Experiences of African American Female First Generation College Students

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EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

Ashley Green

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership, Research and Technology
Western Michigan University
May 2015

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EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Ashley Green, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2015

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of African American, female, first generation college students attending a large, predominantly White research university and to understand what motivates them. The major research question guiding this study was: How do African American, female, first generation college students (in good academic standing) describe their college experience? The researcher asked the participants to discuss their challenges, how they responded to challenges, sources of motivation, and factors that contributed to their success in college.

Through individual, face to face, interviews with 10 African American, female, FGC students attending a large research university, participants described their college transition, and experiences. They explained how their collegiate experiences were shaped by pre-college occurrences, self-identity, parental influence and involvement, challenges, and affiliations with campus and community organizations. Five themes emerged: College Preparation, Parental Influence and Involvement, Relationships, Challenges, and Important Resources.
Participants shared stories of high school high achievement, and their strong sense of self and confidence attributed to parental encouragement, self-motivation, and positive high school experiences. Additionally, for these students, engagement in campus organizations were significant resources contributing to their success and comfort at the institution. A notable finding was that although students were prepared academically from high school with a history of high achievement, they still struggled in college. Students had difficulty adjusting to a large campus, large class sizes, less professor interaction, and acknowledged that they needed to adjust their study habits. Unlike other studies focusing on African American students, attending a PWI was not mentioned as a significant factor in their experience and was not discussed in the context of their challenges. Finally, participants identified strong support networks, intrinsic motivation and self-identity as factors that contributed to their college persistence and success. Specifically, economic status and background, family support, self-confidence, and spirituality were their strongest sources of motivation.

This study contributes to the understanding of how African American, female, FGC students experience a large predominantly White university from their perspective and their strongest sources of motivation. Recommendations for future research include looking at a broader population of students who were not as academically successful. Students of all academic levels have experiences worth being explored and need a platform to share their stories. It is also important to understand their motivation for persisting in college despite lower academic achievement.
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Acknowledgments - Continued

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“God almighty has brought me. The love of family has uplifted me. The joy of friendship has encouraged me.” Thank you to everyone who supported me along the way!

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION
Overview of the Topic of Study

This study is examining the lived experiences of African American, female, first generation college students at a large, public, predominantly White university. There are some clear concerns associated with First Generation College (FGC) students and their lived experiences during college such as being underprepared and disadvantaged academically, financially, and socially (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle 2007; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Although there are previous studies on FGC students (Choy, 2001; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Ishitani, 2003), there is a lack of research on African American, female, first generation college students and their personal perspective. Therefore, this study aims to understand the lived experiences of African American, female, FGC students.

The term First Generation College students (FGC) can be defined as students who are the first in their family to attend college. FGC student has also been defined as, “students whose parents have either not attended college or completed a college degree” (Williams & Butler, 2010, p.1). Research has noted that because first generation college students are the first in their family to embark upon this new experience, many of these students are under-prepared, possess lower self-esteem, originate from lower socio-economic statuses (SES), and work while in college (Alessandria & Nelson, 2005; Vargas, 2004). They also tend to feel isolated and disconnected from their college peers.
who are not FGC students (Merullo, 2002). In addition, they have very little to no
support or guidance from their parents or peers (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Even if parents
are supportive and encouraging, they are still unable to offer the knowledge and wisdom
to help their student prepare because of their lack of awareness and experience with
college (Choy, 2001; Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002).

Research has also revealed that first generation college students are more likely
than non-first generation students to be older, have lower income and have dependents
(Chen & Carrol, 2005). First generation college students are also more likely to enroll in
college on a part-time basis, or choose a two year community college rather than a four
year college (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Compared to non-first
generation college students, FGC students are more likely to begin college in remedial
courses and attain credits and other applicable credentials at a lower rate (Chen &
Carroll, 2005; McMillan, 2004). Compared to their non-first generation peers, FGC
students are said to already be at a disadvantage emotionally, socially, racially,
academically, and financially (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, &
Terenzini, 2004).

It has been said that the pressure of participating in the college selection process
can be especially complicated for uneducated, low SES, Black parents who often see this
process as a challenge (Smith & Fleming, 2006). African American FGC students also
have less resources and a social network that does not consist of people that can
adequately assist and guide them academically or professionally (Pascarella, Pierson,
Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Parks-Yancy, 2012). “Families either do not give any
college or career advice or they encourage students to pursue pathways that are limited in scope” (Park-Yancy, 2012, p. 513).

**Background and Issues with First Generation College Students**

We know that many first generation college students are faced with socio-economic challenges, which has many implications on their college experience. Some of the implications of SES that I will discuss below are race and ethnicity, the need to work while in college, and reasons of program of study and major selections. Other FGC student issues that I will explore below include social integration, lack of encouragement, being under-prepared, and lack of guidance. I will also discuss background issues with African American students, African American students at a PWI, and African American female students.

**Socio-Economic Challenges**

There are several factors noted in the research that impact academic success among college students. Of these, socio-economic status has been particularly impactful, especially amongst FGC students. First generation college students often times come from a low socio economic status which has major implications for their success and feelings of belonging in college (Tinto, 2007). It has been reported that lower income students study less and have lower grade point averages, are less likely to graduate from college or attend a selective institution, and are also more likely to delay their college enrollment which results in a lower likelihood of completing their degree (Austin & Oseguera, 2004; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Walpole, 2003).


**SES and race and ethnicity**

Ishitani (2003) noted that the first-generation student experience varies depending on their socio economic status and ethnicity. When compared to students whose parents went to college, first generation students are more likely to be of African American or Hispanic decent and be low-income (Ishitani, 2003). Compared to other racial groups, African Americans are likely to have unequal or limited access to ‘social capital’ resources, which puts low income African American students on an uneven playing field when compared to other advantaged students (Parks-Yancy, 2005). Social capital is the benefit one receives from a valuable social relationship and is commonly defined by college students as “getting the hook-up” (Parks-Yancy, 2012, p. 510). Social capital resources include sharing information about internships and jobs, passing along contacts, and helping to influence those who make hiring decisions, otherwise helping to obtain employment and/or more esteemed jobs (Smith, 2005a; Westphal & Stern, 2007). Social capital also impacts the probability of setting and achieving career goals (Guiffrida, 2005). Smith (2005b) noted that since many low income African American college students have minimal social capital resources, they do not receive the guidance or assistance in obtaining jobs and internships because their families and networks tend to have very little career resources and connections.

**SES and student employment**

Another direct implication for students from lower SES is the greater likelihood of needing to remain employed while attending college. Previous studies have shown the high employment rate of FGC students. The Higher Education Research Institute (2007) lists that in 2005, over half (55.1%) of FGC students said they would get a job to help pay
for college expenses and 22.2% of first generation students reported working more than 20 hours. Snell (2008) wrote about a university attracting students from three main urban areas, one of which has the highest unemployment rate in the state. This study showed that since 2003, between 49% and 53% of first-year students have been working 16 hours a week or more and 22% of first-year students describe themselves as primary income earners for their dependent(s). Moreover, 38% of the university’s full-time equivalent enrollment received Pell Grants in 2006. These percentages say a lot about the financial need and focus of the students in general. This is an issue because having to work more while in college leaves less time to enroll in classes and less time to study for classes with a likely consequence of poor grades and increased time to graduation (Garcia, 2010; Heller, 2002; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

**SES and academic major selections**

Another implication of socio-economic status is that income and class shape the thoughts, general academic behaviors, and the processes by which students choose their majors. First generation students react to economic factors, and their perceptions of lower earning potential in majors within Social Science, Arts, and Humanities triggers them to limit their choice in majors because of their SES (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). They are highly concerned about which majors result in a higher income and which ones give the fastest access to the job market (Snell, 2008). Therefore, their college decisions are sometimes due to external and internal pressure to choose a career that makes the most money. Focusing on the major or career that has the highest salary amount instead of choosing a major and potential career that captures their true interests and talents could be detrimental.
Institutional choice

Socio economic status can also impact the type of institution that a student selects, and the type of institution a student attends can affect their chances for academic success (Astin & Oseguera, 2005b; Parks-Yancy, 2012). Research has also suggested that institutions serving larger numbers of at-risk students such as low-income students tend to have lower graduation rates (Astin & Oseguera, 2005b; Fiske, 2004). Because of some of these unfavorable realities, low-income students are more likely to defer college enrollment instead of enrolling directly after high school (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Additionally, when low income students do enroll, they have inconsistent and part-time enrollment at higher rates due to tuition cost distress, which results in increased time spent in college, and delayed degree completion (Goldrick-Rab, 2006).

Social Integration and Balancing Two Cultures

Social integration also plays a big role in how students cope with their environment (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Rubin, 2012). As reported by Merullo (2002) in The Chronicle of Higher Education, FGC students particularly find it difficult to socially integrate into the new atmosphere of a college campus. Merullo told a story of how a Mexican American student walked across campus with his peers when they causally joked about the janitors, cafeteria workers and grounds maintenance workers. The student suddenly became uncomfortable as he reflected on how many of his family members were employed in the same type of jobs.

It has been frequently acknowledged that first generation college students, more so than their non-first gen peers are faced with straddling two cultures: their college community (peers, faculty, and staff) and their at home community (family, community
members, and long-time friends). They are likely to experience conflicts between the values of the college atmosphere and those that they have always known, leading to an identity crisis, feelings of alienation, guilt, betrayal, and stress (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Logan, 2007; Phinney & Haas, 2003; Tseng, 2004). While going to college may be seen as a rite of passage for any student, it marks a significant separation from the past for those who are the first in their families to do so. First generation college students often feel disconnected from their families, experience sadness and apprehension about being emotionally and mentally distant from their parents, and may even be faced with negative reactions from their families about college (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Goodwin, 2006).

