cognitive theories that encapsulate both the

personal meaning-making process and the developmental process of meaning-making

appears to be appropriate.

<div align="center">Cognitive Theory from a Counseling Perspective</div>

In the psychology and counseling fields, cognitive theory suggests that an

individual's perception or interpretation of experiences shapes how he or she responds

and assigns meaning to those experiences. Two cognitive theories that have defined the

cognitive school of thought are Ellis's rational emotive behavioral therapy and Beck's

cognitive therapy. Ellis suggests that the assigning of meaning to experiences can be

rational or irrational (Corey, 2009). Ellis proposes that distorted perceptions are a result

of a reciprocal relationship between thoughts, emotions and behaviors (Corey, 2009). It is

his belief that if an individual realizes that it is his or her interpretation of an event that is

problematic and not the event, then a more rational perception can be developed. In order

to access the true cause of the distorted perceptions one must identify the underlying

irrational beliefs. In essence, Ellis is stating that a person's belief system is a significant

contributor to how the person assigns meaning to life events. If the irrational beliefs are

not addressed they begin to dictate how an individual constructs meaning and these

constructs are internalized and become the individual's reality. REBT proposes that in

order to change distorted thoughts, the irrational beliefs must be challenged and replaced with rational beliefs.

Aaron Beck, a contemporary of Ellis, assumes a similar perspective of how individuals make meaning of experiences. Beck believes that faulty thinking and using inadequate information to form interpretations create a problem in an individual's thought process (Corey, 2009). Instead of irrational thoughts, the person demonstrates a negative bias in the interpretation of events. This negative bias causes reality to become skewed resulting in distorted thoughts. Beck identifies seven errors a person makes in his or her reasoning that leads to misconceptions. The seven errors are (a) arbitrary inferences, (b) selective abstractions, (c) overgeneralization, (d) magnification and minimization, (e) personalization, (f) labeling and mislabeling, (g) dichotomous thinking (Corey, 2009). Each of these errors consists of the person using extreme beliefs to make sense of experiences instead of using factual information relevant to the specific experience or event. Like Ellis, Beck believes that in order to correct these errors in logic, the underlying belief behind the meaning must be identified and challenged. Although both of these approaches seem similar, the assumption behind how this process of change occurs is where the similarity ends. Ellis, in his REBT approach, sees the therapist as being the leader, and directing the client in how to think rationally. Beck views the process as collaborative, with the therapist encouraging the client to discover and challenge the logical errors. Despite differences in how each approach promotes cognitive change, both view the processes as developmental.

Student Development Cognitive Theory

Just as counseling and psychological cognitive theories view meaning-making or

thinking as developmental, this concept is further expanded in the student development

theorist's perspective. Student development theories focus on the development of self and

identity in adolescents and young adults. Two theories that focus on this process of how

young adults gain knowledge or learn about self and their world are King and Kitchener's

Reflective Judgment Model (RJM) and Baxter-Magolda's Model of Epistemological

Reflection (MER). Both of these theories look at the developmental stages that young

adults progress through in order to deepen their ability to make sense of their

experiences. In these theories the individuals' perception of the source of knowledge

changes, in turn altering how they assign meaning to the same experiences as different

developmental stages.

Reflective Judgment Model

The RJM focuses on how young adults, in general, come to know things about

self and their environment. King and Kitchener were inspired by their desire to

understand how individuals change cognitively as they mature (1985). The RJM model

has three dimensions: (a) how certain knowledge is, (b) how certain is knowledge, and (c)

how is knowledge gained and beliefs justified (1985). They identified seven stages in

which individuals' progress on each of these dimensions. In the first stage knowledge is

gained by observation (King & Kitchener, 1985). In this stage what is observed is

synonymous to beliefs. In the second stage there is a shift in the absolute certainty of a

belief. In this stage the individual no longer believes that all share the same reality.

Certain information is known only by authorities or experts and non-experts must adopt

this information as it is given (1985). Knowledge is the result of dual sources, the individual and the authorities. In the third stage the individual concedes that truth can be inaccessible, at least temporarily (1985). During this stage uncertainty is becoming acceptable, the assumption that all of us are limited in our knowledge. As the individual progresses along the cognitive development continuum, stage four introduces a stronger belief that knowledge is uncertain (1985). in this stage individuals perceive knowledge or truth to be unique to each person and not universal. It brings to light the old adage that there are three truths: yours, mine and the absolute truth. And although we do not know the absolute truth we become content with not knowing.

By the time a person reaches stage four of cognitive development there is a shift in the cognitive paradigm, it moves from external to internal (reflective). As this shift occurs and the person moves into stage five, knowledge is viewed to be subjective and based on context (King & Kitchener, 1985). This stage suggests that how a person determines reality is based on a personal interpretation of an experience. The uniqueness of each person's interpretation is seen as valid. By stage six, knowledge is no longer viewed as objective (1985). Instead the belief is that one can never have absolute certainty of anything, therefore certainty is measured in degrees. These degrees of certainty are constructed by comparing information and interpretations, selecting that which best fits the need at that particular time. Stage seven is simply a refining of the construction process in stage six (1985). At this stage knowledge is justified by weighing the evidence, our interpretation of the evidence and the amount of risk of being incorrect, and the consequences of those errors. Once these factors are evaluated we select a truth with the awareness that it might change as new information is obtained. The awareness that what we know and how we come to know it is subjective to change implies that the

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process of meaning-making is indeed personal and unique to each person. It is important to note that King and Kitchener do not view the cognitive progression as happening at the same rate of change for all knowledge. Instead individuals may be at stage seven in their knowledge of politics but at stage three in how they interpret the influence of music on society.

King and Kitchener assessed how individuals move through the RJM developmental stages by conducting structured interviews with high school juniors, college juniors and advanced graduate students in a longitudinal study. These interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Each participant was asked a series of questions about four ill-structured problems in the areas of history, science, current events and the relationship between science and religion. The criteria for the interviews was that the question content had to be within the intellectual domain of the participants, that the means of measuring knowledge could not be exclusive to formal educational settings or with college students, and that the rating system of responses be standardized (King & Kitchener, 1985). The purpose of these criteria was to be able to apply the findings of this study to understand how adolescents and young adults in general viewed and gained knowledge. They found over time participants did change as evidenced by an increase in the mean scores from high school to graduate school. Although it cannot be determined by this study if the changes occurred due to maturation or education, it is assumed that both age and education are positive factors in cognitive development.

Model of Epistemological Reflection

Baxter-Magolda echoes the assumptions of how knowledge is gained in her MER. A primary difference between the RJM and MER is that Baxter-Magolda focuses

specifically on how college students' cognitive development happened. She intentionally

directs her attention to formal education settings and their influence on intellectual

development (Baxter- Magolda, 1999; Evans, Forney, &Guido-DiBrito, 1998). It is her

belief that in order to effectively educate students in higher education, an understanding

of how they gain knowledge is essential (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). She

wanted to understand the epistemological development of undergraduates as well as the

role of gender on this process because King and Kitchener had not made gender a

primary variable in their research of the RJM. Her MER model consisted of four stages of

cognitive development and how the genders differ on the stages. It is important to note

that a gender-related difference only occurs in stages one through three.

Knowledge is perceived as an absolute, one can be certain of information shared

by authorities (teachers) during stage one (1998). In stage one, women approach

knowledge by a pattern of receiving, a more passive style. The level at which knowledge

is received is based on a woman's level of comfort in the learning environment, her

relationship with her peers and the amount of opportunity to assess her knowledge

(1998). Males demonstrate an active approach known as mastering knowledge (1998).

Male students will verbalize their opinions as well as challenge instructors and peers.

Both female and male students at this stage see knowledge as certain.

As students progress to stage two their certainty of what they know begins to

lessen. In stage two knowing becomes transitional and knowledge is accepted as having

some degree of uncertainty (Evans et al., 1998). It is during this stage that students realize

that their instructors are not all knowing experts that dispense information. Instead their

authorities become facilitators of how to process information. Female students gain their

understanding by considering the ideas of others as well as their own. This pattern is

interpersonal knowing. Male students again employ a more active approach in which thinking is forced through persuasion such as debate. This approach is labeled impersonal knowing.

As in King and Kitchener's RJM, by stage three of Baxter-Magolda's cognitive development model, there is a shift in the cognitive paradigm. By stage three students have come to accept that knowledge is generally uncertain (Evans et al., 1998). This stage is considered independent knowing. In this stage the main goal is to shift students to think independently and critically about information. Again, female students take a more relational approach to knowing, called inter-individual. In this pattern of knowing, women place equal value on their ideas and the ideas of others (1998). Male students' tendency is to focus on their individual ideas. However, they see the opinions of others as valid, more importance is placed on their individual ideas, hence the name of this pattern of individual knowing. In the fourth stage of the MER, development of knowledge becomes contextually dependent. In this stage, gender is no longer a variable that influences how students approach the acquisition of knowledge. Instead knowledge is a result of a personal construct with supporting evidence (1998). The role of gender diminishes during this stage because students become aware of the limitations of either their relational or impersonal patterns of gaining knowledge. Although gender was a primary variable in this research Baxter-Magolda acknowledges that it is not a comprehensive explanation of our nature of knowing. Just as there are differences between genders in how a person gains knowledge, there are also individual differences within gender groups as well.

Summary

In reviewing the literature on how African American and first-generation students experience college, the most prominent conclusion is that there are too many factors to solidify a generic explanation for why these students persist. Instead, the research indicates that persistence is primarily based on individual characteristics. This idea of individual characteristics as determinants is supported in the cognitive theory literature. The research on African American and first-generation students identified that students persisted if the environment was supportive, provided opportunities for growth and expression and was welcoming. These ideas of comfort, support, and opportunities are reiterated in Baxter-Magolda's research. In essence there is still more we need to uncover to truly understand how and why first-generation and African American students persist in college and how these students make meaning of these experiences in order to persist. It is the goal of this researcher to go beyond the concrete explanations for student persistence and the process of making meaning, to discover the abstract stories of the college experiences of first-generation, African American students attending predominantly White liberal arts college and how their interpretation of those experience influence persistence.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter contains an overview and rationale for choosing a qualitative

research approach and a summary of the measures used to investigate the persistence of a

group of first-generation, African American college students. I selected a

phenomenological approach to explore how first-generation, African American college

students at a predominantly White liberal arts college make meaning of their college

experiences. A description of the participants and the criteria for participation is

provided. This discussion is followed by an explanation of how the data was gathered. I

concluded the chapter by discussing the measures used to analyze the data.

Overview: Philosophical Perspectives of Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of experience. Its purpose is to seek to understand an

experience and how an individual makes meaning of that experience (Creswell, 1998).

Phenomenology seeks to develop a coherent description of a particular human experience

(Polkinghorne, 1989). It is apparent that phenomenological inquiry focuses on human

consciousness and self-awareness. As a person with training in clinical psychology and a

teacher of psychology, I am aware that this concept of understanding how humans

experience consciousness is not unique to phenomenology. Wundt, the founder of

modern psychology, applied this idea to learning more about how the human mind

worked. He proposed that in order to understand how the mind experienced

consciousness, the experience must be reduced to its basic elements (Schultz & Schultz,

2008). It was this philosophical concept of reductionism that would motivate Husserl,

founder of phenomenological psychology and the use of phenomenology as a research method, in his application of the concept of phenomenology to understanding the human experience. Husserl saw this process of reducing an experience down to its elements as the means to reveal the essence of an experience (Moustakas, 1994). Both Wundt and Husserl desired to discover the universal aspects that are essential to multiple individuals' experience of a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

It is natural when observing a phenomenon to make some assumptions about what is happening and how it feels. These assumptions are typically based on the information we have obtained through our own senses (i.e. taste, touch, smell, sight, sound). As an observer, we will cross-reference this information with knowledge we have already stored in our inventory. This process allows us to make some conclusions about the new experience. This method of acquiring knowledge is limiting because it does not permit us to explore new methods of learning. In order to begin to understand the experience of an event from another person's view, we must suspend our use of traditional means of acquiring knowledge. Phenomenology requires us to step outside of our comfort zone. We must approach the new experience with an openness that is void of as many biases as possible. Just because something looks and sounds like a duck does not make it a duck. This process of being open permits us to reflect on our experiences in new ways and find new meanings (Moustakas, 1994).

In order to begin a phenomenological investigation I, as the researcher, had to first explore my biases and assumptions about the phenomena. This was important because I am the primary instrument for data collection. It was essential that I be aware of how my understanding and beliefs about the experience affected my comprehension of the participants' stories (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The process of identifying

biases and setting them aside is called bracketing or the epoche process (Moustakas, 1994). This process allows for a reflective analysis of the information consisting of a description of the complexity of the experience, reduction, and categorization of common themes and meanings (Moustakas, 1994).

<div align="center">Rationale for Selecting Phenomenology</div>

There is minimal research in regards to the persistence of first-generation, African American students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college. Because my focus is not on understanding this issue from a surface level but rather from a greater depth, a phenomenological investigation was a good fit for this study. Unlike other studies that have sought to identify the factors that influence persistence of first-generation, African American students at PWIs, I recognize the importance of these factors but desire to explore how this population makes meaning of their experience. I sought to gain insight into the significance of the experiences from the students' perspective. I intend to give a voice to these students' process of making meaning of their experiences and their reasons for persisting in college. I must reiterate that it is this process of students' constructing meaning of their experiences that makes phenomenology a good fit.

This issue of goodness of fit is important when employing a phenomenological analysis. In order to avoid the mistake of many first-time researchers using a qualitative approach, I attempted to avoid trying to insert quantitative methods into the qualitative model. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative approaches to research do not use instruments and statistical analysis that have been proven valid and reliable. Instead, I, as the researcher, was the primary instrument. My analysis of the students' experiences was

influenced by the experiences I have had. If I were to replicate this study in 20 years, it is likely that my analysis would be different because I will have changed. Phenomenology and other descriptive methods are so potent and meaningful because of the individual focus. When we use statistics and normative data we negate the uniqueness and distinctness of the individual. No two people are alike nor are their experiences or what those experiences mean to them identical. Therefore, phenomenological research allows us to uncover and understand the unique value of the individual experience. Although this data cannot be quantified it is no less significant in adding to our knowledge of the world and its inhabitants.

Participants

The participants for this study were selected based on their fit with the criteria for this study. The study included five participants which was a smaller sample than the 9-12 participants originally sought for the study. I discussed the challenges in identifying eligible participants in the section on gathering data later in this chapter. I used criterion and purposeful sampling methods for selecting the participants for this study. This method recommends that participants must meet a specific set of criteria in order to be included in the study (Creswell, 1998). The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Self-identify as African American,
2. First-generation college student,
3. Attending an identified predominantly White liberal arts college in the Midwest,
4. Hold sophomore, junior or senior status,
5. Be between the ages of 19-23 years old,

6. Have attended the same school for at least two consecutive years.

The participants consisted of four female students and one male student, four sophomores and one junior. I selected students who self-identified racially as African American to avoid making the assumption that all Black students are of United States origin because the term Black can refer to students of African, Caribbean, Haitian, British, Canadian, etc. origin. These particular criteria allowed me to focus on the distinctiveness of the experience of African American students. All of the participants were in good academic standing at the time of the interview which demonstrated persistence. Traditional-aged students were selected as a means of minimizing age-related developmental differences. For example a 40-year-old college senior with a family and significant work experience maybe influenced by different factors in regards to assigning meaning to experiences.

Each of the participants attended the same predominantly White liberal arts college in the Midwest for at least two consecutive years which was the measure used for demonstrating persistence in this study. It is the students' persistence and active engagement in campus life that contributes to the depth of the study's findings. It is important to note that these students are active in student organizations and leadership roles as well as maintain good academic standing. Because these students are engaged in many areas of campus, their experiences are broadened which also augments the depth of their responses.

The focus of the study was on understanding the distinct experiences of first-generation, African American students who are attending predominantly White liberal arts colleges. This student population can be found at other type of institutions of higher learning such as public universities or Historically Black Colleges and Universities

(HBCUs). The reason for focusing on predominantly White liberal arts colleges was to learn if this environment created experiences that were not found at other types of universities. For example, first-generation, African American students who attend HBCUs often feel supported and validated (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Latiker, 2003). Furthermore it has been found in the research that first-generation and African American students often enter college facing challenges that are not consistently experienced by other student populations. For example, first-generation students often enter college with the perception that they are not academically prepared for college (Zalaquett, 1999). Also it has been shown that first-generation students have a higher percentage of being from an ethnic minority group (Zalaquett, 1999). This suggests the experiences of first-generation and African American students are similar. However the interest of this study is in identifying the unique experiences of students who hold both identities. This study provides an opportunity to gain an understanding of the unique experiences of a first-generation, African American student population attending predominately White liberal arts colleges. In this study, I examined how first-generation, African American students made meaning of their experiences and how the meanings motivated their persistence at a small predominantly White liberal arts college. My intent is to supplement our understanding of the distinctiveness of the persistence of first-generation, African American college students.

The sample of five students provided a manageable size and allowed me to gain greater insight into the participants' experiences with each individual. Unlike in quantitative studies, this small number of participants did not diminish the quality or usefulness of the data; instead it added to the richness of the participants' stories. Although the persistence of all students was of interest, this population was investigated

because of its underrepresentation in institutions of higher education. The goal was not to generalize the experience of all first-generation students or African American students but to begin to understand how the experiences of first-generation, African American students are unique and how their experiences are similar to first-generation and African American students individually. The criteria set for participation provided parameters that adequately characterized the targeted population.

Procedure

Data Gathering

In the fall of 2008 I emailed a letter (Appendix A) to the administrator responsible for multicultural student programming at four liberal arts colleges in the Midwest in order to identify eligible participants. In this letter I asked the administrator to disseminate, to students, an announcement (Appendix B) that briefly described the study and requested volunteers. I asked that the announcement be shared with students via email but left it at the discretion of the administrator to also share this information with students in person. I informed the administrator in my initial email that the announcement may also be posted on campus to reach interested students. Included with the announcement was a consent form (Appendix C) describing what participants could expect from participating in this study. Interested students could email, fax or send via U.S. postal service the completed consent form. In addition to asking the administrator to share the announcement, I asked to meet with student organizations that are specifically targeted toward African American students so that I could introduce myself and my study to potential volunteers. I wanted

potential participants to be able to identify with me by hearing my story of being a first-generation, African American student at a PWI.

It was clear, after contacting the first three colleges, that finding first-generation, African American students was going to be difficult. I had four students contact me based on the announcements posted at their respective schools. Those four students completed and returned the consent form and screening questionnaire (Appendix D). However two did not meet the criteria to participate in the study. The students were notified according to the research protocol. The other two did not respond to several invitations to participate in an interview. After encountering challenges with finding appropriate participants using printed announcements only, I presented, in person, the study to the student organizations that were focused on African American students. I did the in-person presentation because I felt there was hesitancy from students to contact me because I was unknown to them. As a result of historical oppression, African Americans have learned to be cautious of White institutions (Allen, 1992; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Sue & Sue, 1990). I felt it was necessary for me to interact in person with potential participants. The lack of trust is based on a history of institutional and systemic racism. African Americans have suffered significant hurts and losses at the hands of Whites and are understandably guarded in their interactions with Whites or someone who appears to be representing the establishment. By addressing potential participants in person, I was able to reveal myself as an African American woman and share the authenticity of my desire to use this study as a means of advocating for them and validating their experiences. These personal presentations proved to be useful for both the students and myself. I benefited from the presentation because I was able to identify participants. At the end of my presentations I provided consent forms. Although I was able to identify

potential participants, identified participants were did not always follow through to participate or were not appropriate for the study. Many of the students who expressed interest were either not first-generation students or did not hold junior or senior status. These difficulties led me to make alterations to my criteria and submit my first of two HSIRB revisions. After consultation with my committee, I decided to change the criteria regarding participants' status, to include second-semester college sophomores. It was this change that yielded three participants at the fourth college in the spring of 2010.

      Once I received the signed consent form I emailed the three participants, and emailed a screening questionnaire. To insure that the emails were received and opened I included an option on my sent emails to notify me that the message had been successfully sent and opened.

      After I verified that the student met the criteria I sent an email inviting the students who met the participation criteria to schedule an in-person interview. In my email I provided the students with instructions on how to schedule an interview with me (Appendix E). In order to protect the student's identity I requested that students select a pseudonym that would be used in place of their real name on any documents. I kept a code of the names and corresponding pseudonyms locked in my desk in my office. Each student was given one week from the date the email was sent to respond with a choice of interview time. Once I received the interview schedule from the students I contacted the administrator responsible for multicultural student programming at the school to secure an interview location. The location for the interviews was an infrequently-used conference room that provided a space with minimal distractions. It was ideal for the interviews.

After completing the first three interviews the process stalled again; I was not getting more responses to my requests for participation. At the invitation of the students at the fourth school I attended a program sponsored by the African American student organization; it was at this program that I was introduced in-person to the administrator responsible for multicultural programming. I appeared to have developed a rapport with the students. The administrator, like the students, demonstrated more trust after meeting me in-person and began recruiting students for my study. The administrator's recruitment efforts led to four potential participants. I collected their email addresses and emailed them consent forms. One of the four students emailed me to decline participating in the study because he was too busy. The other three completed and returned the consent forms and the screening questionnaires; all three met the participation criteria and were sent an email inviting them to schedule an interview with me. I met each of the three for interviews. However, before beginning one of the interviews, a student revealed that one of his parents did complete college although he did not live with that parent; at that point, I terminated the interview and followed the research protocol to manage his information. Again the recruitment of additional participants stalled and I approached my committee for advice. We decided that given all my efforts to date, as well as the limited time I had to complete this project, we would again revise my study. I submitted my second HSIRB revision, reducing the number of participants in the study to the five interviews I had completed.

Each interview averaged approximately eighty-four minutes. Before each interview began I reviewed the consent form with the participants, requesting that on tape they provide verbal consent to participate in the study to confirm their written consent. I began the interview using the open-ended questions I developed to encourage the

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participants to share their experiences (Appendix I). Upon the completion of each interview, the tapes were transcribed and emailed to me. I then emailed each student his or her respective transcript with a letter (Appendix J) instructing the participant to review the transcription for clarity and accuracy of the ideas that the participant was attempting to express.

The letter informed each participant that any corrections or comments regarding the transcription must be returned to me within two weeks. I sent reminder emails to three of the participants because I did not receive a response by the designated deadline (Appendix K), reminding the student to return the transcript with any corrections or comments, allowing a three day deadline from the date the email was sent. Two of the students responded to the follow-up email stating that they had no corrections. The third student did not respond to the follow-up, so I used it as is. Two of the participants responded immediately after receiving the transcript, one stating no corrections and the other emailed me a corrected transcript which is the one used in the data analysis portion of this study.

Data Analysis

A phenomenological approach was used to analyze the interviews. The individual interviews were analyzed in their entirety and then analyzed as a group to create a composite of common themes of the experience. The procedures used for analysis follows.

Phenomenological Description

In phenomenological research the experiences of the participants is described exactly as told by the participant without the researcher attempting to interpret or explain the participant's experience (Moustakas, 1994). I used the participants' stories to provide a description of their experience at a PWI and what that has meant to them and their persistence. This initial description preceded my deeper exploration into the stories. This first description was simply using the transcript of the interview as the unedited voice of the student.

Phenomenological Reduction

After having the interviews transcribed I began the process of reduction to identify the essential elements of the participants' experiences. According to Moustakas each participant's story must be thoroughly reviewed more than once to gain as complete an understanding of the experience as possible (1994). In order to access the richness of these stories I organized the data, immersed myself in the data, coded the data, developed categories and themes, interpreted the data, searched for alternative understandings and wrote the report describing the data. The first step was to organize the data which consisted of putting my notes from the interviews with the transcription of the corresponding interview. The next step was my immersion into the data. This process is called horizonalization, which is the development of multiple layers of perceptions of the same experience. Before starting this process I had to bracket my own experience as a first-generation student attending a predominately White university so that I could read and hear each of the participants' stories as objectively as possible. My personal experience could not be the only lens through which I viewed these stories. During the

interviews I thought it would be difficult to not see myself in the stories of the participants. I found myself so engaged in their stories that I did not impose my understanding on their stories. If I found myself assuming I knew what a participant meant I resorted to my counseling skills and asked the participant for clarification. I did this in several of the interviews and often the student's clarification proved my initial understanding was incorrect. In the first two interviews I took notes during the interviews to monitor the influence of my experience but found this distracting. As a way of validating their experiences I expressed my appreciation for their participation and encouraged each participant to continue with his or her education. At the end of each interview, I found myself feeling pride in each of the participants and their accomplishments. After the participant left the interview room, I spent a few minutes writing a summary of the interview documenting any feelings, reactions or thoughts I had during or about the interview. This process helped me to reflect on how I experienced the story and identify how my experience could be interfering with my ability to hear the students. Simply put, this practice was the technique used to further bracket my assumptions, permitting me to openly listen to the students' voices.

As I continued the immersion process I began the first step in the reduction process by listening to the tapes of the interviews while reading the transcripts and making notes. I denoted my notes from the first review by placing the numeral 1 in a circle above the note. I then read the transcripts for a second time making notes of new revelations. I denoted these notes by placing a numeral 2 in a circle above these notes. This process of making notes was the process of coding the data. In my third reading I did the same thing but also began to develop initial themes for the individual transcripts and writing notes that provided a rationale for selecting a particular theme and why that

information stood out to me. It was in this third review of the data that I began to categorize the data and identify themes. Some of the themes were significant to individual interviews and not common across interviews. I found myself with a hefty list of themes and categories. The idea of reducing this list to a manageable size was overwhelming. Through continued review of the data and the list of themes and categories, I was able to compare the themes from the individual interviews and develop fewer categories with themes that appeared to be common among the participants. This was the process of thematization. I began to identify additional themes and eliminate themes that no longer seemed to fit. Each review of the transcripts was informed by the preceding review. This process occurred until I felt I had a solid grasp of the participants' experiences.

In order to gain more insight into themes, I attempted to organize them into textural and structural descriptions. A textural description consists of clear images of what an experience is like for the individual. For example, it is the use of direct quotes from the interview that provide a clear picture of the feelings and thoughts the person is having during the experience. A structural description would reveal the characteristics of how the feelings and thoughts associated with an experience are triggered. The circumstances that evoke these feelings and thoughts are also part of a structural description. The structural description became the background for the textural descriptions forming a whole gestalt of the experience. These descriptions added richness by revealing what was the experience, how it was experienced, and how the participants made meaning of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). It was this process that led to understanding the different aspects of the themes; what I had once identified as a large list was actually the texture and structure of the experience and not independent themes.

Phenomenological Synthesis

The final stage of analysis was to synthesize the central textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). In this stage I developed a unified statement of the nature of the experience of the phenomenon for the participants. This final stage allowed for discovery of additional meanings not made apparent in earlier stages of reduction.

Once I reduced the data to its essence, or at least to as complete of an understanding that I could reach within my time parameters, I discussed the stories and their essence in a final report. This report, which became chapter four of this phenomenological research study, consisted of a demographic description of the participants as a group, a discussion of the identified themes and excerpts from the participants' stories to authenticate the themes. In discussing the themes, the process of how these first-generation, African American students attending a PWI make meaning of their college experience and how that meaning influences their persistence becomes more evident. The purpose of this process of this phenomenological research study was to become a social archeologist uncovering the essence buried deep within the stories of the participants' experiences. By writing the report of the participants' experiences, I provide an opportunity for others to vicariously take part in the participants' experiences and learn from their experiences.

Trustworthiness

In order to limit the subjectivity of interpreting the experiences and their meanings, the participants reviewed their own transcripts and my dissertation chair reviewed the summaries and themes identified. I also had a colleague, in the counseling department of a private liberal arts college, serve as an independent reader or auditor of

the summaries and interpretations of themes for clarity. All identifying information of the participants was removed by the time it was read by others. It is also important to note that the readers are not employed or associated with the liberal arts college from which the participants were selected. These steps were taken to establish trustworthiness of the data and the process of data analysis. Trustworthiness serves as the qualitative researcher's answer to validity and reliability.

Summary

In summary, this chapter provides a clear description of the population being investigated in this study and a rationale for why this population was selected, as well as a comprehensive description of how the data was collected and analyzed. The process of analysis was extensive but necessary in order to supply a realistic picture of the experience of first-generation, African American students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college, and how they interpret their experiences. It is in this chapter that this study began to take shape. By furnishing a clear explanation of the methods of data collection and analysis, I provide a foundation from which to understand the content of the interviews and the themes revealed in the individual experiences, and the composite of the participants.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, the findings from this phenomenological study regarding how first-generation, African American students attending predominantly White liberal arts colleges make meaning of their experiences and how those meanings influence their persistence are presented. The report of the findings is organized into two sections. The first section provides a summary of the demographic description of the individual participants and a summary of my impressions of the participants' experiences. The second section consists of a description of the common themes identified through the analysis of the data. The six common themes are described in detail along with quotes from the participants and description of relevant situations to provide the reader with the essences of the participants' experiences.

Section I: Demographic Description of Participants

This study focused on the experiences and meaning-making of five first-generation students who self-identify as African American. Each of these participants attends a small, private, predominantly White liberal arts college in the Midwest that is known for its academic rigor and the academic achievements of its students. It is important to note that each of the participants was admitted to the college in good academic standing and at the time of the interviews still had good academic standing. All of the participants were from large urban cities. The participants selected pseudonyms in order to protect their identity and the identity of their school. I will refer to the participants by their pseudonyms throughout this chapter.

Monique is a female and sophomore in college. At the time of this interview she was in her last term as a sophomore. She described her neighborhood of origin as predominately African American, economically poor but one in which individuals were motivated to pursue their goals. She was reared by her maternal grandmother and taught never to allow her environment to determine her destiny. Monique is an only child. She was soft spoken but confident.

Shyani is a female in her last term as a sophomore in college. She is an English major. Shyani portrays her neighborhood as a predominantly Black inner-city area. The neighborhood had the typical issues found in the inner-city: crime, drugs, gangs and unemployment. She did feel that her childhood neighborhood, despite its issues, possessed a sense of community. She shared that the neighborhood in which her family currently lives does not have that same sense of community which she attributes to the fact that her family has not lived there long and are not as established as they were in her childhood neighborhood. Shyani was raised by her mother and step-father along with her brother and sister. She presented as confident with an urban edge. Shyani's fashion style and attitude were indicative of someone living in an urban city, funky with an individualism that was unique to her. She wore her hair natural and spoke with a college level vocabulary but easily integrated urban slang.

Dorothy is the third participant, and a second-term sophomore. She is a biology major. Unlike the other participants, Dorothy has lived in several Southern states but claims the Midwest as her home. She shared that she enjoys knitting, crocheting, drawing and painting. Music is another one of her artistic outlets. She describes the neighborhood in which her grandmother lives because that is what she identifies as home. The neighborhood was predominantly Hispanic but there were a few Black families as well as

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Caucasian families. Dorothy was raised by her mother along with her younger sister. She presented as a cheerful and personable person.

Mindi, the fourth participant, is a junior. She is a biology major with a concentration in health studies. Mindi works in one of the residence halls on her college campus. She is active in many student organizations on campus. She describes her neighborhood as one that has gone through transition from being a predominantly Black working middle class area with homeowners to an economically depressed predominantly Black area in which most of the homes are rental properties. She states that the crime rate has risen and the curb appeal of the neighborhood has declined. Her parents are divorced; she lives with her mother, and her father is an active participant in her life. She has five siblings, an older brother from the marriage between her parents and four older siblings from a previous relationship of her father's. She is an outspoken and driven young woman. An example of Mindi's outspokenness is a story she shared in which she informed a member of the public school board of the lack of college preparation her former high school had provided her. She spoke in a very matter-of-fact manner. She demonstrated her drive by engaging in activities on campus that did not consist of many African American students. She had a philosophy that despite her background, she could do whatever she dreamed. That personifies drive and perseverance.