Many times the FGC student will feel inner conflict and loss while trying to balance their original culture and environment with their new college culture (Logan, 2007).

Snell (2008) asserted that if students do not feel that they belong on their college campus they will continue to connect with the community that they grew up in and home environment, often times “straddling the fence” of college life and local, home life. Then, they are less likely to connect or engage with their college environment which can negatively impact their success (Astin, & Oseguera, 2005a; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Snell (2008) suggested that local social environment is a crucial indicator of success. Students who are too connected to their local social environment instead of their college campus have a harder time adjusting to college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Snell, 2008; Tinto, 2007). Snell also found that because of expectations of college professors not being met and negative behaviors from FGC students, professors tend to think that the students possess bad attitudes, are lazy and unconcerned, or are just academically under-prepared. Snell disagrees with these professors’ assumptions and
proposes that perhaps the students’ lack of engagement is because of their stress levels and rigorous work schedules outside of the classroom (Snell, 2008).

Sources of Encouragement and Inspiration

According to a survey of freshman trends released by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), first generation college students cite parental encouragement as a key reason for attending college more than their peers with college educated parents (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007). The report, First in My Family, (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007) states that in 2005, 47% of FGC students reported parental encouragement as a very important reason for attending college. Additionally, FGC scholars noted that parental involvement has been a critical component in their preparation and graduation from four year colleges and universities (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007). Dennis, Phinney, and Chuaeco (2005) noted that FGC students also cite their peers as sources of encouragement to do well in college. They look to parents and family members for emotional support and to their peers for instrumental support (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuaeco, 2005).

Previous studies have noted that some sources of encouragement for first generation college students are earning potential and parental encouragement (when received). However, there is specific research on sources of encouragement for first generation female students in particular. Studies have shown that, in particular, first generation female students have a slightly different inspiration. Rinker and Speirs-Neumeister (2006) contributed findings that an emerging professional identity was the primary influence on achievement for females. Rinker and Speirs-Neumeister also found
that female FGC student possessed personal characteristics developed from their working-class backgrounds, such as independence and a strong work ethic. These characteristics transferred into their college experience as they became involved in leadership roles and extracurricular activities. So not only are female, first generation college students encouraged by their potential professional identity and accomplishment but also by their own morals and work ethic that were developed from their background and environment.

**Under-Prepared and Disadvantaged**

Vargas (2004) and Snell (2008) noted that FGC students lack guidance and “college knowledge,” like how to complete admissions procedures, the steps to finance the education, how to balance the rigors of college, and how to connect personal career goals with academic requirements. In addition, data also shows that FGC students are generally, academically less prepared for university coursework than are non-FGC students, have lower initial critical thinking skills than non-FGC students, and are less likely to take academically challenging courses in high school (Bui, 2002; McMillan, 2004).

**Lack of guidance and awareness**

Students with college-educated parents, also known as advantaged students, have an edge in completing the needed academic preparation and testing, actually applying to four-year institutions, and are more aware of the demands of college (Astin & Osequera, 2004) which in turn influences their success. Parents who lack a college education are unable to advise their student accurately and appropriately about the college process. Although parental encouragement is a big source of motivation for FGC students when
they do receive it, studies reveal that first-generation students receive less guidance, and less overall support, and encouragement than non-first generation students to attend college (Engle, 2007; Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Other research has revealed that because of their lack of awareness and experience, non-college educated parents cannot offer productive advice regarding choices about majors and course load which creates another disadvantage for students (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). While some parents of FGC students may be supportive of college, they still lack familiarity with professional career options, and therefore they cannot effectively guide their children in career exploration and decisions (Vargas, 2004). Studies have also found that since parents of FGC students have little or no higher education experience, their children begin college with less guidance and preparation than other students (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004).

**Academic preparation**

Chen and Carroll (2005) and Ishitani (2003) noted that first generation college students are at a distinct disadvantage at fulfilling the various college-admission requirements and have lower high-school grade point averages. In addition, they have generally completed fewer high-level math courses, and have not completed a rigorous combination of precollege coursework (McMillan, 2004). This combination contributes to lower scores on college entrance exams and a greater likelihood to take remedial courses once enrolled (Chen & Caroll, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Vargas, 2004). Consequently, an increase in remedial course participation adds to the amount of time in college, time to degree, and the amount of money spent on tuition (Attewell, Lavin, Domina & Levey, 2006).
Another implication of needing remedial courses is the feeling of inadequacy. First generation students tend to feel less confident about their collegiate academic achievements compared with non-FGC students (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Vargas, 2004). So, not only do FGC students come with the baggage of being academically under-prepared, but they may also suffer from lower self-esteem due to the amount of remedial courses needed, thus facing academic and psychological disadvantages (Alessandria & Nelson, 2005). In general, first-generation students have a lower sense of self-efficacy, which causes them to be less psychologically prepared and less adjusted at the end of their first year of college than students whose parents attended college (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

**African American Students**

Previous studies have noted that the transition to college has been tough for underrepresented groups especially for racially underrepresented groups such as African Americans; particularly when they attend a predominantly White university (Fries-Britt Turner, 2004; Littleton, 2003; Nelson-Laird, 2007; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Students from non-majority racial and cultural backgrounds are typically closely connected and interdependent on their families (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). Thus, they may be expected to have and engage in various family commitments and responsibilities that could conflict with college obligations (Tseng, 2004). They often times have to choose between their familiar home and family environment or adjusting to the new environment on a college campus (Merullo, 2002). Thus, African American college student challenges are intensified when attending a predominantly White university.
African American at PWI

A first generation college student who is also African American faces further issues transitioning to college especially if they are attending a predominantly White institution. In addition to the unfamiliarity associated with being a first generation college student these students are also expected to adjust to an environment full of people who do not resemble them resulting in additional culture shock (Goodwin, 2006). Some African American students have discussed their experiences at PWI’s in terms of feeling alienated and invisible (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson, 2004). African American female FGC students also experience stress and discomfort when they attend a predominantly White institution in terms of race and gender perceptions and how it impacts their self-esteem (Watt, 2006).

African American females

Historically, women have encountered institutional, cultural, and political challenges known as the ‘glass-ceiling effect’ that can hinder progress in many educational and professional areas and arenas (Thomas, Love, Roan-Belle, Tyler, Brown, & Garriott, 2009). Considering that African American women face the added component of race discrimination, the challenges they encounter tend to be even more complex (Tomkiewicz, Bass, & Vaicys, 2003). This added layer of discrimination encountered by African American females creates what is known as the ‘concrete ceiling effect’. “The concrete ceiling effect is distinct from the glass ceiling effect in that unlike glass that can be seen through and shattered, concrete is more difficult to infiltrate and cannot be pierced without extreme pressure” (Thomas, Love, Roan-Belle, Tyler, Brown, & Garriott, 2009, p. 159).
African American female college students face some distinct challenges. When they are also a first generation college student then they are affiliated with two “at risk” populations. So there is some intersectionality of the challenged populations. “They are often viewed at the bottom of the social order, and continue to remain disadvantaged in the academic arena” (Robinson & Franklin, 2011, p. 22). In addition to the concrete ceiling effect, first generation African American females face other challenges during their college experience such as faculty having false perceptions of aggressive behavior, and experiencing two forms of oppression because they are female and African American (Zamani, 2003). Another challenge is the imbalanced male to female ratio since African American females outnumber African American males on campus (Watt, 2006). The disproportioned ratio further adds to the issues and anxiety that these female students feel because it limits their dating options within their race and their sense of cultural and racial support (Rosales & Person, 2002).

In spite of challenges, African American females have had increasing college enrollment and graduation numbers over the last 30 years (Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado, 2006; Constantine & Watt, 2002). In 1999-2000, 108,013 bachelor’s degrees were awarded to African Americans with 65.7% being awarded to African American females. In 2009-2010, 164,844 bachelor’s degrees were awarded to African Americans with 65.9% being awarded to African American females (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). The report issued in 2012 by the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that African American women attained 68% of associate's degrees, 66% of bachelor's degrees, 71% of master's degrees, and 65% of all doctor's degrees that were awarded to African American students.
Although, African American females have had increasing enrollment and success in college, much of the literature on the experiences of African American students fails to differentiate between male and female students. Howard-Hamilton (2003) noted that “African American men and women often are treated as a monolithic group, thus masking potentially significant developmental and gender related differences” (pg. 1). In spite of the increased numbers of African American females in college, we still do not understand their distinct experience as an African American female first generation college student at a large predominately White university. We still need to hear from this population and to better understand their story and what they encountered throughout their college experience.

**Problem and Purpose Statement**

As noted, previous studies have explored and revealed the experiences of first generation college students associated with the entire college attendance process from application to graduation and beyond (Ishitani, 2003; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). These studies revealed that FGC students face more challenges than the general student population including often dealing with internal and external issues and being deemed at-risk and disadvantaged academically, emotionally, and/or financially (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). However, not many studies have concentrated primarily on African American females. Therefore, further studies are needed to add to the understanding of how African American, female, FGC students attending PWI’s internalize, interpret, and deal with their college experience including the factors associated with challenges and disadvantages found in previous studies.
The purpose of this study is to understand how African American, female, FGC students make meaning of their college experience as a first generation student at a large predominantly White University. This study aims to understand the experiences of these women and how they internalize and respond to their experiences. This study is specifically focused on African American, female, FGC students in their last two years of undergraduate work (Junior or Senior status) and aims to understand the motivating factors that helped this population to persist and be successful in a large, predominantly White institution. The study will attempt to capture the students’ reflection on their transition to college and their college experience, as well as, the particular issues they dealt with as African American, female, FGC students at a large, predominantly White university. For the purpose of this study, the term “successful” represents the student who is not in academic jeopardy or on academic probation and considered to be a student in good academic standing (with a GPA of 3.0 or higher) on the track to graduation.

**Research Questions**

The research questions that I intend to address in order to explore the lived experiences of African American, female, FGC students include the following:

1. How do African American, female, FGC students (in good academic standing) describe their college experience?

2. What issues and challenges do African American, female FGC students face when attending a large, public PWI and in what ways do they link those issues with the fact that they are the first in their families to attend college?

3. How do African American, female, FGC students describe the ways they responded to the challenges of being a college student at a large, public PWI?
4. What do African American, female, FGC students identify as their strongest sources of motivation, encouragement and discouragement as a college student?

5. What factors, institutional or otherwise, does this population believe contributes to their success or what assisted them in continuing their education?

The research questions address the lack of qualitative research exploring the feelings and perceptions that African American, female, first generation college students possess about their status of being a FGC student and their experiences as a first generation college student. The research questions allow FGC students to be introspective as they internalize their feelings and experiences while offering their personal perspective. These questions and this research will help disclose the voices of African American, female, first generation college students within a predominantly White, large, public university. I, as the researcher will be inquiring about their college experiences, their feelings towards such experiences, and how those experiences influenced their thought process, actions and success level.

Rationale and Significance

The study of African American, female, FGC students is important because there is a lack in the literature about this particular population. They are at a distinct disadvantage in fulfilling the various college admission requirements (Schmidt, 2003). They are unaware and are not properly prepared for college demands and are not equipped with “strategies for success” (Roe & Clark, 2005). Unlike students with college-educated parents, they do not have a network or an advantage in finding and receiving the motivation to go to college, completing the needed academic preparation and testing, and actually applying to postsecondary institutions (Pascarella et al., 2004).
Academically, FGC students may also be less prepared for university coursework than are non-FGC students. Compared with non-FGC students, they may have lower academic achievement which includes lower high school grade point averages and lower scores on college entrance exams (McMillan, 2004). Consequently, they feel less confident about their collegiate academic achievements, compared with non-FGC students, possessing feelings of anxiety and fear of failing (Bui, 2002). They not only come with the baggage of being academically under-prepared, but they may also suffer from lower self-esteem and identity development (Alessandria & Nelson, 2005).

More specifically, I am choosing to look at first generation, African American, female students at a large, public, predominantly White university. There is detailed research studying the educational experiences of African Americans in general, as well as, African American males but this study will contribute more information concerning the higher educational experiences of first generation, African American females. Past research notes how a student’s individual identity such as race, gender, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, and other identity characteristics may impact their college experience and achievement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Previous research also notes that the African American student experience differs depending on the type and size of college that they attend (Nelson-Laird, et. al., 2007).

This study is important because it focuses on a student population that is, often times, considered “at-risk” in higher education (first generation college students FG C). If administrators and educators are better able to understand the issues and experiences that these students have, and how they internalize them, then we may be able to help them more successfully transition to college. Increased knowledge and awareness could
encourage structured initiatives to assist these students. FGC students deserve to get the support they need to be successful.

This study can benefit multiple populations. Findings from this study may help FGC students to better understand the typical experiences and challenges that they might encounter and how to recognize them early. Parents may better understand how to help prepare their student or seek other assistance for their student early in the process. It is important to understand the experiences of African American, female, FGC students so that there can be more targeted, institutionalized support and initiatives put in place for them. It is also important to understand how the experiences influence their transition to college as well as their success rate in college. College administrators, faculty, and staff are trying to better understand the barriers that FGC students have to overcome and how they can assist these students throughout their transition to college. There is further investigation of how to provide equity and bridge the gap that exists between FGC and non-FGC students. Increased knowledge and awareness of this topic could encourage valuable mentorship relationships between students and staff. The continued need for role models and mentors to help FGC students navigate successfully within the college environment has been echoed by others (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004).

**Conceptual Framework**

There are many challenges that affect the college experiences of first generation college students. Some challenges are external, coming from many outside sources, while some challenges are internal, originating from within the individual student. Some of the challenges can be perceived as encouragement and students use them as a source of motivation to overcome and persist in college. For the motivated student, the challenges could serve as a driving factor to achieve. However, some students see the challenges as
discouraging and impossible to overcome. These students may view the challenges as discouraging barriers. They will use these challenges as a reason to give up or as a reason not to aspire or achieve at high levels. Figure 1 represents this bifurcation in the possible FGC student college decision-making process.

Understanding how FGC students perceive and cope with the various issues that are before them will produce more awareness about this at-risk population. Being aware of the students’ feelings about their challenges provides more insight into their transition to college as well as their entire college experience. Student supportive services would be more beneficial if we knew how FGC students viewed the challenges that are associated with attending college.

The conceptual framework illustrates how the study begins with identifying the key challenges that FGC students face. Followed by identifying the challenges, the illustration classifies the issues as internal or external. The next step is to determine if the challenges are motivating or discouraging and then link them to the college experience.
Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Personal/Internal
Possess feelings of isolation
Low self-esteem
Balancing two different cultures
Independent and Autonomous

Institutional/External
Pressure to work while in college
Under-prepared
Lack of awareness & exposure
Low socio-economic status
Lack of family support & encouragement
Intense pressure from family
Social Integration
They are said to already be at a disadvantage emotionally, socially, academically, and financially because of these issues

ENCOURAGING MOTIVATORS?
- Students see challenges as something to fight and overcome.
- Challenges encourage student to rise above their situation and beat the odds.
- If successful, a sense of accomplishment is felt, especially if they proved someone wrong.

DISCOURAGING?
- Students see challenges as impossible to overcome.
- Sometimes challenges can realistically be almost impossible to balance (i.e. work to take care of family)
- Challenges discourage students from trying to achieve.
- Student may endure, but experience extreme difficulty

How do FGC students interpret COLLEGE experience?
How do they make meaning?
Will they be encouraged or discouraged?
Will they attend and drop out or graduate?
Will they be successful?
Theoretical Framework

The primary groundwork for this study is Motivation Theory. Motivation research has vastly contributed to the understanding of education concepts and student achievement (Bozack, 2011). The framework will assist in understanding the motivation of African American, female, first generation college students and their level of success. It is important to understand the motivation of FGC students because motivation stimulates and inspires productivity (Halepota, 2005). Behavioral researcher, Robert H. Warren, claimed that motivation and productivity are “interdependent” (Halepota, 2005, p. 15). He explains that an increase in motivation can cause an increase in productivity.

Methodology Overview

In order to further investigate how female, African American, first generation college students at a large, public, predominantly White university view and internalize their college experience and motivations, this qualitative study will use a phenomenology approach. A phenomenological approach is a strategy that allows one to identify and study a human experience phenomenon as described by the participants (Creswell, 2009). Phenomenology enables one to learn and understand the lived experiences (Creswell, 2009). This study will focus on conducting in-depth interviews with 10-15 first generation, African American, female, college students attending a large, predominantly White research university with over 25,000 students. Students will be in their junior or senior year in good academic standing.
Definition of Terms, Delimitations and Limitations

First Generation College Student

A first generation college student is defined as an undergraduate student who is the first to attend college in their family.

Good Academic Standing

A student in good academic standing is defined as a college student with no academic probationary issues who is on a successful track to graduation. For the purpose of this study, good academic standing will be a student with a 3.0 or above.

“At-Risk”

An “at risk” student is defined as a student who is faced with more than one challenge that could serve as a disadvantage such as low economic status, FGC student status, geographic location, race and ethnicity, disability, etc.

African American

For the purpose of this study, the meaning of African American student is interchangeable with the meaning of Black student. “Black” is a term used in reference to a racial group with a dark or brown skin color. The term has been used to categorize a number of diverse populations (e.g., African American, African, and West Indian, Caribbean) into one common group (Brooks & Althouse, 2000). However, for the purpose of this study, the students are all born in the United States and self-identify using the terms Black and African American.

Predominantly White Institution

Predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are institutions of higher education where the dominant race of students, faculty, and staff is White (Willie, 2003).
This study will be limited to the experiences of academically successfully first generation, African American, female college students attending a large, predominantly White, research University. I aim to understand, specifically, the experiences of African American, females FGC students. I chose a large, predominantly White institution because typically first generation, African American students have a very different experience at this type of institution. PWI’s have a larger likelihood that the campus culture and environment will contrast from the culture and environment of communities in which they are from, thus they have a difficult time integrating into campus since it is different from their home setting (Harper, 2009). However, a large amount of Black students attend PWI’s, approximately 85% (Hoston, Graves, & Fleming-Randle, 2010). One reason is that there are many more PWI’s than there are HBCU’s since the majority of colleges and universities in the U.S. are PWI, also PWI’s tend to have more resources and services than HBCU’s (Hoston, Graves, & Fleming-Randle, 2010).