Joshua, a junior, is the fifth and only male participant. He is a psychology major who plans to study and work outside of the United States. He is from a large, metropolitan city on the East coast. He describes his neighborhood as a predominantly Black urban area. Unlike the other participants, his high school was predominantly Hispanic. He and his older brother were raised by their mother and father. He shared that although his parents did not have a college education, they stressed that Joshua and his

brother would get a college education. Joshua is active in student organizations and choir. In sharing his experiences, Joshua would typically provide his view of the other person's perspective. He prefaced his story with 'this is my opinion.' He was aware of other perspectives. His style of speech was slow and reflective. He is a laid-back and perceptive person.

All of the participants expressed a desire to complete their college education and four out of the five are planning to pursue graduate school. The participants did not want to return to their hometowns because they perceived it as not advantageous due to limited opportunities. This desire to not return home was a shared motivator to persist. The stories of these five participants are just a few in the many stories that provide insight into the persistence of college students. The next section of this chapter explores the common themes of their stories of persistence.

Section II: Description of Themes

Students enter and persist in college for many reasons. Those reasons, combined with their experiences, shape the students' perceptions of their time in college. Their experiences may also support or hinder their persistence. I had the opportunity to interview five first-generation, African American students who are successfully persisting at a predominantly White liberal arts college. I am honored to provide the platform for their stories to be heard. In the following paragraphs I explored the primary factors these students saw as influencing their college experience. Although the students shared many stories, rich in detail, about their individual journeys, I focused on those shared experiences that appear to be common threads in their stories of persistence. In listening to their stories, several themes arose that were common among all the participants and

descriptive of their shared experience. The themes that weave these five stories together are: (a) *Am I an Academic Imposter?*, (b) *Who am I?*, (c) *Can't Stop Now*, (d) *The Right Fit*, (e) *My Support*, and (f) *Insurance for my Future*. There is an evolution that is depicted in each of the themes, showing how the students' perceptions changed with experiences. Each of the themes possess complexity that shows the richness of the individual student's experiences. In the following paragraphs the evolution of the themes and the students' perception are explored.

Am I an Academic Imposter?

This theme delves into the perspectives students have regarding their academic ability or lack of academic ability. In essence, these students began their college journey perceiving themselves as academic imposters, as if their intelligence and abilities were false. However, as they gained academic success in college, the students reached a place in which they could accept and acknowledge their intellectual ability.

The theme of being an academic imposter describes the students' views of their academic ability as being a deception. It was interesting to listen to each of these students deny their intelligence despite the fact that each graduated high school with a GPA above a 3.0 and were accepted into a college known for its academic rigor. Each of these students was in academic good standing in college at the time of the interviews. In spite of demonstrated academic ability, the students appeared uncomfortable with being labeled as smart. Throughout their academic careers, each of the students shared that others have perceived them as having above average intelligence. The students provided a variety of reasons to support their view of not being smart. For example Monique states,

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> *I don't feel like I'm all that smart. I'm not....I just played the role because people were proud of me and I liked the praise.*

Mindi echoes Monique's sentiment in her rationale for not being smart,

> *I don't think I'm smart. I think I work hard to do my work.*

Mindi perceived herself as smart in high school. However, like others, she began to doubt her abilities upon entering college.

> *In (high) school I was known as the smart one. I was the one in all of the leadership organizations. I was that kid, like the helpful one, the smart kid. I graduated with a 3.8 GPA , top 5% , so I thought I was smart in high school…I sat in on the Calc I class on the first day (in college) and I was like, I can't do this.*

Although the students have mixed beliefs about their academic abilities, it is apparent the students also felt as if they were expected to do well. Because they had achieved excellence in high school, families, friends and teachers assumed they would always do well. Joshua shares that he felt an expectation to achieve in his secondary school experience because his older brother was a strong student. This is expressed in the following quote,

> *In middle school I was always told that I should achieve big…Back then it was just like, oh my, I have to do so much, I have to over-achieve…It was pretty stressful.* (The student's older brother was academically successful and he was often compared to his brother in middle school.)

Shyani has a slightly different perception of her intelligence. She describes herself as smart in junior high and high school. She shares that she was always told by people that she was smart and bright. Her perception of her academic ability changed upon entering college. She felt that her college classmates were more intelligent than she. Her first-year experience in college contributed to her doubting her perception of herself as "a smart kid."

> *Maybe I'm not as intellectual as I thought I was. I'm not as smart as I thought I was. I feel average, very average.*

Despite having a 3.7 GPA in college she discounts the significance of this achievement.

> *That [GPA] doesn't really seem to count for anything.*

Dorothy was labeled the smart girl in school; she took honors classes in middle school and moved into advanced placement (AP) class in high school. In high school she graduated with a 3.7 GPA. She, like Shyani, began to doubt the legitimacy of her academic talent once in college.

> *In high school…I only had one grade under a 'B'. Then I got here and I was just like, every weak area was magnified. It was like bad this, bad at that and bad at that.*

Dorothy is a science major and was struggling academically in a course. She shared this experience made her doubt her ability to be successful in reaching her academic goal of pursing graduate school.

> *If I get a D on my transcript I'm not going to get into grad school. I was like maybe I should just not go to grad school, maybe I should just finish up here, and get a job because I can't do this.*

Dorothy felt defeated as evidenced in her quote.

But she found the strength to persist and decided to persevere. Despite her decision to persist she continued to doubt her abilities but that doubt appears to be lessening.

> *Last quarter I felt like I was scraping by and I got a 'B' in organic chemistry.*

Dorothy's perseverance demonstrates the complexities of this theme. She realized that her abilities were not false but that with hard work and her abilities she could be successful. Joshua was also able to change his view of his academic abilities. He states that,

Now, I love the pressure.

Mindi also realized that the abilities she possessed in high school were real but needed some refinement in college.

I got a 'D' the first quarter and an 'A' the second quarter. I did well in the class.

The students did not only see their perceived lack of academic ability as an issue but also felt that they had not been adequately prepared for college by their secondary school experience. Many of the students described their White classmates as having exposure to more things in high school therefore entering college better prepared. The students in my study were describing a lack of cultural capital (Oldfield, 2007). Although they did not use this term, the students were aware that their White classmates had an advantage that was not necessarily due to being smarter. However, the students did recognize that their White classmates had an advantage in the preparation of how to use their abilities. The students I interviewed were first-generation students who did not come from an environment that prepared them for navigating the college terrain. The students were aware that for some reason they were "behind the eight ball" upon entering college. Mindi expressed this idea of not feeling prepared for college, as if she felt her high school had failed in preparing her academically and mentally for college.

> *Going back, I don't think it really prepared me for school.....I was like I went to school and I wasn't prepared for it. It's intimidating like to be in the class because you have these kids who come from these grade schools and all their parents are doctors and such. So they know everything.*

Shyani describes her high school as having a reputation as an academically solid school,

> *The school I came from is supposed to be one of the best schools in my state…but compared to these 3.7/3.8 people, it's not that much.*

Despite her solid high school GPA, she realized something was deficient in her

preparation compared to her classmates that was not based solely on grades. Joshua also

perceives a difference between his college preparation and that of his White classmates.

> *You can clearly tell there's a discrepancy in terms of education from high schools, in terms of like the education system, in like from an urban city to a suburban city. I thought I wasn't as prepared for college as some people were.*

Monique recognizes that her classmates have backgrounds that have prepared them not

only academically but also prepared them in how to apply their abilities.

> *My classmates are able to articulate well. They come from backgrounds that have prepared them for it.*

The students are each doing well academically and many are feeling as if they are now

able to compete with their second- and third-generation White classmates. Mindi

understands that she can do well but cannot depend just on her abilities.

> *I have to work hard to learn, and it was really hard to learn to study.*

Monique found that for her, school was no longer just about earning a grade but

discovered that through learning she could grow and change.

> *I don't think I was ever that excited about a class in high school… it changed the way I think, changed the way I thought and I think helped me to be a lot more motivated. I feel like when I do accomplish stuff, it's like real. It's like I'm blown away when I like do well on something because I feel like I deserved it.*

She deserves it. That statement demonstrates that at some point these students were

finally able to embrace their intelligence and abilities. Although they still battle with

doubt they have reached a point of recognizing that, like their White classmates, they

have a legitimate right to be in college and to expect to do well. These students are not

just persisting but are successfully making the grade in college. I think it is necessary to

state that although these students did not enter college with the same opportunities as

their White classmates, their backgrounds appear to have taught them how to survive and

develop effective strategies for adapting to new environments. Although these students have learned how to be successful academically, they continue to struggle with finding and owning who they are.

Who Am I?

The second theme to be explored is that which describes the students struggle with finding and owning their voice and sense of identity. Throughout each of the interviews a common thread was evident. The students described feeling as if they wore disguises that camouflaged their true identity. This mask was not always worn intentionally but seemed to be placed on them by the dominant culture on campus as means of maintaining the status quo. It is in this environment that students describe feeling invisible as they move among their White counterparts in class, residence halls and other social functions on campus. Shyani, one of the students I spoke with summed up the feeling of invisibility with this quote,

> *I was so sick of people walking by me like I wasn't there, so I was tired of being overlooked and ignored that I shouted, hey!*

She felt that in order to be acknowledged she had to take drastic measures. Her friend suggested in the future Shyani should ignore those who ignore her. Shyani felt that this was unfair that she should not accept being overlooked. Her friend's comments suggested to her that she should accept her role as the "invisible Black woman." Dorothy describes a similar situation, in which her presence is intentionally disregarded by classmates.

> *In my first BIO lab, I sat down and there were three other Caucasian girls. I sat down and they all got up and moved to another table. I just sat there and I almost wanted to cry.*

It is apparent that Dorothy and Shyani were hurt by the actions of their classmates. These experiences left both of these students questioning if they matter as a person or are they

expected to learn to accept being part of the background. This absence of presence has also been experienced by Mindi.

You can speak, they don't speak. They just walk by you.

These young ladies found themselves puzzled by the perceived insensitivity of their White classmates. These students were attempting to be active participants in class settings, residence halls and social settings but were blatantly ignored. They became a non-entity. As a result of feeling invisible, the students often chose not to speak in class or were hesitant to share their ideas, questions or opinions in class discussions. The students' decision to silence themselves in class is a result of feeling that their voices are not legitimate. Their resistance to owning their voice has also been attributed to the students' fear of perpetuating stereotypes of African Americans.

As a Black person on campus, the students are aware of the misperceptions that some members of the dominant culture may have of them. The White classmates who may have limited interactions with Blacks have developed their perceptions based on what they have learned from the media or their own culture. The Black students have been raised to be aware of the stereotypes, discrimination and prejudices held about and against African Americans in the United States. The students, in this study, were all from inner city areas, most also economically impoverished communities. They often felt that not only being Black but also their backgrounds made them prone to be stereotyped. Shyani demonstrates the idea of perpetuating stereotypes in the following quotes,

> *I'm having all these conflicts, like for example the way I speak seems to be stereotypical… I wrote a poem based on Hurricane Katrina and Kanye's reaction to President Bush's reaction to Hurricane Katrina. The first thing I heard was, 'your poem is very stereotypical.' Not only did they see everything in this poem as stereotypical but they can't even bring any real constructive criticism about it. I felt bad because it's like everything I do is a stereotype. It's been difficult trying to figure out where I begin and these stereotypes end.*

Her comments illustrate a struggle with being able to be seen as Shyani and not just an image of a Black person created in someone's mind. Other students reiterate this fear of being perceived as a stereotype yet at the same time feeling a need to be a representative of African Americans. Dorothy states,

> *So sometimes you feel the urge, like you have to represent every Black person because they ask you questions like you represent every Black person. I feel like I can't like sit back and relax. I have to be alert and I have to pay attention and I have to answer questions because if I don't, they're going to think all Black people are stupid.*

Monique shares that she often feels like she has to be aware of her race because of how others might perceive her language or actions as stereotypical. This comment solidifies her experience,

> *I wish at times that I went to an HBCU…I feel like I need to be around Black people. I have to always be conscious of it…It's like you have to filter certain things from your vocabulary, from your body language, from the way you talk, whereas if I were in a Black community I wouldn't have to do that…I felt like any time race came up in class…I felt uncomfortable. Because I always felt like anything that was said about Black people, I was the stereotype.*

Although these students feel pressure to personify Blacks in a positive light, they also feel as if their instructors and classmates fail to see the Black students as distinct individuals. The students acknowledge that as a race there are some shared experiences but we do not all look alike and are not homogenous. Mindi shares her frustration with being seen as one undistinguishable group,

> *Sometimes… you're singled out and asked to speak for your race. Like when you have a White professor teaching about Black culture.*

It is clear that these students perceive that they bear the burden of trying to alleviate the negative images White classmates might hold about African Americans. The students in my study felt so obligated to be representatives of their ethnicity that they felt inhibited from expressing their own individual personalities. These students described

their existence as needing to be on guard at all times as not to accidently perpetrate a stereotype. It was as if these students wore masks that were socially acceptable to the dominant White culture of the college campus. This idea of having to prove that a person deserves equality despite the color of the person's skin seems a bit foreign in the twenty-first century. However it appears that these students continue to feel the sting of racism and White privilege on their college campuses. Mindi sheds light on her experience with racism in the following quote:

> *One of the comments* [in-class discussion by a White classmate] *was if Black people don't work, then they shouldn't get help here or something like that. So that made a lot of people angry. Last year or the year before when things were being renovated, someone broke in, and they wrote like, Niggers, all types of things, pigs.*

These experiences challenge the students' sense of personhood. One reason that their White classmates may ignore their presence and their voices is due to a lack of awareness of what is to be a minority on the campus as well as benefiting from White privilege. Minority students' perception is that their White classmates do not understand that there are other ways of being. The lack of awareness of what it is to be a minority is another form of disregarding the value of a person. For example Joshua shares an experience he had in a feminist psychology class in which he was one of two males and the only African American in the class. He states that for the duration of the course he functioned outside of his comfort zone because he did not have personal knowledge of what is was to be a woman. His frustration stemmed from an assignment in which his White female classmates had to function outside of their comfort zones. The assignment required students to interview an African American woman over the age of 30 about being a Black and if she experienced any of the following complexes: Jezebel, Mamie, Sapphire or Biracial. His classmates were upset by this assignment because they knew

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no person who met the criteria and questioned the integrity of the assignment. The White

students in the class found this assignment difficult. Joshua was frustrated by his

classmates' opposition to the assignment because he had felt uncomfortable with most of

the assignments.

> *I don't know if it's me personally, me as a Black student, me as a Black male, but I felt that was pretty much slighted in the class because I've been uncomfortable for the past eight weeks, but they've been uncomfortable for a day and it's okay.*

Joshua is irritated because his classmates are ignorant to his experience in this class as a

Black person and a male. He felt that their reaction to the assignment was confirming that

only White experiences are relevant and that there is no reason to learn about other

cultures. In essence you (Blacks) are not relevant.

Shyani provides a slightly different view of the idea of White privilege. She

shares about a visit to her White roommate's home over spring break in which she and

her roommate were watching television with the roommate's mother. The scenario on the

television program is one in which a Black woman is speaking; this is the exchange

between the roommate and the mother in the presence of Shyani:

> *Yeah she does sound kind of White…yeah she sounds White.*

Shyani wonders if they are assuming she sounds White because of her ability to be

articulate.

> *I'm thinking… she sounds White because she was pronouncing her words? So I'm thinking so does that mean that being Black means slurring your words together, using slang.*

Like Joshua, Shyani is being provided a not-so-subtle message that there is a perception

of Blacks as being inferior to Whites. Monique's experience is not based on receiving a

message from Whites about her inferiority; instead it appears to be an internalized

message she has taught herself. She gives the impression that she is ashamed of who she is; it is as if she is uncomfortable in her own skin.

> *I …feel like being a first-generation is not really something I want to announce or tell people because it's just…a negative, something negative comes to mind. I think it comes with being Black. If they knew I was from an urban area and if they know about my family history…that only adds to people's perception of me. I don't want people to see me from the lens, being poor, being from the ghetto. I don't want to be seen as this…person who… from 'homeless to Harvard.' I felt college would be a way for me to change my identity.*

These students' experiences with Whites in college and prior to college appear to have left them feeling that who they are is not adequate.