The large predominantly White institution that was selected for this study was selected because of its size and status as a large, research, predominantly White institution that is also located in a predominantly White geographic location. It is important to note the geographic location of this institution because African American students are considered to be a minority population on campus as well as in the surrounding city. This fact creates another concern that African American students must face. The dynamic of being a minority on campus and in the surrounding community yields a different experience for the African American student than if they attended a university located in an urban or predominantly Black setting (Nelson-Laird, et. al., 2007).
Chapter One Summary

According to the literature, it is inevitable that first generation college students are at more of a disadvantage than their peers who are not first generation student status (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Schmidt, 2003). We know some of these disadvantages and experiences from a university, researcher, administrator, or educator perspective. However, we know very little about how first generation, African American, female college students feel about being a first generation college student. We also know very little about how they internalize the disadvantages and other lived experiences that being an African American, female FGC, at a large, public PWI student can bring. Lastly, we know very little about the motivating and the discouraging factors that affect the population of this study. This study will explore the lived experiences and capture some of the voices of the first generation, African American, female college student and their motivation for continuing successfully in college.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This study examines the lived experiences of African American, female, first generation college students. More specifically, I am interested in how they make meaning of their college experience. This phenomenological study involves in-depth interviews of 10-15 participants in order to capture their thoughts and feelings about their experiences in their own words. Participants are in their junior or senior year in good academic standing at a large, predominantly White research university.

University counselors have expressed an increasing concern about the experience of first generation college students (Pike & Kuh, 2005). As studies have uncovered various challenges that FGC students face, certain factors continually surface as major issues including: financial, social, academic, and emotional issues (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007; Haghs-Vaughn, 2004). Some of the reoccurring themes in the research were: FGC students have a unique set of needs and are disadvantaged before even entering college (Engle, 2007; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004); they are less academically prepared (Chen, 2005) with lower reading, math, and critical thinking skills (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007); they have lower educational achievement aspirations (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006); and they will need additional and targeted support to not only apply to and enter college, but to also be successful in college.
The experiences of first generation college students are currently topics of discussion among higher education researchers and administration (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). One reason for the continued attention is that FGC students represent almost a third of the national undergraduate student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Researchers have emphasized that, “As a growing population in higher education, first-generation students represent a unique group with distinct goals, motivations, and constraints” (Ayala & Striplen, 2002, p. 3). Therefore it is important to understand the phenomenon of the FGC student experience and how they describe their experience.

To further understand the experiences of African American, female, first generation college students, I will utilize motivation theory. It is important to understand what motivates these students to attend, persist, and complete college while being knowledgeable about their experiences. This dissertation’s literature review is organized into two main topics. The first segment focuses on the theoretical framework of motivation theory. This study of FGC students builds on motivation theory and uses several lenses to view the phenomenon of motivation. The second segment focuses on previously conducted research concerning first generation students, African American students, female students, and experiences at large predominantly White educational institutions.

**Motivation Theory**

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of first generation, female African American college students in college and to understand what motivates them. More specifically, how these students interpret or internalize their
experiences and what they consider to be their motivation or discouragement. In support of this I have elected to use motivation theory as the primary theoretical framework to understand what motivates first generation college students to pursue and attend college, but more so, do well and complete college. There has been extensive research exploring various motivational theories related to productivity and success of college students (Griffin, 2006; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). However, we know very little about the motivation factors of female, African American, first generation college students specifically.

Halepota (2005) defined motivation as “a person’s active participation in and commitment to achieving the prescribed results” (p. 1). Other researchers have described motivation as being “the natural human capacity to direct energy in the pursuit of a goal” (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995, p. 22). Motivation has also been described as being, “the direction and intensity of one’s efforts (Weinberg & Gould, 2003, p. 52). Roberts (2001) described motivation as a process where people become motivated or demotivated based on the value of the task and their judgment of their own level of competence. Halepota (2005) claimed that the notion of motivation can be exemplified by the process of many strategies yielding a variety of results at various times. All of these definitions explain how a persons’ motivation affects their actions. Schlesinger (2005) explained that people do what they do because of their motivation. As mentioned, motivation has been defined and explained by many researchers. The term motivation is diversely and loosely defined and considered to be abstract.

The quality of a students’ motivation has also been inspected. Quality of motivation can be described as the kind of motivation that triggers learning conduct
Vansteenkiste et al. (2006) noted “Quality of motivation refers to the type or kind of motivation that underlies learning behavior” (p. 19). Quality of motivation is different from the quantity, or level of motivation that a learner has. The quantity of motivation can be described as the amount of motivation a person has and addresses where the motivation is coming from which, according to the research findings, is usually externally (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). A large quantity of motivation does not necessarily produce productivity if the quality is low. Quality motivation (also known as autonomous or intrinsic motivation) yields more productivity than controlled motivation, which is externally regulated and the most pressured type of motivation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006; Vansteenkiste, Sierens, Soenens, Luyckx & Lens, 2009).

Much of the work on motivation and learning has focused on elementary school students (Bozack, 2011). Another large portion of previous motivation research was conducted with younger adults within academic achievement environments (Schlesinger, 2005). Although previous motivation research on children and young adults was applied in the field of education, it was actually based on a field other than education. To understand the historical context of Motivation Theory, it is important to note that motivation research regarding education was originally derived from the field of psychology (Brophy, 1987).

Brophy (1987) asserted that “it is important not to confuse motivation with performance” (p.18). In the field of psychology, motivation evolved to denote achievement motivation, and addressed behavior in relation to achievement when referring to success or failure situations (Schlesinger, 2005). Schlesinger (2005) noted
that “in psychology, the motivation construct accounts for the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of behavior” (p. 230). Motivation derived from psychology focuses on the learner as an individual in many settings, whereas other motivation research emphasizes motivation of students as being influenced by teachers in a classroom setting (Brophy, 1987; Schlesinger, 2005).

Motivational concepts have added to the understanding and comprehension of student literacy and academic achievement (Bozack, 2011). Understanding what motivates students’ helps to reveal the many elements of motivation and how motivation is related to academic achievement. Research has also been done on school reform and how motivational factors attribute to optimizing learning. Such motivational theories state that “students’ learning experiences are enhanced when instruction is authentic, challenging, skill demanding, and allows for student autonomy” (Yair, 2000, p. 1). The purpose of the study done by Yair (2000) was to understand how four structural instruction characteristics (authenticity, challenging, skill demanding, and student autonomy enabling) effects a students’ learning experience. Data were collected from 33 elementary and secondary schools, which included 865 students. Findings show that the structure of instruction heavily affects the students’ motivation.

When considering motivation theories as they relate to learning, it is important to mention that the “emotional, expressive, and affective” experiences in schools are critical to a students’ success (Deci, 1992). “The more students feel in command of their learning and feel active and excited by it, the more they fulfill their learning potential” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It has also been noted that the motivation factors of students are centered on their inner control rather than being controlled by others (Deci, 1992).
The learning outcomes and success level of students are correlated with the students’ interest to learn and how much they enjoy what they are learning about (Ames, 1992; Deci, 1992). Wlodkowski (1985) points out that motivation is a vital factor for learning, yet other factors such as an individual’s capabilities and quality of instruction are also important factors for learning. He also notes that some motivation theories are more applicable than others.

Motivation may not always be constant and can be affected daily by many factors (Hutchinson, 2004). Weinberg and Gould (2003) note that students’ motivation can be affected by a teacher or an instructors’ enthusiasm or lack thereof. Mercier and Hutchinson (2003) note that the teachers’ mood, the teachers’ fairness and the students’ perception of how approachable the teacher is also affects motivation level. Therefore, it is possible that motivated students can have days that they are feeling unmotivated and non-motivated students may have days where they are feeling especially motivated. This type of motivation is impacted by influential elements. Achievement goal theory is important to note since it can be strongly impacted by many factors that are suggested to be a challenge for first generation college students such as socio economic status or academic unpreparedness.

There are several theories that have been developed regarding motivation. Previous research has explored the range of motivation theories and concepts and how they are applicable to education and education achievement. Below, I will explain some of the prevalent theories in order to provide a well-rounded, historical background for motivation in regards to education. According to Halepota (2005) there are a few motivation theories that explain the various factors that typically affect an individual’s
level of motivation. Two of these theories are Expectancy theory and Maslow’s theory of needs. Maslow’s theory of needs explains an individuals’ necessity to be motivated and helps us understand human behavior. Expectancy theory addresses the expectations that an individual has after making an effort and can be used to predict motivational consequences. These motivation theories, and others, are addressed below to feature the different elements that affect an individuals’ motivation.

**Choice theory**

William Glasser’s Choice Theory suggests that individuals are responsible for their own behavior based on internal motivation (Glasser, 1998). According to the theory, motivation is based on five needs: survival, belonging, power, autonomy, and fun/learning. Glasser (1998) says that an understanding of these needs can help individuals achieve more satisfying results. Choice theory proposes that whenever any of these needs can be met in a classroom setting, a student will be more interested in the work, will have more fun, and will thus learn more. According to Glasser (1998), if any of these needs are unmet, the void overshadows the students’ need for learning causing less chance of academic success.

Choice Theories of motivation can best be summarized by the premise that we choose what best meets our needs. We are motivated when our needs are fulfilled and the motivation is internal as we are driven by our desire/interest in the five needs. Choice theory can also be explained by our motivation to pursue and achieve goals and the process of setting goals and having expectations. If people know what the goal is and have more information about the goal, then they tend to do better than if they have less knowledge (Locke, 1978). People perform better when there is no uncertainty (Mitchell,
Therefore, ambiguity is detrimental to an individual’s motivation and performance. This is important to my study because research has demonstrated that first generation college students have ambiguous thoughts about college due to lack of guidance, exposure and preparedness. They have lowered expectations and a lower sense of goal achievement which affects their motivation in regards to choice theory.