It is apparent that these students struggle with feelings of inadequacy on their college campus. This sense of being nullified by Whites on campus has led to students at times choosing to remain silent in class instead of risk being disregarded or viewed as a stereotype. Some students also shared that they choose not to be vocal in class because of a sense of being less articulate than their White classmates. Dorothy describes that she is uncomfortable talking in class and needs time to process but is aware of the message this might be sending to Whites. She states about speaking in class,

> *So if I do it, it's like, she doesn't get it. I'm not saying that everybody thinks this but some people like here, they come up and they ask you questions; they ask other people questions because this is like their first experience with Black people, so anything they see is automatically what they think about you. So I want it to be like because I don't understand Black kids have a harder time in class or feel an added stress to understand. I feel bad when I don't understand.*

Shyani refrains from speaking because she feels less articulate than her classmates,

> *Then I hear the way they speak in class and they're so articulate, they can express themselves, they're really in-depth with whatever we happen to talk about. It's like can I match that? There are some things I just don't want to say because I know it won't come out right; it won't sound as articulate or intelligent so I just don't say anything.*

These young ladies have chosen to silence themselves in order not to perpetuate stereotypes. Their comments also allude to the belief that as Black students they lack something their White classmates possess. It is almost as if because I look and sound different, therefore I am inferior in some way. It would be sad if the story ended with the students continuing to see themselves as less than their White classmates because they do not hail from backgrounds of affluence and privilege. Instead a new chapter gives way to these students reclaiming their voices and recognizing that they have value simply because they exist. Mindi takes us on a journey in which she has come full circle.

> *People try to intimidate you…They tend to try to make you feel inferior. Like I don't tend to speak up in class. I'm starting to speak more in class.*

Mindi demonstrates how she initially felt intimidated by others but realized she has an equal right to engage in her education. Monique's experience is the most interesting because she has expressed a sense of personal shame about her background but also recognizes how her background has given her strength.

> *It makes me like proud of myself because I've overcome obstacles that I've had to deal with…I didn't come with that foundation…but I've reached the same point as they.*

In this quote she acknowledges that she entered college with cultural deficits but was able to prevail in the long run. Monique shared a story that really epitomizes the intricacies of the theme of "*Who am I?*" She expressed some concern about her grade in a class to the instructor, and in response she received what she described as a nasty email from the instructor. Initially she was going to ignore the email but decided to consult the Provost and Dean of Students for advice on how she should handle the situation. Both administrators deemed the email inappropriate and encouraged her to address the issue of the email's inappropriateness with the instructor. Monique's value as a person was

validated by these two individuals and made her feel that she mattered. The best way to conclude the discussion of the exploration of the students' struggle to acknowledge their identity is a quote by Monique.

> *And I think after that situation I felt like I had a voice in that I did matter on campus and they cared enough about me to do something about my situation.*

Although these students are intelligent and confident individuals, they were able to sense an unspoken rule that as African American students on a predominantly White college campus, they were not equal to their White classmates. But as these students experienced various trials and triumphs, they began to own their voice and see it as valid despite the unspoken rule.

Can't Stop Now

Despite the obvious strengths possessed by these students, the third theme that appeared strongly in each story was that of being resilient. This theme epitomizes the focus of this project, which was to better understand what motivates these students to persist in college despite the obstacles they encounter. The sheer determination of these students was evident. The students simply refused to quit even though they doubted their abilities at times. It was as if a force greater than self was pushing them to persist at all cost. This theme explores their motivation for continuing to pursue a college education. The students saw college as the key to a future with more opportunities.

> *The only way I'm going to get a good job to live the life that I want is getting an education. That's what keeps me motivated. Just knowing what I want.*

This quote supports the students' perception that college opens doors and in order to go through those doors one must have a dream. Monique not only sees college as the key to

her future but also understands that the path will be challenging. She is motivated for the journey.

> *I think knowing that I have this future goal of wanting to graduate from college and finding my dream job. I'm going to get there one day and so it's like, no it's hard now and I really don't want to study…I don't this, I don't that but it will all be worth it in the long run.*

The road is difficult and plagued with doubts but the benefits definitely outweigh the costs. These students see their opportunity to go to college as being denied to others in their lives. They understand the obligation to persevere, despite struggling. Many of them feel as if others have discounted them due to their background and the color of their skin, but they display that "never give up" attitude. The students set a goal to earn a college degree and regardless of the obstacles and challenges in reaching the goal, they will persist until the goal is obtained. This is evidence of real moxie.

Monique expressed that the journey is difficult at times. Other students like her used their doubt as a motivator to persist in college. For example, Mindi wanted to quit but found a way to push herself.

> *There have been times where I just want to leave this place and I hated it but its like well, you can do it. Keep on going. You can stick to it; you can do it.*

Mindi shares that she overcomes the obstacles by considering the alternative if she does not complete college. She sees her future as limited without an education.

> *My hometown is a sad town. There is nothing there for African Americans. I don't want to be that person that goes back to my hometown and is stuck there.*

Her thought is reiterated by others. No matter how difficult college is, quitting would make life that much more difficult. Shyani, although not certain of what she wants for her future, does not want to go home and feel trapped.

I don't have anything else to do. There is nothing else to really look forward to. What else am I going to do if I drop out? Go home, go to work? Work where? What kind of job am I supposed to get back home?

Like Mindi and Shyani, Monique does not see returning home without an education as a viable option.

I can't give up because what else am I going to do? Go back to my hometown? I'm like, I've just got to ride it out because I can't go back home.

These students did not enter college with the same advantages as their White counterparts, but they have come to value their education and are not willing to accept failure as an option. The following quotes all show that bold proclamation, "claiming what is rightfully yours":

I haven't really thought about it and I choose not to think about it because I don't…like there's no way I can fail and even if my parents did go to college and they got Ph.D.'s, there is no way I'm going to fail. I put …what they instilled, this motivation, into me. I was going to get my degree. I was probably going to go to graduate school, get a professional degree.

Joshua shares that failure was not a realistic choice for him. Although his parents did not have college educations, they instilled in him and his brother that nothing less would be acceptable. His parents had clear expectations for their children, that their sons would each earn a college degree. Joshua also possesses an intrinsic motivation to persist in college. When asked what motivated him, his response was:

I would just say self-motivation. If you don't have it, it's pretty much a loss. So it's really hard to keep motivated here and to not just say ok, I'm going to transfer. If you find where you belong and you find what you need to do, then you stay.

Like Joshua, Dorothy has an intrinsic motivation as well as a desire to be an inspiration to others to pursue college. As the oldest sibling and the first to go to college in her family, she is motivated to graduate to set an example for her younger sister. Dorothy, like some of the other students, did not always feel like college was the place for her but in time

realized she had a right to be in college and wants her sister to understand that she too has

a right to a college education.

> *I'm still going and I want to finish so that my sister….knows that she can do the same thing.*

Dorothy describes her willingness to ignore the distractions and naysayers as being

attributed to her religious faith. She views her God as her source of strength and guide.

She lists faith as her number one motivation for persisting in college.

> *I think like first is my faith, like I believe that no matter how hard this stuff is, God is going to bring me out…*

Like her, Monique is also motivated by her religious faith. She states that her faith

provides her with purpose and direction for life.

> *I would definitely say that my faith…I feel like I'm motivated to and ready to go and just to forget about all the crazy things…I'm here with a purpose. I have a mission and I have a plan for my life.*

In addition to internal desire, faith, and family, the students were motivated by their own

sense of accomplishment and obligation. Dorothy articulates that she wants to pursue

graduate education and as she continues to persist she sees her goals as achievable.

> *I'm not dropping out because I did this much already. I want to get a doctorate. I want Dr. in front of my name, so as long as it takes for me that's what I'm trying to get.*

Dorothy continues to demonstrate being motivated by her sense of accomplishment.

> *I'm in college. I've been here for two years already, so when I actually think about it like that, it makes me feel good.*

Some of the students were not motivated by the desire to achieve but simply a refusal to

quit. Shyani, who unlike the other students in the study, did not express a desire to go on

for more education or to inspire others to achieve; she just refused not to finish her

education.

> *I might as well finish it and be done with it. I've gotten this far.*

Shyani has shared that in her life she has learned to just deal with whatever life deals you.

This survival attitude is evident in the following quote:

I'm just used to hanging in there and getting through it.

College has not been the first challenge she has faced and it will not be the last as she takes it in stride.

I am amazed that in spite of feeling unintelligent, academically unprepared for college, and insignificant, these students were brazen enough to deny failure as an option. Regardless of the reasons they were motivated to continue, they genuinely believed that an education was as much their right as it was others. And if they failed to graduate from college then they would be ignoring their obligation and denying an opportunity to provide themselves with advantages in life.

Dorothy exemplifies this perception of an obligation to finish.

I guess…I have a couple of things counting against me…my success, so I need to take advantage of every opportunity that I get because they won't come as often or as easy as for somebody who doesn't have all these things (references obstacles).

The Right Fit

The college experience is not just about grades and graduation but also discovering a sense of community. The idea of feeling a sense of belonging is tightly interwoven with the students finding their sense of identity. Many of the same ideas that arose as they spoke of defining self also played a part in finding a place to belong on campus. The fourth theme explores how the students developed a sense of belonging on their college campus. Although each student ultimately found a niche on campus, many shared how arduous the process was to find that niche. The students initially saw entering college as providing the opportunity to connect with and learn about others as

well as to form lifelong relationships. Those initial perceptions were not quickly realized which often led to the students feeling like square pegs in a world meant for circles. The question that was raised by these experiences was "Where do I belong?"

Going off to college can be a time of excitement and anticipation of what the future holds. Many students begin their college journey with the hopes of meeting lifelong friends and connecting with others. The students all shared how they hoped college would be this place in which diversity was celebrated and folks were interested in developing relationships with depth. However their dreams were not the reality they found on campus. Joshua was excited by the marketing materials that portrayed a diverse campus.

> *Coming here, I'm thinking there's going to be a bunch of diversity because that's what the school sells…. But then when I came here, there was only about 40 (maybe 30) African American students out of a population of about 1,200-1,300, so you really feel like a "fly in buttermilk" as my dad always says because you notice yourself on campus.*

His comment is indicative of how the students' perceptions of college were drastically different from their first experience on their college campus. Like Joshua, Monique also had a "fly in the buttermilk" experience coming to college.

> *I think initially when I got to college I was so like race conscious. I'm like all these White people, and I was not…. It's so like noticeable like being the only Black student in my class.*

Dorothy became aware of her skin color upon entering college, but to some extent it was a positive experience for her because in high school she did not feel as if she was accepted by her Black peers.

> *I never really felt like I was Black until I came here because when I was home I went to a mostly Black school but the kids there, I wasn't like them…Some of them would even say, like they don't like me because I try to act White or I talk White… I always felt like I was on the outside.*

This experience was not unique to her as many of the students expressed that in pursuing academics they were often ostracized by their Black classmates in high school and even some family members. The desire to achieve academically was viewed as attempting to be White. Monique resonates with Dorothy's feelings of not fitting in at home or school.

> *I have a difficult time going back home because I always felt separated, especially when I got into high school…I knew I wanted to go to college and my friends… most of them dropped out or either went to a trade school. So I kind of just like strayed away and lost connection… It's so different because I don't feel a sense of connection with my community.*

But like many of these students college became an opportunity to be accepted by other Blacks since there were so few on campus. Both Dorothy and Monique described feeling not "Black enough" in high school because they excelled academically or participated in activities that were not deemed "cool." These young women were teased by their Black high school classmates and even their families for acting "White." Their opponents perceived their academic achievements as denying their identity as a Black person and assimilating to the values of the dominant White culture. This was a source of frustration for these students. Even though racial difference was a reason students felt as if they did not belong, those differences also became a source of strength in finding a sense of belonging on campus.

Although race was one reason for feeling out of place, other students attributed cultural differences for not feeling as if they fit in on campus. These students came from urban areas that were plagued with many socioeconomic issues. Despite coming from educational and family systems that exposed them to limited experiences, the students did not view these as barriers for building relationships. The cultural difference between the students in this study and their White classmates became evident to the students. The students felt that they did not belong and could not relate to their White classmates.

Monique is able to capture that feeling of cultural differences in her comment about how she experienced discomfort as a result of cultural differences.

> *I was just like I don't fit in; I don't belong here; I can't connect with these people because they come from a totally different world than me. I felt disadvantaged to most students here. They were superior to me and so that kind of added to the discomfort.*
> *I can't connect with these people because they come from a totally different world than me.*

In addition to race and culture some students felt alienated because their motivations for friendships were not shared by all students. Shyani had a strong desire to really get to know her classmates beyond the classroom. Instead she found that her motivation for relationships in college was not shared by those she met.

> *My level of connection is beyond academic. I don't want to know people just so I can ask them about homework. I want actual friends, people I can rely on to be there for me when I need them. It seems really hard to get to know students here.*

This was one of her reasons for going off to college. She was not surprised that the depth of relationship she was seeking was not found with White students but was taken aback when she found her relationships with other Black students lacked depth as well. In the following quote she sums up her disappointment well:

> *Honestly, it hasn't been that deep with them (Blacks) either.*

The desire for strong social connections is something that many students seek in college. My participants have found it challenging to achieve especially on a predominantly White campus. The students see that a barrier to connecting with their White classmates is due to the White classmates' fear of or lack of interaction with Blacks or belief in Black stereotypes. The students are keenly aware that something is going on that prevents them from developing non-superficial relationships.

> *I feel like they don't know how to act around me….you get other people and they're like really timid, like they don't want to talk to you, like they're afraid of*

you. Sometimes I feel like why should I hang around them more?... because we're usually all together, I wonder what they think, if they think that's why they can't talk to me.
I have a Caucasian roommate and it was like she would hang out with me in the room but outside of the room it was not okay.
Nobody (White students) would ever sit right next to me.
People here don't seem very keen on getting too close to you. They seem scared. It's like practically none of the people in my class talk or associate with me outside of class unless they really, really, really, need help with an assignment.

These quotes express the frustration these Black students feel regarding the difficulty of trying to integrate on predominantly White campuses. There appears to be an unwritten rule that interactions should be limited. Is fear the reason for the barriers or are stereotypes to blame? Both Shyani and Joshua shared that they are very conscious that White students often form opinions of Black students based on stereotypes perpetuated in popular culture mediums. Joshua shares that because he is from a large metropolitan city, White students often have a certain perception of him that is dispelled once they have spent some time getting to know him.

Being from a big city people think of you differently, like they expect you to be a certain way but when I'm not, they tend to accept it.

Unlike Joshua, Shyani has not found that more interaction with White students has allowed her to shed the stereotypes of Blacks.

It feels like everything I do or everything I associate with is a stereotype. If I try to stay outside that stereotype, then that's a stereotype. What am I supposed to do?

Shyani is not a solo voice in her experience with being stereotyped. For example, in a study conducted by Fries-Britt and Turner (2001), African American students expressed that their White classmates had the audacity to stereotype African Americans. This sense of being belittled was echoed by students in Negga, Applewhite and Livingston's study exploring African American students at PWIs (2007). Many Black students feel that if they speak, dress or act in a certain manner, it will be perceived as stereotypical which

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hinders them in being free to be themselves. This frustration often leads Black students

to feel invisible on campus and invalidated. Mindi does bring to light the issue of feeling

invisible.

> *Sometime people treat you like you're not there. You can have a class with them… you may have a lab group, know them; they know you, and once the class is done, they don't acknowledge your existence.*

Mindi's comments are similar to those of other students in this study in that they are for

whatever reason made to feel out of place on campus among their White classmates.

Not only are they not made to feel welcomed by some of their White classmates but are

often seen as indistinguishable. At times, a student in this study was mistaken as another

Black student, the old adage that we all look alike. Mindi discusses an incident when she

was mistaken by a White student for another Black student. She shared that the only thing

the two shared in physical characteristics were their gender and being plus size. The two

women had different skin tones, shapes, hair styles and clothing styles. Mindi felt

invalidated by this experience. It left her feeling as if in the eyes of that White student,

Mindi was not important enough to be a distinct individual.

> *They confuse us all (Black students) which I think is weird because we can learn their names.*

Although the students struggle with finding a sense of belonging on their predominantly

White campus, they are not deterred and demonstrate a resiliency that allows them to find

a niche on campus that is theirs. Many of the students found a haven by joining ethnic-

oriented student organizations. This provided them a place in which they could be

themselves and not have to be on guard or decode unwritten rules of behavior and social

interactions. The students did not only seek sanctuary in ethnic-oriented student groups

but also in student organizations that appealed to their interests. The following students'

quotes illustrate how they made their own place on campus instead of waiting to be invited to a place.

> *…I've established my network of friends. I feel like I have my little bubble of people.*
> *…I joined an ethnic student group as soon as I got here.*
> *…When I first came here, the first thing I did was make Black friends.*
> *…I was in the multicultural student organization. I did a service learning program. I was doing mentoring programs for orientation… sang in an a cappella group, wrote for the newspaper and am on student government.*

These students could have allowed their struggles to establish relationships and connections with others to defeat them, to transfer to another school, or retreat into their own world; instead they saw themselves as having a role in changing the community. The students became architects of a new campus community. Mindi says it best in the following quote:

> *I'm an RA… I have a part in building the community.*

Her ideals are repeated by Dorothy regarding her motivation for persisting in an environment that does not provide a ready-made place for Black students.

> *I'm trying to like make a difference before I leave.*

Joshua exemplifies the idea that motivates him and his fellow students to persist in belonging to and becoming a part of their campus community.

> *I would say just self-motivation…It's really hard to keep motivated here and not just say OK, I'm going to transfer because it's too hard or the campus is too small. It's a lot of things that make people want to leave but then if you find where you belong and you find what you need to do, then you stay.*

These students continue to demonstrate their tenacious spirits by facing challenges directly. In trying to find a place to belong on campus many sought out organizations for ethnic students and other Black students to have a base in which to retreat. But they did not allow their comfort zone to be limited to being with other

Blacks; instead they dared to forge new paths to become part of the campus community. Although they realize that others will view them through lenses of stereotypes, fear and ignorance, that will not tether them down to a presence only among other Blacks. Through their actions these students are communicating to their campus that they are an active part of the campus community.

My Support

Not one of us can exist in this world alone without some form of help from another person. Students entering college are in need of various types of support, such as financial, emotional and academic support. The fifth theme explores the assistance and essential support needed by these students. Many of them chose to come to their college because they were offered a generous financial aid package that would almost eliminate the stress of financing a college education. Shyani shares that the financial aid package she was offered made her choice of school easy; she also felt as if they were sincere in wanting her to come.

> *They offered me the best financial aid package and gave me most of my, practically all of my funding was paid for; I had to pay nothing, and they only gave me one loan… It was easier to communicate with them; they worked with me when things went wrong, I don't know, it was like they really made an effort to keep in contact with me, but at the same time, they weren't bugging me.*

Although the financial assistance was appreciated by the students they longed for emotional support to help them navigate this new terrain. Their need for support was connected to feeling a sense of belonging. As discussed in the fourth theme, the students struggled to find their place on campus which suggests that feeling supported was equally challenging. Many of the students sought out other Black students as their source of

support. Both Mindi and Monique, respectively, shared how they made connections with other Black students in order to create a support network.

> *The majority of my friends are Black. It's kind of creating our own Black community. It could be a bad thing, it could be a good thing, but it's kind of like that.*
> *I think I connect more with Black students on campus for the most part.*

The students found some solace amongst other Black students on campus but still did not feel fully supported because their fellow students could only provide a limited amount of support. The students wanted mentoring and guidance by those that were wiser and more seasoned in life. Monique describes that she has support both from home and on campus but needs more intentional assistance from faculty, staff and administrators.

> *Having my church family and friends, I know I have them…OK I'm not alone here; other people are struggling as well. I do think we have a lot of support, but need people who we can talk to and be real and get advice…so we can be successful. I think having mentors would help.*

Mindi agrees with Monique in that their college should make a serious effort to employ more faculty of different races, not just Black. This might help students to make better connections. Mindi shared a negative experience she had with an instructor that she attributed to race and felt like with a more diverse faculty, students would have minimal racial experience with an instructor.

> *If they see a professor of color in their field, they'll probably talk to that professor and that professor would try and help them, give them tips and stuff, and so they'll be more likely to stay.*

It is obvious that these students have recognized that support is directly correlated with them staying in college. Despite the challenges to identifying support systems, the students do acknowledge that on campus there are those who are making a real effort to support them. Monique and Mindi each speak of the faculty as making an effort to help

students regardless of color. Monique is candid in her support of the campus and faculty in lieu of her experiences.

> *I definitely feel that because it is a small college and that really helps too, it's at that level of family, the close knit relationships that you have with students, staff and faculty.*
> *I feel like I know a considerable amount of my professors. I feel like I'm connected to them.*

Joshua shares that he has a White male faculty member in his major that has been instrumental in supporting him academically.

> *He's been trying to help me out with finding internships for next year.*

Mindi, as a science major, shares the challenges of being one of a few Black students in her area of study. She had a lot to say about one of her professors who has gone above and beyond her expectations in helping with her course work, connecting with campus and feeling that she is important. It was her relationship with Dr. Math that made her realize that it is okay to ask for help and sometimes help cannot be given if it is not asked for. So when a person thinks that he or she does not have support, it may be because the person has not let his or her needs be known. Mindi was struggling in a class and had no idea how to get back on track.

> *I had to go to the prof. and talk… sometimes I have a tutor. Luckily, I had Dr. Math who helped me out and got me tutors and stuff. I don't think I would have made it this far or done this good if it weren't for Dr. Math.*

Like Monique and Joshua, Mindi learned that the faculty want to help their students.

> *Professors have definitely been a support…I can talk to them, and they'll talk to me… and help me.*

Dorothy has also found the faculty to be a reliable source of support if only you let it be known that you need help. She was having a problem in a class and decided to ask her

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instructor for assistance in how to improve her grade. The professor's response reminded Dorothy that help is there for anyone who asks for it.

> *I forgot about how much other people are willing to help me. I talked to the teacher and the teacher got me a tutor. We ended up creating groups in the class to where people like had study groups. My grade like went from a C to an A.*

These students initially perceived their only sources of support were from family, friends and other Black students. But being forced to survive in a new environment they learned that support was accessible from many sources. As first-generation students, there was additional support available to them simply to deal with the concerns of being the first member of their immediate families to attend college. Many of them shared that they liked the support groups for first-generation students. The support offered to first-generation students shows that the college wants students to succeed. Dorothy and Joshua both commented on how the first-generation student programs were beneficial to them acclimating to the college environment.

> *I like the group that we have for the older first-generation students and the younger first-generation students to get together.*
> *I think the first-gen is really a good thing…I think the first-gen program that they have here, they have a lot of people here to support you as a first-gen student. They are really trying to push for first-gen students to actually succeed.*

Each of the aforementioned themes has exposed the struggles and victories students have had in their college experience and yet with each new encounter they continue to acquire new knowledge and skills to assist them in persisting. The students acknowledge that their college has done significant things to provide them with financial, emotional and academic support. However, the campus still has room to improve in making their campus a hospitable place for minorities. Mindi, in her sage-like way, summarizes the support that exists and the support that is still needed to insure success for all students.

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I think the school has to be real good about giving resources. The school is getting better at getting more resources for minorities.

Mindi's quote was a good representation of how these students felt about the campus' efforts to be inclusive. The last question asked of the students was what would you tell the faculty and administration of the school about better serving first-generation, African American students? The students felt the school made strides in the right direction but much of what still needs to be done is on the level of changing attitudes because programs can only be as effective as those who facilitate them. So support is imperative to success in college and it is the responsibility of the student and the institution to provide it in as many ways as possible.

Insurance for My Future

Students have many motivations for going to college, but the most common is that college will provide them with a better future. The sixth and last theme, insurance for my future, examines the role college plays in the students' planning and preparation for their futures. The students entered college with many expectations and hopes. Some are motivated to attend college to instill pride in their parents, others to secure a dream job, and some to open up doors to more advanced educational pursuits. These students view a college education as a key to a future of possibilities. This theme brings to the surface the expectations students have of a college education. These expectations promote persistence despite the many trials. College has taught each of these students many academic and life lessons. Joshua was excited to go to college to learn new things and he did just that.

I was able to learn about different aspects. I always wanted to take a political science class and now I'm taking it, to just experience different things.

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Monique learned how to be self-sufficient and take initiative to seek out what you want and need. She participated in a summer internship on the East coast in which she was responsible for securing her own housing, transportation and necessities. She was required to be proactive and assertive in insuring that her personal needs as well as her professional needs were met.

> *I took on a lot more independent roles… whereas with this internship experience I felt I kind of had to help them plan what I was there to do. I got to experience the high life. This was awesome.*

Like Monique, Dorothy sees her college experience as providing her with experiences that will make her interactions in the world after college more successful

> *I feel like its teaching me what the real…world. Sometimes I feel like the real world is NOT this hard, but if it's not, then it's going to be easier for me if I experience the roughness now.*

College was foreign to the students but these bright students quickly recognized that college is a tool that is essential to building a better future.

A substantial aspect of that better future is a job; not simply a job, but a career. The students want to work in the fields in which they have studied. By finding a career in which they are passionate the students will be able to make their voices heard in the world. Mindi wants a career in public health. By her attending a predominantly White college not only will she be prepared to work in public health but also to successfully navigate a predominantly White work environment.

> *I want to be able to get a job, get the things I want, live the type of life I want and not have to worry about anything else. I know the only way that I'm going to get that is by an education. I feel… with health management and public health, there are not many African Americans in that field… predominantly White institution, it would prepare me to know that not everyone is like me not everyone is going to understand where I'm coming from.*

Mindi is able to see the non-academic benefits of attending a predominantly White college. Her college experience has prepared her to find her place and function well in an environment in which people who look and sound like her are not the majority. Monique also perceives her college experience as preparing her to work in predominantly White environments.

> *I would say that it's preparing me to know how to behave in a predominantly White environment.*

Both Mindi and Monique remind me of the sentiment that through adversity one can gain the skills to be successful.

These students are using their challenges to leverage for successful futures. These students are very clear about their goals and that determination is a source of motivation.

> *That keeps me motivated. Just knowing what I want.*

Mindi's quote demonstrates the determination these students possess regarding their success. Since some of the students come from cities and neighborhoods in which career opportunities are limited, they want a means to escape a bleak future. They view a college degree as offering an alternative to that bleak future. Monique definitely saw college as a means to escape the conditions that plague many in her hometown.

> *That's what I have to do in order to get away from my hometown. I mean that's not the only reason why I went to college…but it was my escape…to get out.*

Joshua also attributes a college education as his ticket to the world. He sees that education as not guaranteeing a job but that it does assure more depth in his prospects for employment.

> *This is the perfect time to get your education so that when you get out, you'll have a better chance of getting a job… I knew I did not want to stay home.*

Several of these students also desire to pursue graduate education and understand that in order to achieve that goal they must persist and graduate. Joshua, Dorothy and Mindi each shared that they wanted to earn a doctorate degree in their respective fields. Some of the students wish to work in other countries, a dream inspired by the chance they were given in college to study abroad. Shyani is motivated to persist in college because she wants to be able to gain experience in the work world to help her determine her direction for graduate education.

> *I want some work experience first to see what I actually want to do and then I'll pursue grad school.*

These students perceive their college degrees as an insurance policy that guarantees them a certain amount of security in their futures. By persisting in college and using the experiences they have had in college as motivation they are aware that their futures are more promising then had they quit because the challenges in college were too difficult.

Summary of Findings

The findings in this study examine how first-generation, African American students make meaning of their college experience and the relationship between their interpretation of those meanings and their persistence. Section one consisted of demographic descriptions of the participants. These descriptions also included the researcher's perception of the participants' personality. The personality description was relevant because it provided an additional lens by which to understand the students' perceptions. Section one described the five participants who participated in the study. It was interesting that each of them came from large urban cities with a significant African American population. There was only one male in the study. Each of these students had a

unique personality which may have influenced how he or she made meaning out of his or her experiences therefore shaping his or her responses to the interview questions. The uniqueness of each student became evident in the exploration of the emerging themes described in section two.

Provided in section two is the description of the results of the phenomenological data analysis of the most prevalent themes that emerged from the stories of the five participants. There were six themes that emerged across each of the five interviews. These six themes are described and supported by student responses to interview questions. The themes were not one dimensional and so the various dimensions of the themes became part of the descriptions. The six themes were as follows: *Am I an Academic Imposter?, Who Am I?, Can't Stop Now, The Right Fit, My Support* and *Insurance for My Future.*

Summary of Themes

In section two of this chapter, the first theme explores the students' feeling of being imposters regarding their academic ability and achievements. The students in the study each graduated high school with GPAs above a 3.0 and have maintained a good academic standing in college. Each of the five students attends a predominantly White liberal arts college; they were admitted without conditions because they met, and in some cases exceeded, the minimum admission requirements. The college in which the students are enrolled has high academic standards. This suggests that these students' academic abilities are not that of an imposter. Initially, the students struggled to accept their academic ability but they now acknowledge that they are not acting as imposters by attending college, especially a private school with rigid selection requirements.

The second theme that emerged was one that examines the students' attempt to develop an identity. The students entered college with an idea of who they were based on the perception of family, friends and high school teachers. This idea was challenged by their college experiences. For some the experience was frustrating because it left them feeling lost and invalidated at times. The experience also provided some with clarity of who they are.

Through exploring the third theme it became clear the resiliency possessed by these five students. The question was simply asked why do they persist in this college environment that is not always hospitable. The students share that many times they wanted to transfer to another school or to quit. They refused to be defeated by their challenges and environment because they had invested so much and proven that they had the ability to succeed. The students spoke of feeling like they had to be the ambassadors for the Black community. Instead of wearing that role as a burden, they chose to use it to change the perceptions of Blacks and to achieve their goals. These students demonstrated that persistence is the product and resiliency is the process to make the product.

The fourth theme is a natural progression from the second theme in that it probed the students' sense of belonging to the campus community. It is human nature to want to belong, to know our place in life. For these students that place was being defined by White students and faculty. The students perceived that the place reserved for them was one in the background. These students did not like being relegated to the background and fought for a prominent place in the community. It also solidified for them their identity as African Americans. Three of the students shared that in their communities of origin they were perceived as not "Black enough" because they had traits that were associated with White culture. Once these students entered a predominantly White college, those White

traits were not recognized and for the first time they were perceived only as Black. This was both a positive and a negative experience for the students. It was positive in that it gave them a sense of belonging among the Black students on campus but a negative because it ignored aspects of who they were. The students created a place for themselves on campus and became focused on making the college community more inclusive.

In order to carve a place for themselves on their predominantly White campus, the students recognized the need for support. In the fifth theme, my support, the students guided me along their journey of learning to recognize the need for help and to identify the many forms of assistance that presented itself. The initial support sought and received by the students was financial which allowed them to pursue a college education. However, the students were prompt in realizing that more than money was needed to survive in college. The sense of alienation described in some of the aforementioned themes left the students feeling that their world was absent of adequate emotional support. Although they had support from their families, they needed a consistent source of emotional support to deal with the day-to-day experiences on campus. Many of the students found support in other Black students. However, a source of support that seemed to surprise the students was from the White faculty. These students began to take risks and ask for assistance from their faculty regarding coursework and found that the faculty were not only willing to help them be successful academically, but also wanted to support them in being successful in life. The lesson that the students learned was that help is available if you ask and are willing to accept it.

The last theme explores the source of the students' motivation for pursuing a college education. The students viewed college as an insurance policy for a better future.

Most of these students left hometowns that did not offer much hope. College became a means by which to gain access to opportunities denied them if they remained at home. In listening to the stories of why students came to college it was clear that on some level they knew it would pose challenges but were willing to take the risk. Even though the students expressed, in the first two themes, that they felt as if they did not belong in college for a variety of reasons, as they persisted in their pursuit of a college education, it became clear that they had a right to a college education. These students realized that they were intelligent and began to value their future. It was this change in perception that cemented their willingness to insure their futures by persisting in college and even dreaming beyond a baccalaureate degree.