**Achievement goal theory**

One of the primary elements of achievement is motivation, and Achievement Goal theory is a theoretical perspective of motivation (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). Research on Achievement goal theory has largely been social-cognitive in nature and is similar to the thought that personal goals are associated to cognitive and emotional stimulation developments (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). Achievement goal theory is also known as goal orientation theory. The theory is less concerned about the actual goal but more so the motive of the goal (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). It has been said that, “Achievement goal theory specifies the kinds of goals (purposes or reasons) that direct achievement-related behaviors” (Maehr & Zusho, 2009, p. 77).

Achievement goal theory emphasizes the difference between mastery goals and performance goals (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2009). Mastery goals concentrate on learning and comprehension, whereas performance goals focus on competence demonstration and exhibiting ability. Linnenbrink and Pintrick (2009) noted that a students’ decision to tackle a goal (or not) is based on a range of factors including personal motivation and other external factors and situations.
**Expectancy theory**

When thinking about motivational theories, one should consider the Expectancy-Value Theory because it suggests that an individuals’ choice to engage is influenced by their own sense of competence and value beliefs (Matusovich, Streveler, & Miller, 2010). Victor Vroom developed the expectancy theory in 1964. This theory says that an individual’s motivational level is dependent on the person’s perception of their ability to achieve the potential reward, and the value that the person places on the reward (Eccles, 2005; Eccles, 2007).

The Expectancy-Value theory consists of two key beliefs, which are competence and value. In terms of this theory, competence refers to ability in a particular area, whereas value refers to the worth or an individuals’ perception of the significance of a task (Wigfield, 1994). Competency beliefs focus on an individual’s capability to complete a task or participate in an activity. Value beliefs focus on the persons’ desire or aspiration to participate in a task or activity (Matusovich, Streveler, & Miller, 2010). In an educational context, these beliefs of competence and value are factors that persuade or influence academic decision making. Eccles (2005) noted that ideas of competence and value are influenced by various factors such as people who are surrounding you (parents, peers, teachers, etc.), previous experiences, and individual beliefs about identity. Expectancy-Value theory describes feelings of competence as “experiences of success” (Eccles et al., 1993). Expectancy-Value theory states that motivation to participate and engage “is shaped by competence and value beliefs” (Eccles, 2005, 2007). Matusovich, Streveler, and Miller (2010) mention that competence beliefs have been studied more deeply than values beliefs.
Maslow’s hierarchy theory of needs

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory also known as the “hierarchy of needs theory” was published in 1954 by a behavioral scientist named Abraham H. Maslow. Maslow’s theory asserts that a person’s needs are their main motivation. These needs were listed in five different categories: psychological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs (Halepota, 2005). Maslow’s theory also explains that there is a hierarchy order to these needs. When an individual fulfills fundamental needs in the lower levels of the hierarchy order, it becomes more possible for them to pursue higher level needs (Benson & Dundis, 2003; Maslow, 1954). In order to understand human behavior, Maslow’s theory has been applied and has been useful to our understanding in order to choose appropriate motivational strategies.

Academic self-concept

Given that this study involves college student motivation, an important element to consider is academic self-concept. Academic self-concept represents a person’s knowledge and perceptions about their own academic achievement ability and has been noted to predict motivation and performance (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Cokley (2000a) says it is important to mention “academic self-concept” when studying motivation and indicates, “Academic self-concept can be defined as how a student views his or her academic ability when compared with other students” (p. 529). Bong and Skaalvik (2003) noted that academic self-concept is greatly shaped by ideals or benchmarks in which to evaluate one’s own accomplishments along with social comparisons.

Academic self-concept has specifically been connected with intrinsic motivation (Cokley, Bernard, Cunningham, & Motoike, 2001). Bong and Skaalvik (2003) reported
how positive self-concept assisted and enhanced students’ intrinsic motivation along with other positive achievement behaviors. Cokley, et al. (2003) did a study exploring the validity and reliability of scores on the Academic Self-Concept Scale (ASCS) from 396 African American and 291 European American college students. Findings revealed that when students have a positive self-concept and believe in themselves, they tend to be more motivated (Cokley, 2003). African American students tend to sustain a high level of self-concept even when their academic achievement is low because they perceive issues to be external (Cokley, 2003). Findings from this study also revealed that when African Americans get discouraged concerning school it is because they are dissatisfied in their performance and not because they doubted their abilities.

**Self determination theory**

Self- Determination theory (SDT) focuses on the quality of motivation rather than just the quantity and type. This theory has been used as a framework for understanding academic motivation. Specifically, SDT is empirically based and concentrates on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as it relates to well-being and performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Research has noted that intrinsic motivation encompassed self-determination, and extrinsic motivation lacked self-determination (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006).

SDT is used as a basis to describe motivation based on a person’s personality, opportunities for satisfaction, behavior, and the three psychological needs of “autonomy, competency, and relatedness” (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy can be described as having freedom and a choice to initiate your own actions. Competency is being successful and achieving desired results. Relatedness is establishing a relationship and
trust with others. It is expected that people will experience a greater self-motivation when they experience autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

SDT also implies that settings, environments, and institutional climates play a major role and has significance in regards to motivation outcomes (Deci et al., 2001). For example, when a student feels supported, they tend to have more self-motivation and achievement and better performance. When basic needs of the students are fulfilled and supported, they are more likely to adjust to their environments (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003). Thus, motivation can heavily depend on campus environments and academic settings.

**Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation**

Motivated behavior has been broken down into two different types: intrinsic and extrinsic (Deci et al., 1991). Intrinsic motivation can be defined as being motivated or choosing to engage in an activity for the sake of doing it. A person is content with doing the activity with the incentive being the actual activity. Intrinsic motivation is for self-gratification, self-accomplishment, or for self-stimulation or excitement (Cokley, 2003). Extrinsic motivation can be defined as participating in an activity in order to achieve a specific outcome or reward (Deci, 1975). A person’s involvement in something for the sole purpose of a specific goal or because of the anticipated reward is due to extrinsic motivation (Cokley, 2003). To add more clarity, in a students’ case the mere act of studying to learn and gain knowledge is intrinsic versus the act of studying in order to obtain a certain grade in efforts to acquire specific credentials is extrinsic.

Motivation also depends on the associated goals. Intrinsic goals are in the form of “growth, relationships, and community” and extrinsic goals are in the form of “wealth,
fame, and image” (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Research has noted that extrinsic goals tend to have a negative impact on students’ well-being verses intrinsic goals having a more positive impact on well-being (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Achieving an intrinsic goal is gratifying a psychological need. This is the reason that it has been linked with positive well-being and adjustment. Students that are concentrated on extrinsic goals are more associated with comparisons (Patrick, Neighbours, & Knee, 2004), outside approvals (Kernis, 2003), and gaining external affirmations of self-worth (Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004). This is the reason why extrinsic goals are associated with poorer well-being and less favorable performance (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006).

Extrinsic motivation can also be broken down to autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Autonomous motivation entails choice and desires while controlled motivation entails coercion or being pressured (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). It has been said that autonomous motivation yields more flexibility and adaptive behavior in an education setting and a more constructive and productive performance than controlled motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Controlled motivation can sometimes have a reverse effect of discouraging a student rather than encouraging and motivating.

I have presented an overview of various motivation theories as a framework for my study. Motivation theory is a useful framework for my study because it has been used in the field of education. A visual summary of the main Motivation Theory constructs or elements are presented in Table 1.
Table 1

*Summary of Motivation Theory Concepts Relevant to the Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice Theory</td>
<td>Internal motivation based on five needs: survival, belonging, power, autonomy, fun. Understanding/meeting needs yield more satisfying results. Student more interested in work, has more fun, thus learn more. If these needs are unmet, the void overshadows need for learning causing less chance of academic success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement Goal Theory</td>
<td>Emphasizes mastery and performance goals. Mastery concentrates on learning and comprehension. Performance focuses on competence and ability. The decision to tackle goal (or not) is based on personal motivation and other external factors/situations. Less concerned about actual goal, more so motive of goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectancy Theory</td>
<td>Motivation and choice to engage influenced by two key beliefs: competence &amp; value. Motivational level dependent on perception of ability to achieve, the potential reward, and value of reward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maslow’s Hierarchy Theory Needs</td>
<td>A person’s needs are their main motivation such as: psychological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs). Fulfilling lower fundamental needs (hierarchy order) makes it more possible to pursue higher level needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Self-Concept</td>
<td>Knowledge/perception about own achievement ability; compared with other students. Benchmarks to evaluate accomplishments. Positive self-concept enhanced intrinsic motivation. Students who believe in themselves tend to be more motivated. African American students have high level of self-concept even with low achievement; perceive issues to be external. Discouragement due to dissatisfied in performance, not because they doubted ability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic Motivation</td>
<td>Content with engaging with incentive being actual activity. For self- gratification/achievement/stimulation or excitement. Linked with positive well-being and adjustment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic Motivation</td>
<td>Participating to achieve a specific outcome/reward. For the sole purpose of a specific goal or anticipated reward. Linked with negative impact on well-being; less favorable performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self – Efficacy</td>
<td>Experiences to increase self-efficacy beliefs will enhance motivation and ultimately increase academic adjustment. Students with more confidence in their ability to do well had more motivation to do well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall the various motivation theories connect to my study by giving an overview of what motivates students. Next, I will explore, more specifically, what motivates first generation students, African American, and female college students.