It is apparent the six themes that emerged are interconnected. These themes are not independent of one another but are interdependent. This interdependence exists because how the students make meaning of one experience will influence their response to future experiences. Our sense of identity, belonging and support are intertwined. For example, if a person feels a sense of community and support, he or she can develop a positive sense of self. This is the basic premise of humanism. An individual with a positive sense of self is more confident in his or her abilities, therefore, would be less likely to minimize his or her intellectual ability. By overcoming the obstacles set forth in the first five themes, the students proved to themselves that they can and are persisting in college and that they will be able to cash in on the insurance benefits of a college education.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This phenomenological study used semi-structured interviews to explore how first-generation, African American students made meaning of their college experiences and how these meanings influenced their persistence at a predominantly White liberal arts college. Chapter one introduces the issue of retention and persistence of first-generation, African American students in institutions of higher education. Although there is literature that identifies some of the reasons African American students do not succeed in college, there is not an abundance of research that focuses on African American students who are succeeding. African American students continue to enter college in increasing numbers but are not graduating at the same rate as their White counterparts. Chapter two explores the literature on the college experiences of African American and first-generation students as well as the cognitive theoretical approaches that attempt to describe how students assign meanings to their experiences. Chapter three provides a description of and a rationale for using phenomenology as the method of study. This chapter also describes the study's participants. The data was collected using individual semi-structured interviews. I used the interview transcripts to identify the common themes among the stories of the participants. A discussion of the themes and their relationship to the literature is the focus of chapter four. Chapter five contains a summary of the findings, a discussion of the key findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for further research and conclusion of the study.

Overview of the Findings

     I began this study because I sought to understand, from the students' perspective, why they chose to persist in the pursuit of a goal that was wrought with obstacles. I was equally interested in how they made meaning of their college experiences. By seeking to explore these questions, the findings of this study were able to add depth to the discussion of the meaning first-generation, African American students make of their college experience and their interpretation of those meanings on the students' ability to persist in college.

     Individually the six themes identified in chapter four do not answer the research questions that focused this study but they do provide the foundation from which to understand the experiences of these students. The first theme which explored the students' perceptions of their academic ability revealed that despite their above average academic performances, they struggled to accept their intellectual ability. These students diminished the significance of their academic achievements, attributing their grades to hard work. I found it interesting that the students' described of their intellectual abilities as unequal to their White classmates' intellectual abilities. It appeared that because the students' experiences prior to college were different than their White classmates, the students devalued their academic experiences. These students also seemed to reject their academic ability because many had been given messages from their environment that good grades equated "acting White." This was not something that was sought after in their families or communities of origin. It was obvious that these students internalized several messages regarding their academic abilities, but as they persisted, those internalized messages were challenged and changed. The students were able to validate their own intellectual abilities.

The struggle to accept their academic skill was one aspect of their challenge to clearly own their individual identities. The second theme explores the labor of establishing an individual identity, including what it meant to be an individual, an African American, and to some extent a first-generation student. The most interesting premise that arose in exploring this theme was that many of the students were perceived as not being "Black enough" in their communities of origin, and as "too Black" in their college community. This dissonance created internal struggle for the students. They were also challenged by the idea of not being seen as a stereotype but being authentic. These students realized that their White classmates did not have to struggle with racial identity issues. The idea of being first-generation had some impact on their identity development but did not appear to be as significant as the effort to define their individual and racial identity. These students faced their identity challenge head on instead of allowing others to define their identities. The students invested in the process of clarifying what it meant to be them; this resulted in strengthening their persistence.

The first two themes address how the students made meaning of their experiences and how they interpreted these experiences. The third theme clearly spoke to the essence of this study which is the motivation to persist in college. The students openly reflected on why they continue to persist despite the challenges experienced in college. The students simply credited their persistence to the desire to achieve a goal not met by others in their family or communities, first to earn a college degree. Although many of them had really not spent time considering the significance of being a first-generation student, they recognized that they were accomplishing something important. These students were determined to persevere because college offered more opportunities to improve the quality of their lives than did quitting because it was at times difficult. Throughout these

first three themes, it is evident that these students possess resiliency. The students in my study, like the Aborigines of Australia, have demonstrated a rare ability to adapt and thrive despite non-hospitable conditions. The students are focused on their goals and believe that they have the right and the capability to be college graduates.

In the first three themes, the students had to struggle with internalized messages of inadequacy. As they overcame those messages, they realized that their resiliency was not sufficient to push them to their goal. The students reflected that in their high schools and families they felt a sense of community which was missing upon entering college. The fourth theme delves into the students' process of finding their place on their college campus and establishing a sense of community. The students found community within student organizations and often with other African American students. One student shared that she realized it was her responsibility to create community and engage in the larger campus community. The building of community was a natural segue into the fifth theme of finding sources of support.

By leaving home the students felt they were losing their day-to-day support from family and friends. However, as they engaged in the college community they realized that help was provided to them if only they asked. The campus provided resources to assist with financial needs and academic needs. The most amazing source of support for students was the willingness of White faculty to assist them to successfully navigate the terrain of higher education. These students came from environments that had not adequately prepared them for the nuances of college and so were often at a loss as to how to succeed. Although they possessed a desire to succeed, they lacked some basic skills in how to succeed. By being open to accepting assistance from non-traditional sources, the students fortified their success.

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As in the third theme, which examines the essences of the students' persistence, the sixth theme substantiates their motivation for persisting. The students viewed a college degree as the key to a future that afforded diversity in their options for life. The sixth theme explored the idea of college being an insurance policy to protect the students' prospects for a better life. They took full advantage of their college experience as an opportunity to transform who they were. The students' perceptions of themselves began to change and they realized that they had options and were not regulated simply to accept what was given to them by others but that they could decide the course for their lives. It was apparent that a relationship existed between how these students made meaning of their college experiences and their persistence.

The students' interpretation of their college experiences had a significant influence on their persistence at a PWI. The students through their various experiences found their voices and claimed their right to earn a college education despite the doubt often cast by their White counterparts. In the brief synopsis of the six themes identified in this study, the evolution of these five students was laid out. The students began this journey uncertain of their identity as college students and as individuals but as the study concluded the students demonstrated their resiliency, perseverance, self-efficacy and a sense of hope.

Discussion

The six themes identified in chapter four provide a foundation for gaining insight into how these students understand their experiences; the themes also echoed what has been found in the literature about first-generation and African American students. In addition to similarities to current research findings, this study identifies some information

about first-generation, African American students that differed from literature reviewed in chapter two of this study. The findings of this study also address the three research questions that guided this study. The first question examines how first-generation, African American students experienced college. An appropriate word to describe the experiences of the students in this study is challenging. The challenges were personal as well as institutionally attributed.

Personally the students struggled with forming their own individual identity. Before entering college the students had accepted identities assigned to them by others. This also occurred initially once arriving on campus. During college the students found themselves questioning their individual identities as well as the legitimacy of their ethnic identity, their right to attend the PWI, the right to dream of a better life and their academic ability. These personal trials were magnified by the daily challenges of dealing with discrimination, stereotyping and questioning by the campus community at-large. The students spoke of being ostracized by their White classmates and at times having their cultural and individual needs ignored by the campus community. Although their college experience was based on challenges, each of them entered college with expectations of friends, opportunity and learning. The challenges they experienced did not fit their expectations. This dissonance between their expectations and actual experiences could have led them to give up on their dreams; instead they demonstrated a resolve to realize their college hopes.

Their determination led them to the process of making meaning of their experiences. The countless challenges faced by the students appeared to contribute to the resiliency the students unknowingly brought to college with them. In order to move past their personal self-doubts, the students were forced to begin to answer the question "Who

am I?" The students were able to find their voice. No longer did they allow someone else to define their personhood. Although each student was still shaping his or her identity, the important point is that the students were doing the shaping and no longer relying on family, friends or an institution to define their voice. The students, through their experiences, learned to trust and believe in their academic abilities. Each of them found a definition of what it was to be Black, to be college-educated, and to find a sense of belonging. It was as if they found their unique identity. This also led to each of them developing a sense of adventure and a boldness to engage in their campus community and find a niche. The students no longer see their place as in the shadows on the campus but are willing to take center stage. The students have learned to validate self and communicate to others how to respect and appreciate them as individuals and as a collective group. In essence these students interpreted their college experiences as a means of learning about themselves and how to be in a world in which they were the minority but not of less value. The students expected college to provide growth opportunities and it did. These students took their struggles and used them to blossom.

The third question that guides this study focused on the impact of the interaction of race and generational status on their college experiences. The students did not perceive their status as first-generation students to be as significant to their experiences as they did their race. The students attributed their challenges adapting to college to being African American. However, many of the adaption issues were common for first-generation students. For example, they lacked a working knowledge of financial aid, how to approach faculty, or a solid grasp of the culture of higher education. Although some of the challenges attributed to being first-generation parallel those of being an African American student, some experiences were distinctly ascribed to race. These students

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came from communities that reflected their cultural values. Upon entering a PWI these students lacked an intimate understanding of White culture. Although they live in a country in which the dominate culture is White, these students lived their daily lives in African American families and communities that taught them to be cautious of Whites. The students had to find a means to compensate for the deficits created by their status as first-generation and African American. Although they did not necessarily recognize an interaction between their generational status and race it was evident that the interaction had a notable impact on their college experiences. As stated earlier in this chapter, individually the six themes do not answer the research questions that directed this study. However, collectively the themes do provide support to the information found about first-generation and African American students in the literature.

Comparisons to the Literature

The relationship between the findings of this study and the literature on first-generation and African American students were examined for similarities and differences. As the students discussed their experiences, it became apparent to me that the meanings they placed on their college experiences shaped their perception of self and college. The students addressed issues of identity, sense of belonging, academic preparedness, race and generational status. It was these issues that were relevant to the literature on first-generation and African American students. The remainder of the discussion section will address the similarities and uniqueness of the findings of this study with the reviewed literature.

Colleges and universities have tended to use cognitive variables such as GPA and test scores as predictors for academic success. Even though cognitive variables have

been shown to be appropriate predictors of college success, there is research that suggests non-cognitive variables may have equal impact on college success. The findings of this study support the research that indicates that cognitive variables are not the sole predictor of academic success in college. The idea that quantitative measures could forecast a student's individual potential for academic success has been challenged prior to this study. Both Astin (1984) and Tinto (1987) argued that academic success is more likely when there is both a physical and a psychological investment from the student in his or her college experience. The students' integration in the campus community was equally if not more important than grades and test scores. Rodgers and Summers (2008) suggested that it is not simply a student's involvement in the institution but the student's perception of his or her relationship to the institution. The findings of this study augment the depth of the literature regarding the concept that student's perception of his or her college experience is directly linked to the student's persistence in college. This study contributes to the literature by examining how meaning is made of the college experience and the persistence of first-generation, African American students especially those attending predominantly White liberal arts colleges using the stories of the students and not a quantitative measurement.

Over the past 50 years there has been an increase in the number of African Americans pursuing a college education. However, the increase has not necessarily lead to African Americans earning college degrees at an equal rate as their White counterparts (Harvey, Harvey & King, 2004). In trying to understand why there is a discrepancy in the graduation rates, educational research has explored many possible reasons. Much of the research on the experience of African Americans has been focused on those who have not persisted and the research does not provide a comprehensive examination of all African

American students. Therefore in my research I chose to interview students who were not at risk for dropping out of school or being dismissed. These students demonstrated significant evidence that graduation was an expected outcome. These students were in good academic standing and expressed a desire to persist until graduation. Although these students may not become part of the statistics for those not persisting, their experience at predominantly White institutions echoed what has been found in other studies.

In Harvey, Harvey and King's (2004) study students who attended PWIs often felt that with fewer numbers of African Americans on campus their perspective may not be reflected in the campus culture. Similarly, the students in my study often expressed that they felt as if they did not fit in their college community or that in classes their perspective was not represented or validated. The students became frustrated with feeling as if they had to prove they had a right to be in college. Shyani, a student in my study, captured this frustration in her comment about always feeling like she had to be on guard when in the presence of White students or faculty. The students describe a sense of not being able to be authentic in all situations but needing to have several personas depending on the audience.

The one place many of the students felt accepted and validated was among other Black students. This resulted in them joining student organizations that were oriented to Black culture. This idea of forming relationships with other Blacks was echoed in Fries-Britt and Turner's (2001) study exploring why African American students at PWIs often felt isolated from the primary campus community. During interactions with other Black students, the students the in study did not feel as if they were being stereotyped whereas they did feel as if they were being stereotyped when interacting with White students (2001). A student in my study shared that a Black student was seen as sounding White

simply because she was articulate which suggested to the student that her White classmates assumed that Blacks did not have a solid grasp on the English language. The students I interviewed shared many examples of how they felt stereotyped by White students and faculty. The following themes, identified in chapter four, encapsulate the experience of not belonging or lacking adequate representation in the campus decision making process: *Who am I?, The Right Fit,* and *My Support.* In these three themes the students shared their feelings of not belonging on campus or struggling to find support outside of other Blacks to find their way and a lack of self-identity.

A significant aspect to the experience of African American students at PWI institutions is finding support to assist them in navigating the college terrain. The students in my study communicated that there was not an abundance of faculty, staff and administrators that reflected their culture. When asked about something their schools could do to better serve first-generation, African American students, their response was to hire more diverse faculty and staff. The students longed for positive role models that looked like them and could understand their experience. Two studies found that African American students at HBCU schools perceived a stronger sense of support and an increase in self-confidence because they were in an environment that consisted of Black faculty and staff (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Latiker, 2003). Students at HBCUs were able to see doctoral level faculty and administrators that looked like them and who have had similar experiences as the students. The students in my study shared that they had not had a Black faculty member in their tenure at the PWI. The fact these students had not had the opportunity to be mentored by Black faculty or be part of a community that was culturally diverse, may have impeded the students' development of positive sense of self and validity of their cultural heritage.

Despite the lack of a strong Black presence on their campus, these students were able to find support in White faculty and the few Black staff and administrators who made it a point to reach out to the African American students. The ideal would be for these students to have entered college on a campus that would nurture and provide for their needs in a healthy manner. Instead these students were able to find a means by which to meet their needs. Negga, Applewhite and Livingston (2007) found in their study that regardless of the type of institution a student attends, if the student feels supported and develops effective coping skills, he or she is more likely to persist. The students that I interviewed provided evidence for Negga, Applewhite and Livingston's findings. The source of support was not just from faculty but also from other students in the form of student organizations that were ethnically focused. Littleton (2001) also found that students perception that faculty were supportive had a positive influence on persistence of African American students. According to Littleton, African American students on PWI campuses joined and participated in Black student groups as a means of being affirmed (2002). The students in my study also share that they joined Black student groups in order to have a community in which they felt accepted and appreciated. On their campus there are two student programs, one organized primarily by White students and the other by Black students. The program sponsored by the Black students is open to all students but the White students view it as something for Blacks only. The two programs developed because the Black students did not feel as if they had equal input in the program sponsored by primarily White students so they formed their own. This idea of having a place of their own appears to have developed as a necessity to have a distinct platform for their voice and to provide a safe space. It is evident that African American

students, especially those that are first-generation have some unique experiences with equally unique ways of managing their experiences in order to persist in college.

The experiences a student has in college plays an important role in shaping the student's perception of his or her experiences. The students in my study shared that despite the challenges of attending a predominantly White liberal arts college, the fact that they were able to find support and make connections assisted them in persisting. These students were able to discover strengths and a sense of self-confidence. Sedlacek (1987) confirms that support is influential to the success of African Americans in college. Sedlacek identified eight variables that influence the success of an African American student in college. The more of the variables a student possesses the greater the likelihood the student will experience success in college. The eight variables were observed in the experience of the students in my study. The variable that African American students had the most difficulty with was realistic appraisal. Realistic appraisal consists of the student's ability to gauge his or her progress in growth areas (1987). The students in my study reported that at times they were not certain of the quality of their academic performance because instructors would often only provide negative feedback. The students did not have experience in developing skills to identify areas of growth and observing the growth. However, despite the challenges in realistic appraisal, some of the students were able to identify that study skills were inadequate and sought assistance in developing those areas. Dorothy was one in particular who struggled with a biology course and met with her professor to discuss effective note taking and study skills. She applied the advice her professor shared and found that she improved her grades and understanding of the course material. Her progress was not instantaneous but she was able to see incremental changes.