**Student Experience**

Several studies (Ishitani, 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Woosley & Shepler, 2011) examine the characteristics and history of first generation college students but what I will be adding to the literature is the voice of the first generation, African American, female student. Many studies are taken from the voice, or perspective of administrators, researchers, and other educators (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson & Covarrubias, 2012) but this study will capture the lived experiences from the words of the actual student. Few studies have captured the words, perceptions, thoughts, feelings and experiences from the first generation, African American, female student which makes this study unique. Even further, this study will explore the experiences of first generation, African American, female students attending a large, predominantly White, research based-institution. This study aims to understand what influences and motivates these students to persist and be successful in college and how they make meaning of their experiences.

**First generation students**

A study done by Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) examined how motivation and integration factors influenced the academic achievement of 277 diverse first generation college students attending a community college. This quantitative study employed bivariate and multivariate analyses and findings suggested that motivation and academic
integration played a significant role in academic achievement and was associated with higher grade point averages with first generation students. However, the results demonstrated that extrinsic motivation contributed to lower academic achievement resulting in lower grade point averages. Many FGC students are extrinsically motivated with a goal of achieving a degree in order to obtain a well-paying job and improve their “social, economic, and occupational standing” (Nunez & Caccaro, 1998; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deco (2006) reviewed various field experiments to explore intrinsic goal framing versus extrinsic goal framing. Findings revealed that when students are presented with a justification and the long term significance of a learning activity, then they better understand the value of learning. When instructors focusing on longstanding intrinsic benefits such as the students’ personal development, relationship development, improved health, or community building, the student is more likely to participate and comprehend the content more, resulting in higher performance and greater competence.

It is more beneficial for first generation college students to be intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically motivated (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Intrinsic aspects such as gaining more knowledge, undertaking challenges, working towards academic accomplishment, etc. may make it easier for FGC students to assimilate and adjust to college (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). If FGC students actually enjoy and find pleasure in their courses, then they are more likely to commit to doing the coursework and participate in class. When they feel gratification from their courses then they feel less pressure. Contrary, if the FGC student
believes that the courses are “unnecessary barriers” keeping them from attaining their end goal of a good paying job, then they are less likely to complete assignments, less likely to feel pleasure from participating and more likely to feel pressure and increased stress (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

**African American students**

It is noted that, “While the extant literature sheds light on several important aspects of the lack of college experience, conspicuously absent are the voices of Black students themselves” (Davis, et al., 2004, p. 422). African Americans face additional challenges once they begin college that are intensified due to their academic preparation (or lack thereof) and other personal characteristics such as first generation status, and low socio economic status (Fries-Britt Turner, 2004; Nelson-Laird, 2007). Existing demographic information indicates that first-generation students are more likely to be non-White (racial ethnic minorities), and are more likely to be Black or Hispanic (Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Ishitani, 2003). When compared to White and Asian counterparts, African Americans are less likely to graduate from a bachelor’s degree granting institution within six years (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002) and they have lower aspirations to attend college (Hamrick & Stage, 2004).

African American college students report that they consistently encounter obstacles that have a tendency to impede their success. (Love, 2008; Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003) conducted a study looking at the issues of underrepresented college students and how to retain them. Various students of color trends including enrollment, persistence, and completion rates
were examined. The findings from the study suggested that minority students face numerous issues impeding their success, included in these were: lack of academic preparedness in high school, uncomfortable campus climate, students’ inability to commit to their educational goals, institution, social and academic integration, and the availability of adequate financial aid (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003).

Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) also emphasized that African American students consistently feel like their academic ability is constantly questioned. Their qualitative study of nine Black students attending a large, public university included high achieving students whose academic and social experiences were examined. Findings revealed that even though these students were involved in the honors program and performed well academically, they still felt judged based on common negative stereotypes about Black students’ academic abilities. African American students have also expressed their desire to have university programs specific to their needs and experiences and have broader more inclusive pedagogy (Cuyjet, 2006; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). In another study examining African American females and their struggle with racisms and sexism, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) interviewed 333 African American women. When describing her experiences, one participant explained that, “When I walk [into a new class] that first day . . . I feel like I come in with something to prove already, like I’m already set back by the way people are perceiving me. They’re wondering why I’m here. Am I really smart enough to be in this class?” (p. 14)

There are qualitative studies that have continuously suggested and explained the negative stereotypes and racial prejudices that African American students face and experience in college (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002).
When faced with negative stereotypes, some Black students internalize such negative beliefs which then negatively impacts their self-esteem (Solorzano et al., 2000; Solorzano et al., 2002). In a previous study conducted by Fries-Britt and Turner (2001), 14 Black students were interviewed and participated in focus groups. Two students were freshmen, four were sophomores, six were juniors, and two students were seniors with a mixture of six males and eight females. These students were asked about their academic and racial experiences. The experiences that the students described included common stereotypes directed towards them that came from non-Black students. They also explained feeling the need to prove their intellectual ability. Findings suggested that being a minority student dealing with stereotypes can result in a threatening environment for them. Overall, the main theme that surfaced from this study was that the stereotypes that Black students faced corroded their sense of self and confidence regarding their academics.

In another study, Solorzano, Allen, and Carroll (2002) examined the pressure of being a racial ethnic minority on a predominantly White campus. An African American undergraduate female attending UC Berkeley explained the stereotypical assumptions that she had encountered. She explained that, most of her racism experiences had come from students who thought Black students only got into universities because of Affirmative Action. She said many of the White students could not believe that Black students worked hard to get accepted into college. Thus, she was left to defend her intelligence. The findings suggested that the campus environment and culture affects the academic experiences of students of color. Specifically, it was noted that “Campus racial climate exerts a major influence on college achievement among Chicano/Latino and
African American students- two groups that have historically been the targets of racial discrimination” (Solorzano, et al., 2002, p. 16). Data shows that when the campus climate is racially discouraging or destructive, Black students have a lower rate of academic success and have lower confidence.

In a previous study investigating racial climate on campus at the University of California, Berkeley, the researchers studied African Americans, Latina’s, Asian Americans, and White undergraduate students in the Spring of 2000. There were 7 females and 18 males included in this study. The researchers utilized multiple methods including interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, historic records, and published research. The findings revealed that students of color, African American students specifically, experience micro-aggressions on campus. The term “micro aggressions” was defined as subtle, stunning, often automatic, verbal and non-verbal insults directed towards non-whites” (Solorzano, et al., 2002, p. 17).

Some literature highlights the institutionalized cultural and racial prejudices perpetuated through curricula and teaching methods (Hale, 2001). These institutionalized biases and practices can create inequality and disadvantages for African American students. Janice Hale (2001) asserted that teaching and training methods in many schools create a ‘bell curve environment’ that marginalizes African American students by focusing on one traditional learning style rather than a variety of styles. Previous research on motivation among college students assumes that cultural factors within the university curriculum are embraced and accepted by all populations (Schlesinger, 2005). This thought highlights the potential biases that are within education achievement measures (Ladson-Billings, 2000). In addition, African American students feel a pressure to prove
their intellectual ability to their instructors and classmates that brings about a psychological burden that they must cope with (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007).

African American first generation college students have reported feeling the burden of maintaining and managing two different cultures. It is a challenge to balance the responsibilities that they have at home and maintaining their peer and community relationships with their college environment and aspirations (Schmidt, 2003). Guiffrida (2005) conducted a study of 99 African American students from a midsize, private PWI. Purposeful sampling was used to obtain students with varying academic achievement from various levels. High and low achieving students were interviewed in order for the researcher to understand family influences on achievement. Findings from this study noted that low achieving African American students felt pressure from their families, which hindered their success or academic achievement. Students felt obligated to go home on a regular basis to tend to physical duties or to provide emotional support. Students found it hard to break ties with things that were happening at home resulting in frequent home visits. Students also explained that they traveled home often to connect with their peers since they had not established a social connection on campus. These frequent visits kept the students from socially integrating into the campus community.

For some African American, first generation college students who attend PWI’s, the dual culture experience and issues are intensified due to the college campus environment (Choy, 2001; Tinto, 2007). Students face culture shock and feelings of isolation when there are very few other Black students (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003). Not only do these students have to deal with their home culture and responsibilities, but they also have to deal with their new college culture being unfamiliar and unlike the culture
and environment that they are accustomed to. Choy (2001) described this dynamic as being socially knowledgeable and competent in two cultures, also known as biculturalism (Choy, 2001).

**Predominantly White Institutions**

Based on the literature, African Americans face many challenges at predominantly White institutions. The most prevalent of these include: tokenism, racism, isolation, and lack of Black faculty and role models, (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Guiffrida, 2005a; Howard-Hamilton, 2000; Rosales & Person, 2003). The environment of the institution significantly influences the experience of the student (Jackson & Moore, 2008). If the environment is intimidating or unpleasant to minorities it will probably negatively impact their mental functioning and social involvement (Griffin, 2006). The National Survey of Student Engagement 2005 (NSSE) reported that African American undergraduate students attending PWI’s, expressed the lowest level of satisfaction with their college experience.

Previous research conducted by Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) studied nine high-achieving Black students attending a large university. Six students were female and three students were male. The purpose of the study was to intentionally explore engaged, honors students’ academic and social experiences. Findings suggested that even though these high achieving Black students were involved in honors classes, they still felt judged due to common stereotypes. They also felt that they had to intentionally get involved with certain activities to prove they were smart while also exemplifying an example of a positive Black student. They also felt pressure to behave and present themselves in a certain way that they describe as non-White.
Terms such as “alienated, disengaged, disenfranchised, underserved, incompatible, and dissatisfied” are all terms that have been used to characterize the African American undergraduate student experience at PWI’s (Harper, 2007). If predominantly White institutions do not understand the characteristics and needs of African American students, then the environment may make the student feel separated, isolated, and alienated (Cuyjet, 2006).

**Large institutions**

Large institutions can be problematic in creating a welcoming environment for all students (Summers, Svinicki, Gorin, & Sullivan, 2002). Students attending larger universities have different factors to deal with than that of students attending smaller institutions such as feeling lost and intimidated while navigating a big campus, larger class sizes and less individualized attention from teachers due to a higher teacher to student ratio (Guiffrida, 2008). Further, previous studies have suggested that African American first generation college students have a uniquely challenging experience at larger institutions (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Nelson-Laird et al., 2007). It has been noted that a larger institution can produce social issues and intimidation and can have a significant impact on social adjustment (Caldwell, 2007; Hurtado, Carter & Spuler, 1996). It can become harder for students to meet people that they identify with on a larger campus and social interactions can become more difficult outside and inside the classroom (Caldwell, 2007; Fisher, 2007). Larger institutions yield larger class sizes, which frequently makes students cautious or reluctant to speak in class due to concern of mistakes, embarrassment, or insecurity of classroom behavior and etiquette (Caldwell, 2007).
The study done by Nelson-Lard et al., (2007) found that African American students have lower levels of engagement, collaborative learning, and student-faculty interactions at larger PWI institutions compared to other students at the same institution. Rashne Jehangir’s longitudinal study of first-generation students examined the impact of participation in a cultural learning community at a large PWI. Findings from this study suggested that overall, African American students are outnumbered at large predominantly White universities and tend to feel misunderstood, alone, isolated or even invisible (Jehangir, 2010). According to previous studies, minority students have experienced “chilly campus environments” while attending large predominantly White institutions (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Merullo, 2002). Although all students face challenges in college, research has shown that high achieving Black collegians face overt and covert forms of racism and discrimination at large predominantly White institutions unlike their non-Black peers (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001).

**Classroom experiences**

In a previous study by Rovai, Gallien, and Wighting (2005), under achievement in African American college students attending predominantly White universities were examined. The study found that due to the teaching methods of some White professors, African Americans tend to feel culturally disengaged in the classroom. If White professors are teaching without diversity in mind, it could become a source of frustration for African American students (Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005).

Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) did a study on 15 African American students and their in-class experiences at a PWI. The participants were interviewed and placed into focus groups where they discussed their academic, social, and racial experiences. The
participants in their study recognized and explained a variety of issues in the classroom: “(a) Negative comments and stereotypes from professors and their non-African American peers about the African American community; (b) being forced to validate their intellectual competence to White peers and faculty in the classroom; and (c) less-than-appropriate stereotypes about their personal appearance” (p. 97). Overall the participants felt that they had to prove themselves and their abilities more so than their White peers had to. The stereotypes that many African American students faced in classrooms decreased their level of confidence in their academic abilities leading to further disengagement in campus and classroom activities (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001).

Regarding the classroom experience, “many African American students attending PWI’s will find themselves in a position of being the only or the token Black student” (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 515). This data suggested that African American students coped with stereotypes that obstructed how they viewed themselves and how they performed.

African American students have also expressed a need for more African American faculty and staff at PWI’s (Willie, 2003). African American students do not feel as supported as White students due to the lack of African American faculty (Thomas, et al., 2009). The qualitative study involving Black students at a PWI done by Guiffrida (2005a) revealed that Black students often feel that they cannot connect with White faculty because they feel that White faculty are culturally insensitive. This lack of connection hinders the Black student to form a comfortable relationship with faculty which makes them uncomfortable to seek assistance (Guiffrida, 2005a). Additionally, Black students do not view White faculty as realistic or natural role models (Guiffrida, 2005a).
**Tokenism**

Another frequent mistake that instructors at PWI’s have made was calling on the African American students to offer the “Black” or “minority” perspective in relation to course topics or subject matters (Howard-Hamilton, 2000). This instruction method forces or makes the student feel obligated to be the sole representative for all African Americans which either adds more pressure or further segregates the student. This dynamic is known as “tokenism” which can be described as when a member of an ethnic group is numerically underrepresented in a specific setting and they are pressured to represent the entire group (Kanter, 1977). Tokenism is an issue that has been documented as a significant challenge encountered by minority students and staff at PWI’s (Howard-Hamilton, 2000; Jones & William, 2004; Kanter, 1977; Ward, 2003).

Gay (2007) noted that some African Americans perceive tokenism to be when a minority individual is used for the dominant groups’ personal purposes. Tokenism can also be viewed as symbolic participation, however, it can produce intensified pressure (Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire, & Green, 2004). Davila (2012) noted that students felt that they were in the “spotlight” because of the pressure or expectation to represent their entire race in class. When African American students experience tokenism, they often feel that they are the spokesperson and that they have to prove existing stereotypes wrong (Yosso et al., 2009).

**Campus experiences**

Campus culture and environment plays a big role in how students transition, adjust and persist in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The student experience is influenced by the campus environment (Jackson & Moore, 2008) and Rankin and Reason
(2005) suggests that there is a relationship between student learning outcomes and the institutional culture. Rankin and Reason (2005) surveyed 7,347 students from 10 campuses in an effort to see if different students from different races experienced campus climates differently. Students of color reported higher rates of harassment than did the White students. Although White students recognized and also experienced racial harassment, students of color felt less accepted and reported the climate as being more racists than White students did.

During a year-long study of the experiences of minority students attending seven small predominately White colleges, Watson et al. (2002), using qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups, found that initially the colleges demonstrated a commitment and strong interest in diversity and multiculturalism especially during the recruitment process. However, later on students expressed disappointment because they felt the commitment was no longer there and the reality was that there was no real commitment to diversity. One student described the campus as being “monoculture” (p. 53). Universities will need to create a welcoming environment if they will be successful in providing education to a diverse student body (Harper, 2005; Hurtado, 2006).

Within the PWI campus experience there are certain challenges that can impact an African American student’s experience. Rosales and Person (2003) noted that some challenges include isolation from the majority students, dealing with stereotypical perceptions from other students, and a lack of cultural understanding and consideration from students and staff. Another challenge that African American students face is the low student population number which makes them feel alone and without a supporting community (Rosales & Person, 2003). It has been noted that there is a difference
between the Black urban community and a lot of university campus communities which adds to feeling of separation and seclusion (Malveaux, 2002). Many African American students feel a cultural disconnect from their urban home environment and the predominantly White campus community (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). These students often feel that they must adopt biculturalism where they are able to embrace and function in two different cultures. This entails upholding an identity with their culture group and environment while also obtaining and balancing an identity within the PWI campus culture (Choy, 2001; Rodgers & Summers, 2008).

**Experiences at Predominantly White institutions compared to HBCU’s**

The environment for African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWI’s) is a little different than that of other institutions like a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). Studies have found that African American students attending HBCU’s have higher GPA’s than their peers at PWI’s (Cokley, 2000a). Cokley (2000a) did a study comparing African American students at HBCU’s to students at PWI’s. He found that there was a substantial difference in the relationships between students and faculty. The findings showed that African American students at HBCU’s reported closer, more quality, relationships with faculty, more positive perceptions of African American students and higher GPA’s than the African American students attending PWI’s (Cokley, 2000a). These findings suggest that African American students tend to have a more positive and satisfying experience at HBCU’s than at PWI’s.

In a study of FGC students attending a large HBCU, Murphy and Hicks (2006) investigated academic expectations of 203 first generation and non-first generation
undergraduates. The purpose of the study was to understand if there were differences in academic expectations of first generation and non-first generation. Results showed that first generation students attending HBCUs had higher self-confidence and a lower fear of failing than students from previous studies. Thus it was suggested that FGC students attending a HBCU were likely to be more successful than students at other types of universities (Murphy & Hicks, 2006). This level of success at HBCU’s can be contributed to the welcoming, nurturing, and supportive environment that HBCU’s tend to provide for their students (Jackson & Nunn, 2003).

**Motivation for African American Students**

Graham (1994) reviewed empirical literature that encompassed nearly 140 studies on motivation. The review was structured around general notions concerning the relationship between motivation and ethnic minorities. The purpose of the review was to explore motivational concerns as they relate to achievement among African Americans. The review suggests that when exploring African American academic achievement levels, motivation is a key factor to consider. Graham (1994) addresses the issue that there is a lack of studies focusing on the relationship of motivation and African Americans. She notes that prior research has largely been comparing Black and White learners instead of solely focusing on the thoughts and behaviors of African Americans within a motivation framework (Graham, 1994). Earlier studies of the motivation among African Americans encompassed looking at the achievement motive (Graham, 1994). There are a few studies that have explored motivation and African American students that I will discuss.
“Attribution theory and self-determination theory has been used to develop a cohesive motivational theory for African Americans” (Cokley, 2003, p. 536). Both theories address motivation originating from self (intrinsic) and motivation originating from external (extrinsic) factors (Cokley, 2003). Intrinsic motivation has been associated with good academic performance (Deci et al., 1991). Consequently, intrinsically motivated students are more likely to persist in school than students with a smaller amount of intrinsic motivation. However, research on African American students has shown that when students do not link their academic involvement to an outcome, then they are less motivated (Cokley, 2003). Studies have indicated that African American students are more extrinsically motivated whereas White students are more intrinsically motivated (Cokley, 2003). Since extrinsic motivation is positively related to academic behaviors of African American students, it has been suggested that extrinsic motivation may be more affective for African American students (Van Laar, 2002). African Americans tend to begin college with a high level of extrinsic motivation inspired by their economic potential (Cokley, 2003). However if they experience a decline in academic performance, their motivation decreases.