In contrast to Dorothy's experience, Shyani shared that she often felt as if her comments in class or papers were misunderstood by her professors and White classmates. This led her to question her fit in college. In essence Shyani's doubt in her abilities is not a unique interpretation. It is common among African American students to minimize their intelligence because their experiences are not represented in the classroom. Sedlacek (1987) attributes this to White faculty lacking understanding and validation of the African American students' experiences therefore evaluating the African American students using the White experience as the norm. This is an example of how cultural and ethnic experiences can shape how individuals gain knowledge. Although the students in my study may not have experienced overt racism in the classroom the veiled stereotyping of them by White faculty and classmates creates an environment in which African American students perceive as unsafe. This idea of indirect or cloaked racism contributes to the reduction in retention among African American students attending PWIs (Love, 1993). This idea of being excluded extends beyond the classroom for many African American students attending PWIs. The students I interviewed each shared that they found solace by joining student organizations that focused on their ethnicity because they felt other student organizations did not address their needs, culture or interests. Love reiterates that students are less likely to be retained because of the perception that extracurricular activities on campus are not inclusive for non-White students. The concept that a student's perception will influence his or her persistence in school is discussed significantly in the literature regarding African American students and first-generation students. Bui (2002), Dorsey and Jackson (1995), Littleton (2001), Love (1993), Naumann, Bandalos, and Gutkin (2003), and Rowser (1997) all found that if students perceived the college environment to be supportive, the student was more likely

to persist and if the environment is perceived as unsupportive students were less likely to persist. This was found in the five students that I interviewed as each eventually identified sources of support at the PWI they attended and therefore were able to overcome the obstacles whether perceived or real to persist toward their goal of earning a college degree.

This study focused on the experiences of first-generation, African American students attending a PWI. Although I was interested in the experiences of first-generation, African American students, the students in my study had not given much thought to what it meant to be a first-generation student or how their generational status impacted their college experience. Instead their awareness appeared to be on the impact of their race/ethnicity in regards to their college experience.Despite their lack of awareness of the impact of the interaction of race and generational status on their college experience, their stories reiterated the findings in the literature on first-generation and African American students. Although my study concentrated on first-generation, African American students as an individual population, the literature indicated that many of the predictors of persistence for African American students paralleled those for first-generation students.

Dorsey and Jackson (1995) conducted a study of African American students and some first-generation students. They found that students persisted if they felt satisfaction in their relationships with the faculty and in their academics. The students in my study reported that as they developed relationships with faculty members in their majors it became easier to ask for help and to feel as if they had support. Dorothy and Joshua found faculty members that also became mentors. These faculty members were instrumental in helping them gain more confidence in their academic abilities. Each of

the five students began to see their grades improve the longer they remained in college which motivated them to continue pursuing their college education.

In addition to satisfaction with relationships and academics, Love suggested that financial support was significant for both first-generation and African American students in regards to persisting in college (1993). Other variables found by Love to impact the persistence of African American and first-generation students were support of institution, academic preparation, self-image and locus of control. In Love's study, it was concluded that if a student perceived that any of the aforementioned variables were absent or lacking the student was less likely to persist in college. The students in my study also indicated that financial support was important. Most of the students in my study shared that one of the reasons they chose to attend their college was the financial assistance the university offered. Shyani shared that the she attended this college only because it provided a larger financial aid package than her first-choice institution. The students were aware that their parents could not afford to fund their college plans so the need for financial assistance that would not result in significant debt after graduation was important.

In addition to financial support, Richardson and Skinner (1992) found that first-generation, African American students in particular were concerned about academic preparedness and fear of failure. One of the themes revealed in my study addressed the students' perception of being academic imposters, suggesting that they did not possess the intellectual ability to be in college. This perception of limited intellectual aptitude was created a fear that they would not succeed. The students in my study attributed their perceived lack of academic fortitude to their comparison of themselves with their White classmates, who were primarily second-generation students. This is important because in Zalaquett's (1999) study it was found that first-generation students have a higher

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likelihood of being members of an ethnic minority. As first-generation, these students did not benefit from having parents who were college educated and are employed in jobs that require advanced education. The students in my study recognized that their experiences and lifestyles were drastically different from their White classmates. These students began to measure their abilities by standards set for second-generation White students. Because the students were using an inadequate measurement, it is clear how they came to the conclusion they were not academically prepared. Although the findings in my study regarding students' perception of their academic ability are similar to the research, it is also where the findings of my study show differences from the established research.

Contrasts to the Literature

Despite their initial perception of not having the academic proficiency to be successful in college, the students in my study soon realized their perception was incorrect and that they did possess talent equal to their White classmates. Historically, GPA and ACT scores have been the tool by which college success was predicted. It was assumed that first-generation and ethnic minority students enter college with lower GPAs and ACT scores in comparison to other students (Bui, 2002; Naumann, Bandalos & Gutkin, 2003; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Zalaquett, 1999). However, in my study the five students all graduated high school with honors and many had taken honors course work in high school. Each was enrolled in courses that were considered college preparatory. The students each more than met the minimum requirements for admissions in the midwestern liberal arts college being attended by these students. Although the literature suggests that first-generation students, as well as ethnic minority students, tend

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to achieve less than other students, Zalaquett's (1999) study found that the difference between first-generation and second-generation students GPAs were not substantial.

In addition to grades and ACT scores, Bui (2002) found that family support was significant to persistence for first-generation students. However in my study, at least four of the students shared that although their families saw college as a positive step, their families would be equally satisfied if the students just got jobs after high school. Joshua, the only male in my study, was the one student who stated that education, especially a college education, was expected of the children in his family despite his parents' lack of a college education. Dorothy shared that her family viewed her pursuit of a college education as denying her ethnic identity and as adopting the values of Whites. Though some of the students in my study report not having strong family support in regards to their college education, each of them saw college as a means of providing a better future for them and demonstrating to others in their families, especially younger siblings, an alternative to the status quo. Bui (2002), Richardson and Skinner (1992) found that many first-generation, African American students pursued a college education as a means of improving the financial and social status of their families.

The findings of my research both support and challenge the findings of the literature reviewed in chapter two. However what makes my research unique is that the findings are based on the perspective of the students. By using a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore my research questions, I was able to bring a voice and real person perspective to the quantitative studies of first-generation and African American students. This study provides a face for the data through the students' stories. The research findings suggest that we are improving our understanding of first-generation, African American students. Unlike many of the studies that look at first-

generation students or African America students exclusively, my study looked at the

experiences of first-generation, African American students to glean if this group of

students had challenges that were unique to them. It is apparent from my findings that

some of the experiences of these students are similar but their perceptions of their

experiences and their motivation for persisting are not one and the same. Even though

this study makes a noteworthy contribution to the body of research on first-generation,

African American students' college experiences and persistence, it also leads to more

questions and new areas to investigate. This study provides a platform for the voices of

first-generation, African American students to be heard by those conducting research in

this area. This is important because so often it is the interpretation of the researchers that

is found in the literature. I think it is of the utmost importance to learn about these

students from the students in order to insure accuracy of understanding. The more

accurate the understanding, the more effective colleges and universities can become at

serving all students well.

<center>Limitations of the Study</center>

The focus of this phenomenological qualitative study is on how first-generation,

African American students make meaning of their college experience and the influence of

that meaning on their persistence at a predominantly White liberal arts college. In this

section I consider the limitations to this study.

Because of the nature of a phenomenological qualitative research approach, the

ability to generalize the experiences of first-generation, African American students is

limited. It is also important to note that the intention of a qualitative study is not to

generalize the information discovered. This study included five participants who fit a

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selective participation criterion. Originally, I planned to interview 6-12 students; however, after several attempts to find participants, I settled on interviews with five students. The smaller number of participants may have limited my ability to identify other themes and redundancy in the students' stories. The participants in the study are from only one school; the experiences of these students may be unique to the college environment and not typical of first-generation, African American students at other predominantly White liberal arts colleges. In my search to identify students that met the selective participation criterion, I was able to identify first-year, first-generation, African American students but it became a challenge to identify first-generation, African American students with sophomore, junior or senior status. Due to this challenge, I interviewed students from the only school in which I could identify students that met the selective participation criterion. Albeit, in a qualitative study the number of participants does not diminish the importance of the findings; it is imperative to note, however, that because of the number of participants in the study and the lack of other schools being represented, the study may be limited in the ability to be descriptive of the experiences of first-generation, African American students. Of the five participants, four were females and one was male. This indicates that more variability was needed in order to examine if sex or gender influences how a student experiences college and makes meaning of that experience. Originally, the focus of the study was the persistence of first-generation, African American students who held junior or senior status. The challenge to identify students that met the criteria resulted in my revisiting the criteria to include sophomores as well. It is my belief that the longer a student is in school, the more opportunity he or she has had to demonstrate persistence. By interviewing four sophomores and one junior, the depth of understanding persistence was limited.

As the researcher in this phenomenological qualitative study, I was the sole interviewer and coder of the data. In addition to being the only interviewer and data coder, I am also a first-generation, African American student. Because I was the only one interacting with the data, it was imperative that I monitor my biases throughout the interviews with the participants, and the coding and the analysis of the data. Some of the steps I took to establish trustworthiness were identified in chapter three. They included continuous bracketing of my experiences as a first-generation, African American student. I also utilized a colleague to serve as a reader to help me identify alternative interpretations of the findings. While I employed several strategies to prevent my biases from unduly shaping the outcome of the study, I could have unintentionally influenced the process and findings of the study.

Recommendations

After reviewing the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations for future research and practical applications come to mind. The focus of this study is on the experience of first-generation, African American students and how they make meaning of these experiences. To gain more insight into first-generation students it is recommended that future research initiatives include participants from more geographically diverse liberal arts colleges. It is also recommended that in order to understand the complexity of persistence among first-generation, African American students, future studies include participants with junior and senior status. This recommendation is made because of the challenge I had in finding first-generation, African American students that were junior and senior status. That challenge caused me to question if these students were not persisting in high rates beyond the sophomore year.

A study that includes more juniors and seniors may assist in uncovering if there are factors that limit persistence of these students beyond the sophomore year.

The findings of this study also brought into question the significance of attending a PWI on the experiences of the students. Future endeavors should explore the impact of the type of institution on the experiences of the students, such as HBCUs and/or public universities. By exploring the experiences and persistence of this student population at other types of colleges and universities, it will allow the opportunity to investigate if the type of institution is significant to the experiences and persistence of first-generation, African American students.

The exploration of the experiences of first-generation, African American students was beneficial in gaining an understanding of first-generation students. In order to learn more about the experiences of first-generation students, it is recommended that future research compare and contrast the experiences of first-generation students across ethnic/racial cultural groups. Some other cultural groups to consider are Latino, Asian-American, Native American, Arabic American, and White. The investigation of the experiences and persistence of other first-generation, ethnic student populations will allow for a better understanding of the similarities and differences between first-generation students of different ethnicities. This information will enrich the body of literature on first-generation students. The more knowledge that can be added to the literature about the experiences of first-generation students and what influences their persistence, the better equipped institutions of higher education can be to effectively serve and educate this student population.

In addition to recommendations for future research studies, this study provides opportunities to suggest practical applications of the findings. The findings of this study

can be used to develop programs that better meet the needs and cultivate the persistence of first-generation, African American students who are successfully persisting at PWIs. Currently private liberal arts colleges are providing significant financial support to minority and first-generation students; however, the literature and the findings of this study have shown that these students are in need of more than financial assistance. It is essential for PWIs to recruit and retain ethnically diverse faculty, staff and administrators to be more reflective of the students they are recruiting. In addition to diversifying the employees, universities and colleges can develop mentoring programs that pair first-generation, African American students with a faculty/staff/administrator to provide support in learning to navigate the culture of higher education. In addition to mentors for students, colleges/universities can develop mentoring programs for faculty/staff/administration that assist them in being more effective in helping and understanding first-generation, African American students. At many PWIs the culture is not reflective of all the members of the campus communities. This is a necessity in order for all students to thrive in these environments. Mindi, a student in the study, stated that schools can make policy changes but the change needs to occur within the attitudes of the institutions and their constituents. This is a problem that has plagued not just PWIs but society in general. Although attitudes cannot be legislated, we can manage behaviors which can lead to changes in attitude.

Furthermore, recommendations based on the findings of this study are focused on cultivating persistence of first-generation, African American students. Although this study was not a study on retention, in order for students to persist, schools must successfully retain them. Therefore this study focused on students who entered college with strengths, but many programs for retention focus on the risks of students as opposed

to their strengths. It is my recommendation that universities and colleges develop retention programs that are based on students' strengths-based that challenge these students academically. The programs can also build upon the various experiences these students bring to college. The value of this research is that it provides a venue for institutions of higher learning to hear the needs of the students from the students' perspective.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of first-generation, African American students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college, how they make meaning of their college experiences, and the effect of those meanings on their persistence. The findings of this study reveal that the students in this study experienced an evolution in their perception of identity, intellect, sense of community, support and future goals. It was through their experiences that they became motivated to persist. As the students persisted in college, they began to develop confidence in their academic ability, their contribution to the campus community, their ability to ask for and receive support, and in their individual identity. These students demonstrated a resiliency that influenced their persistence but at the same time their persistence strengthened their internal resolve.

This study substantiated many of the findings of the quantitative research on first-generation and African American students reviewed in chapter two. The findings also challenged some ideas posed by researchers about this population. Instead of investigating students at-risk academically, this study examined the experiences of students who entered college demonstrating academic strengths. The students in this

study revealed that being a member of a particular ethnicity, socio-economic status or generational category does not determine success in college. The research findings of this phenomenological study was significant to the literature in that it presented the perspective of first-generation, African American students on what their challenges were attending a PWI and how they overcame those challenges in order to persist.

It is the responsibility of colleges and universities to prepare students to participate in the contemporary world. In order to meet that responsibility, institutions of higher education must have a sound understanding of the diversity of the students that enter these institutions and be prepared to teach and engage them on all levels of learning. By providing essential information about first-generation, African American students the findings of this study assist in meeting those obligations. These students, like all other students have a right to have their experiences validated. It is the responsibility of colleges and universities to develop standards of measuring students' abilities that are culturally inclusive.

CHAPTER VI

REFLECTIONS OF THE RESEARCHER

Experience Conducting Interviews

At the start of this research project, I was uncertain as to what to expect. Prior to this study my research experience and knowledge have been in the area of quantitative research in which finite data was analyzed. My first venture into qualitative research required more intimate engagement in the project. I was not only the sole instrument used to collect and analyze the data, but also I had to maintain some objectivity about a phenomenon with which I have personal experience. As I started this project my experience as a first-generation, African American student who had attended a PWI biased me toward what I would discover while conducting this research. I experienced several challenges during this project. During the interviews I found myself identifying with many of the experiences and emotions shared by the students. Listening to their stories made me reminiscent about my undergraduate experience at a PWI. However, I was not merely reminiscent but using my current knowledge as the lens through which I filtered my memories of my past experiences.

The interviews not only brought memories from my past experiences but as I listened to these five students describing their doubt about their academic ability or struggling to find their individual identity, I wanted a means by which I could allow them to see themselves through my eyes. I witnessed in each interview five uniquely individual people who were articulate, courageous, intelligent and gifted. But as the researcher, I was forced to contain the experiences and emotions I was having during this interview because I was not the focus. I was challenged by the struggle to be present with each

student during his or her respective interview and suppress yet validate my experiences as a participant in this interview. Although I was interested in hearing the stories of these students' experiences, I found myself feeling very protective of them as well. I too had experienced the invalidation and doubt which triggered me to assume a big sister role. It also angered me these students are dealing with many of the issues that I dealt with as a first-generation, African American student at a PWI.

As I conducted the interviews I felt joy, pride, anger, frustration, sadness and fear. The joy and pride were a result of how impressed I was by the awareness, openness and giftedness of the five participants. The reason for my feelings of anger, frustration and sadness was due to the fact that these students were made to doubt themselves and their abilities without just cause. The fear I felt were from the shadows of my past that still haunt me today. Almost twenty years have passed since I completed my baccalaureate degree and still I question my academic abilities and my legitimacy as a member of the academy.

Conducting the interviews proved more challenging than I had expected. As a therapist, I have conducted numerous clinical interviews and facilitated an abundance of individual and group therapy sessions. In those experiences I found no difficulty in being present with the clients. However, during the interviews in this study I had to be intentional about my level of engagement and be diligent about maintaining my objectivity. I often wondered if I was too close still to the topic to justly present the stories of these students and the significance of the contribution of their experiences to the literature.

Experience of Analyzing the Data

Although the interviews posed a challenge for me, I found reviewing the transcripts to be a task I enjoyed. Each time I read the transcripts of the interviews or listened to the tapes of the interviews, it was like re-reading a favorite book or re-watching a favorite movie. With each review I was able to see or hear something new that was not present in an earlier interaction with the information. The personality of each student was revealed more with each reading. As I read the transcripts, I was transported back to the interview. I could recall the sounds and the elements present in the interview room. It was easier for me to disassociate my personal experiences from the students' experiences while reading the transcripts or listening to the interview tapes. This was peculiar to me because I found it difficult to disconnect my experiences from the students in the live interview.

After each interview I took time to write down and reflect on how I experienced and what I experienced during the interview. I attribute this practice of debriefing as essential to my ability to focus solely on the students stories during the analysis of the transcripts and the process of coding the data and identifying the themes. As I continued to review the transcripts and my notes the themes began to take shape. In my initial draft of chapters four and five, I had given titles to each theme but as I revised those chapters I found titles that were more descriptive of the themes. Just as the students in this study went through an evolution, as the researcher I too, continue to change.

Overall Experience

Like me, the students in this study and others were labeled by academic research as being at-risk of achieving academically. We were identified as at-risk because we

were the first in our families to pursue higher education, from an ethnic minority, and of low socio-economic status. The primary motivation for this study was to demonstrate that we were so much more than statistics and that success can be influenced by statistics but the human factor should never be discounted or minimized in assessing success. Although these students did have risks they possessed strengths that had not been evaluated when predicting their success. This project provided me an opportunity to show that the strengths of five students outweighed their risks in determining their success. The stories of these students are unique to each of them but the essence of their stories is representative of many more students. This project provided me the opportunity to allow the voice of a student population that has been silent. The process of writing this dissertation and the experience has been transformative.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Email Letter to the Administrator Responsible for Multicultural Student Programming

Date:

Name:

Title:

Institution:

Dear Dr. /Mr. /Ms. _____;

(This research study has been approved by the HSIRB of Western Michigan University)

My name is Candy McCorkle, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI. I would like to request your assistance in finding volunteers to participate in my dissertation study on the experience of first-generation African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college. The study is a qualitative study consisting of 1-11/2 hour individual audio-taped interviews to be conducted on your campus in a public building selected by you.

I am enclosing an announcement calling for volunteers for the study. Please email this announcement to students or make available to students by posting on your campus. I would also like to address the student organization that represents the African American students on your campus in order to introduce myself and the purpose of my study. You may email with a date, time and location that I can meet with the African American student organization. Interested students can email me at the address listed on the announcement. Students will be notified via email of their selections status. Students who meet the criteria for the study will receive an invitation to participate in the study. Students who do not meet the criteria for the study will be notified via email and

instructed to contact your office if they wish to explore their interest in this research topic

further. Students who agree to participate will be asked to read and sign a consent form.

The consent form will explain the purpose of the study, the process of data collection and

the student's right to withdraw from the study at any time. A copy of the consent form is

attached to this email.

Please feel free to contact me if you have additional questions. I may be reached

by phone at (517) 750-6627 or via email at candym@arbor.edu.

Thank you for your assistance in completing my doctoral research.

Sincerely,

Candy McCorkle

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B

Call for Research Study Volunteers

CALLING Student VOLUNTEERS!

(This research study has been approved by the HSIRB of Western Michigan University)

Are you a first-generation, African American college student with a story to tell? I am ready to listen and make your voice heard.

My name is Candy McCorkle, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education & Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI. I am looking for student volunteers to participate in my dissertation study on the experiences of first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college. As a first-generation, African American student who attended a predominantly White university, I am interested in learning about other students' experiences.

This is an opportunity for our voices to be heard and our stories to become a prevalent throughout colleges and universities. By participating in this study you may assist predominantly White colleges and universities to better serve first-generation, African American students as well as to appreciate the richness of the experiences of all students. Study participants will be asked to participate in a 1-1 ½ hour in-person individual interview that will be audio-taped. I am looking for volunteers between 19-23 years of age, who self identify as African American, and the first person in your family to attend college. If interested in participating please email me at candym@arbor.edu .

Appendix C

Consent Form

Consent Form

(This research study has been approved by the HSIRB of Western Michigan University)

Western Michigan University
Department of: Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Principle Investigator: Donna Talbot, Ph.D.
Student Investigator: Candy McCorkle, MS

You have been invited to participate in a research project entitled "The Meaning of and Persistence of First-Generation, African American College Students Attending a Predominantly White Liberal Arts College". This research is intended to study how first-generation, African American students making meaning of their college experience and how that affects their persistence. This project is Candy McCorkle's dissertation project.

You will be asked to attend one 1-1 ½ hour private interview with Candy McCorkle. You will be asked to meet Candy McCorkle for this interview at _____. The interview will involve you responding to several questions regarding your college experiences in general and, more specifically your experience as a first- generation, African American student.

As in all research, there may be unforeseen risks to the participant. A potential risk of participation in this project is that you may be uncomfortable discussing personal issues in the interview. If this occurs, Candy McCorkle is prepared to provide crisis counseling should you become significantly distressed and she will be prepared to make a referral if you need further counseling about this topic. You will be responsible for the cost of the therapy if you choose to pursue it.

Despite the minimal risks associated with participation in this research study, one way in which you may benefit from participation in this study is having a chance to talk about your journey as a first-generation, African American college student and reflect on this experience. You may also be able to contribute to a better understanding of how first-generation, African American students attending Predominantly White Institutions make meaning out of their persistence. This may help college and universities to better serve this population.

All information collected from you is confidential. The interview will be tape-recorded. Before taping the interview you will be asked for your verbal permission to tape-record the interview and to select a pseudonym to be used in place of your real name on all printed documents. The use of a pseudonym is to maintain confidentiality. All printed papers will be coded, and Candy McCorkle will keep a separate master list with names of participants and the corresponding pseudonyms. Once the data are collected and analyzed, the master list will be destroyed. All other documents will be retained for at least three years in a locked file in the principal investigator's office. You may refuse to participate or quit at any time during the study without prejudice or penalty. If you have

any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact either, Candy McCorkle at (517) 750-6319 or Dr. Donna Talbot at (269) 387-5122 or the vice president for research at (269) 387-8298 with any concerns that you have.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is more than one year old.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and/or had explained to you the purpose and requirements of the study and that you agree to participate.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

Consent obtained by: _____   _____
                       Initials of Researcher   Date

Appendix D

Screening Questionnaire and Instructions

(This research study has been approved by the HSIRB of Western Michigan University)

Dear <u>(Student Name)</u>:

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Attached to this email is a questionnaire requesting demographic information. This information will be used to determine if you meet the criteria to participate in this study. Please complete the questionnaire and return it to me via email.

Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym, of your choice, on all printed documents. All printed copies of the questionnaire will be kept in a locked file in my office. Please note that email is not a 100% secure or confidential method of communication. However, all attempts will be taken to protect your identity and the confidentiality of the information you share.

Sincerely,

Candy McCorkle

Screening Questionnaire

(This research study has been approved by the HSIRB of Western Michigan University)

Name: Pseudonym:

Date:

<u>Please respond to all of the items on the questionnaire.</u>

For items 1-6 please check the appropriate box.

1. What is your class status?

    Freshman ☐   Sophomore ☐   Junior ☐   Senior ☐

2. What is your martial or partnered status?

    Single ☐   Married ☐   Partnered ☐   Divorced ☐   Widowed ☐

3. Do you self- identify as African American?

    Yes ☐   No ☐   Comments, if any:

4. What is your gender?

    Male ☐   Female ☐   Transgender ☐   Other ☐

5. Did either of your parents attend college?

    Mother: Yes ☐   No ☐

    Father: Yes ☐   No ☐

6. Did either of your parents complete a four-year college degree?

    Mother: Yes ☐   No ☐

    Father: Yes ☐   No ☐

<u>For items 7-9 please fill in the blank.</u>

7. How many years total have you attended this college?

8. What years have you attended (i.e. 2002-2006)?

9. What is your email address?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire and for your interest in this study. Please return this questionnaire within a week of the date this email was received.

Sincerely,

Candy McCorkle

candym@arbor.edu

Appendix E

Interview Schedule Email

(This research study has been approved by the HSIRB of Western Michigan University)

Congratulations! You have been invited to participate in the research study on the experiences of first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college. The following are available interview times and dates:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____ .

Please email me the date and time you have selected for your interview.

I ask that you email (candym@arbor.edu) your response to me within one week of the date the email was sent. In your response email please include the time and date you selected for your interview. If I do not hear from you within by this deadline, I will email you a reminder.

Thank you for your interest and willingness to participate in the study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Candy McCorkle

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix F

Email Reminder to Respond to Schedule the Interview

(This research study has been approved by the HSIRB of Western Michigan University)

Date:

Dear <u>(Student Name):</u>

      This is a reminder that I have not received a response regarding your scheduling a date and time to be interviewed for the study pertaining to the experiences of first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college. Please select one of the following dates and times for your interview:

      1. _____

      2. _____

      3. _____.

      If I do not receive a response from you within a week from the date of this email, I will assume that you are no longer interested in participating in the study. At that time, any information you have submitted at this point will be electronically destroyed and not used in the study.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Candy McCorkle

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix G

Email for Waitlisted Volunteers

(This research study has been approved by the HSIRB of Western Michigan University)

Date:

Dear <u>(Student Name)</u> :

      Thank you for your interest in participating in the study on the experiences of first-generation, African American college students attending a predominantly White liberal arts college. However, at this time, I have enough participants for the study. I will keep your information on file for three months in case one of the students withdraws from the study. If you do not hear from me within three months, this means your participation will not be needed for the study. I will electronically destroy any information that may identify you and that information will not be used in anyway.

      If you do not hear from me in the three month timeframe but would like to further pursue your interest in this issue, you may wish to contact an appropriate member of the professional staff of the office that manages multicultural student programming or the counseling services on your campus.

      Thank you for your interest in this study.

Sincerely,

Candy McCorkle

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix H

Email Notification of Not Meeting Participation Criteria

(This research study has been approved by the HSIRB of Western Michigan University)

Date:

Dear <u>(Student Name)</u>:

I appreciate your interest and willingness to participate in my study. Unfortunately, you do not meet the narrow criteria for participants to be eligible for inclusion in my study.

If you desire to further pursue your interest in this issue you may wish to contact an appropriate member of the professional staff of the office that manages multicultural student programming or the counseling services.

Sincerely,

Candy McCorkle

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix I

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

(This research study has been approved by the HSIRB of Western Michigan University)

Each interview will begin with the researcher greeting the participant and introductions.

The script will state: *Hello! I am Candy McCorkle a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Department at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI. You must be _____ (first name of scheduled interview participant)*

After greetings and introductions the researcher will say the following: *Thank you for your interest and willingness to participate in this study. Before we proceed please review and sign the consent form. If you have any questions regarding the purpose of this study and the interview process please feel free to ask me. I will give you a copy of the consent form as well. I do wish to remind you that your participation in this study is voluntary and you have the right to discontinue participation at anytime.*

(Pause)

After the consent form is signed, and the participant is given a copy of the consent form, the interview will begin. *Before I turn on the tape-recorder I will ask you to give me verbal permission to tape the interview and to state the pseudonym you would like to use in place of your real name.* (Pause) I will start the tape recorder once verbal permission is granted. Once the tape-recorder is on, the participant will be asked to: *Please state the following: I give permission to be recorded.* The participant will be given the bulleted prompts if he or she appears to be having difficulty understanding the questions. I will then proceed with the interview. It is important to note that each interview will not be identical because the interview will be directed by the responses and level of engagement

of the participant. However, the following questions will be addressed in each interview.

Additional questions may be included in the interviews. Since this is a qualitative study, the interview is to feel more like a conversation instead of a sterile information gathering session, this protocol is not a verbatim script but an outline that will guide the interview. Any questions asked that are not included in this outline will appear in the transcripts of each interview.

1. *Describe for me who you are and the community from which you come.*

    Possible probes for further information:

    •What is your neighborhood like?

    •Describe your high school to me.

2. *What expectations, if any, did you have about college?*

    Possible Probe:

    - *What shaped those expectations?*

    - *Were your expectations met?*

3. *Tell me about your college experience at this college?*

    Possible Probes:

    - *Why did you select this college?*

    - *What is it like to live on campus?*

    - *What are your classes like?*

    - *What are some negative experiences that were significant?*

    - *What are some positive experiences that were significant?*

4. *Are there other reasons that have affected your choice to remain in college?*

5. *Was there ever a time in your college career when you did not think you would succeed? Explain.*

    Potential Probes:

- *Was dropping out ever an option?*

- *If so how serious were you about leaving school?*

- *How did feel about leaving?*

6. *If you did doubt your ability to succeed what kept you going?*

7. *What does it mean to you to be the first in your family to attend college?*

8. *How important is graduation to you? Explain.*

9. *Have you ever thought about being an African American person on this campus?*

    Possible Probes:

- *Can you tell me more?*

- *What does it mean to you to be an African American college student?*

10. *Looking back at your college experiences, what has helped to keep you going?*

11. *After reflecting on your college experience what does this all mean to you?*

12. *How do interpret these experiences?*

13. *How has your perception of your experience contributed to your decision to continue pursuing your college education?*

14. *If you could talk to faculty and staff at predominantly White institutions what would you tell them about helping students like yourself?*

Before we conclude our interview is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experience? If the participant does not wish to add anything, conclude by stating: *Thank you for your time and sharing your story with me. I am very appreciative of the opportunity to have been invited into your world. I will be emailing you in the next 2-3 weeks a copy of the transcript of this interview for you to review and make any corrections or comments. I ask that you return the information within two weeks of receiving it. Again, thank you. Goodbye"*

Appendix J

Email Requesting Student Participant to Review and Return Transcript

Date:

Dear <u>(Student Name):</u>

Enclosed is a copy of the transcript from your interview. Please read the transcript and make comments or corrections as you see necessary in order for this to be accurate of your story. Please feel free to type your corrections on the transcript or include an attachment with your comments or concerns.

You will have two weeks from the date of this letter to review your transcript and return it to me. If I do not receive it within this time, I will send you a reminder email to return to the transcript. If you do no respond to that email reminder in the timeframe stated in the email, I will assume that you have no comments or corrections to the transcript and the information will be used as is.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Candy McCorkle

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix K

Email Reminder to Return Transcript

(This research study has been approved by the HSIRB of Western Michigan University)

Date:

Dear <u>(Student Name)</u>:

    I sent you a copy of your interview transcript approximately two weeks ago and have not received the transcript with your comments and/or corrections. I have attached a copy of your transcript to this email as well. Please return the corrected transcript within 5 days of the date of this email. If I do not receive the transcript within this time, I will assume there are no comments or corrections and the interview information will be used as is.

Sincerely,

Candy McCorkle

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix L

Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) Approval Letters

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Date: March 9, 2009

To: Donna Talbot, Principal Investigator
        Candy McCorkle, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 09-02-24

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "The Meaning of
and Persistence of First-Generation, African American College Students Attending a
Predominantly White Liberal Arts College" has been **approved** under the **expedited**
category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions
and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan
University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved.
You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also
seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In
addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events
associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project
and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: March 9, 2010

Date: Oct. 13, 2009

To: Donna Talbot, Principal Investigator
        Candy McCorkle, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 09-02-24

This letter will serve as confirmation that the change to your research project entitled "The Meaning of and Persistence of First-Generation, African-American College Students Attending a Predominantly White Liberal Arts College" requested in your memo dated Oct. 9, 2009 (expand recruitment efforts to Kalamazoo College and Alma College, pending approval from those institutions; modify consent document to reflect change in investigator contact information) has been approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

The conditions and the duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: March 9, 2010