A study done by Caldwell and Obasi (2010) examined motivation achievement, and educational value, and how it relates to academic performance in African American students. With 202 African American college students participating, the findings from this quantitative study suggested that how a student values their education regulates the connection between motivation and academic performance. If the student initially has a high value for education then they will be initially highly motivated which contributes to higher academic performance.
Cokley (2003) did a study examining the academic motivation levels of African American and White students. He incorporated existing academic motivation and academic self-concept research in efforts to understand the motivation of African American students. The quantitative study of 687 students comprised of 396 African American students and 291 White students. Of those participants, 252 African American students attended HBCU’s and 144 were from PWI’s, whereas 267 White students attended the PWI and 23 attended an HBCU. He found that African Americans who attended HBCU’s were more confident and motivated intrinsically and that African Americans attending PWI’s were more extrinsically motivated and less confidence than their White peers. Cokley’s work highlighted the importance of contextual elements when studying student motivation and reinforced the significance of educational environment and school type (i.e HBCU, PWI) as considerable factors in the motivation of African American students. He also highlighted that the racial make-up of the institution can be a key factor noting that, “Campus racial composition is an important contextual variable to consider when researching academic motivation of African American students” (Cokley, 2003, p. 549).

**Female African American Students**

Even further than studying African American, first generation college students, I am specifically interested in the female population of African American, FGC students. What is unique about this population is that, the female African American population has not been studied as much as the male African American population.

There have been studies examining the transition of women of color to predominantly White institutions (PWI’s). This research has noted that some African
American women feel a sense of reduced racial identity at PWI’s (Watt, 2006). This feeling also leads to discontentment with self-esteem and body image (Roberts, Cash, Feingold, & Johnson, 2006). It has also been noted that the millennial African American female is more vulnerable and weak to the impact of racism because their experience with blatant acts of racism is far less than that of previous generations (Coomes, 2004; Debard, 2004). Therefore, when they do experience racist acts, they are more likely to be shocked, distracted, and deeply impacted. In a study of 196 African American females, Shorter-Goeden (2004) examined the coping methods that these women used to manage stress derived from racism and sexism. Findings revealed that African American women have encountered various forms of racism and sexism such as: sexual harassment, receiving racial insults, and feeling the need to defend stereotypes. Additional findings note that Black women value relying on social support to cope with these stresses of racial and gender discrimination.

Black women are negatively impacted by the lack of Black males on campus. Specifically, Black women also face the issue of the lack of educated Black males on college campuses (Cuyjet, 2006; NCES, 2005). A study by Cohen (2000) analyzed gender and education progress among African Americans, specifically the differences between African American males and female. She found a consistent increase in enrollment and degree awards among African American women and a decrease in African American men enrollment and graduation. Thus, on most college campuses there is a shortage of Black men for Black women to date (Coomes, 2004). This disparity produces anxiety and sometimes depression for African American women (Coomes, 2004). A qualitative study done by Littleton (2003) discussed the experiences of 16
African American students who attended predominantly White colleges. The findings revealed that even though there is often times a shortage of Black men on campus for Black women to date, Black female students feel the need to establish brother and sister relationships with Black male peers in order to create a support system which is difficult when there is a shortage of Black males on campus (Littleton, 2003). It is important that African American female students have a support system or a social network who can relate to their feelings and experiences to help with the transition and overall college experience (Dyson & Renk, 2006).

Constantine and Watt (2002) conducted a study where they explored “cultural congruity, womanist identity attitudes, and life satisfaction” (p. 189) among 165 African American women attending historically Black and predominantly White colleges and universities. The researchers set out to understand African American females’ cultural congruity and womanist identity attitudes specifically in the context of a university setting. They found that African American female students at HBCU’s described experiencing higher levels of “cultural congruity and life satisfaction” than African American female students attending PWIs (Constantine & Watt, 2002, p. 189). African American females who attend HBCU’s typically experience more happiness in their college environment and experience less social and cultural adjustment issues when compared to their peers at PWI’s. Researchers believe that an institutions climate plays a critical function in African American female students’ satisfaction and social adjustment on a college campus. Other findings exposed that attitudes of womanist identity could reconcile the connection between life satisfaction and cultural congruity. African American women with a greater womanist identity perception tend to view their college
experience through a more positive lens. Overall, the findings from this study suggest that identity, culture, and campus environment are all important factors in understanding how African American female students experience college.

**Motivation for African American Female Students**

It has been reported that there are gender differences in academic motivation amongst African American students (Cokley, 2001; Cokley, 2003). A study done by Cokley (2001) sought to determine if gender was a key variable when attempting to understand the psychosocial development of African American students. The study consisted of 258 African American undergraduate students and findings from this sample showed that African American females were more motivated, both intrinsically and extrinsically, than male students to be in college (Cokley, 2001; Cokley, 2003). Research has also noted that African American females specifically connect motivation and academic achievement with their racial identity (Cokley, 2003).

Previous studies have suggested that women frequently face sexism, and other institutional and political barriers even within educational settings (Lemons, 2003). Such prejudice hurdles can hinder their motivation, success, and persistence in college (Szymanski & Stewart, 2010). These barriers are multiplied when looking at African American women because they have an additional layer of challenges such as racial discrimination (Moore & Jones, 2001). Yet, in spite of the obstacles, African American female students have had increased rates of college enrollment for the past 33 years (Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado, 2006; Constantine & Watt, 2002).
When discussing motivation and academic outcomes amongst African American females in higher education, it is important to address self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a person’s belief in them-selves. It is the confidence that they have in their own ability. “As self-efficacy beliefs increase, the likelihood that a given task is attempted increases and the level of persistence at the task increases, which can be equated to motivation or resiliency” (Thomas, Love, Roan-Belle, Tyler, Brown & Garriott, 2009, p. 116). Therefore, self-efficacy influences motivation and persistence regardless of obstacles (Thomas, et al., 2009).

Research suggested that self-efficacy could possibly vindicate the motivation and persistence of African American females in higher education in spite of known challenges like sexism and racism (Walker, Greene, & Mansell, 2006). “Providing experiences to increase self-efficacy beliefs will enhance motivation and ultimately increase academic adjustment” (Thomas, et al., 2009, p. 167). A study done by Thomas, Love, Roan-Belle, Tyler, Brown and Garriott (2009) examined the self-efficacy beliefs, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and academic adjustment of 111 African American, female college students. The goal was to understand the “influence of self-efficacy beliefs and motivational attributes on academic adjustments of African American women” attending college (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 166). The findings showed that self-efficacy beliefs predicted intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and academic adjustment in African American women. Students with more confidence in their ability to do well had more motivation to do well. Students with such confidence in their ability were typically motivated intrinsically for the sake of obtaining acknowledge and had high levels of
academic adjustment. Ultimately an increase in intrinsic motivation can also increase academic adjustment in African American women.

Chapter Two Summary

The review of literature documents the struggles that African American first generation college students face. While this population has had some negative experiences, I use motivation theory as the framework to attempt to understand what motivates this population and understand the experiences that are unique to female, African American, FGC students at predominantly White universities.

It is through previous research that we know that a strong racial identity is linked to academic motivation and achievement in African Americans (Cokley, 2001). Researchers have been interested in understanding the motivation for African American student achievement for many years. Having a better understanding of their academic motivation will help to bring clarity to underachievement in African American students (Kaplan & Maehr, 2000).

Through past research we know that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation is directly connected to academic performance and success in college (Griffin, 2006). While African American FGC students tend to be more extrinsically motivated (Cokley, 2003), it is suggested that intrinsic motivation is more beneficial (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006) and could improve their satisfaction, and level of enjoyment in their college experience and improve their academic outcomes.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

As noted in previous chapters, it is important to understand the college experiences of African American, female, first generation college students, and how they internalize or feel about their experiences. Since the existing literature is limited in research that gives voice to how that specific population understands and derives meaning from their experiences, as FGC students in a large research university, my study gave voice to these participants’ experiences. Through this study I explored experiences of African American, female, FGC students in good academic standing who attend a large predominantly White research university to understand how they view, internalize, and make sense of their experiences. By gaining a detailed understanding of the college lived experiences that are described by the population of this study and distilling prominent themes embedded in their accounts of personal experiences, I have compiled findings that may help other African American, female, FGC students find common ground with those who have made similar journeys as FGC students learn about potential challenges early, and recognize beneficial services and resources. Although past literature has explored some of the challenges that first generation college students face, this study was designed to actually capture the voices of the female, African American, FGC students themselves as they describe their lived experiences. I also anticipate that the results of this study may help parents of female, African American, FGC students to better understand how to prepare their student and/or seek other assistance for their student early in the process. Lastly, educators, administrators, and student affairs professionals may better understand the needs of this group, as well as produce more targeted support and initiatives to assist students. Understanding the preparation for, the
transition to, and the actual college experience provides a big picture and encompasses the many elements that could impact a students’ college experience. If administrators and educators know what African American FGC students’ specific needs are, then we can more efficiently and effectively help them through their college experience.

In this study, a phenomenological qualitative approach with a lens of Motivation Theory is used to understand and capture the students’ experiences.

**Phenomenology**

In order to further investigate how first generation, African American, female college students view and internalize their experiences, this qualitative study used a phenomenological approach. This approach aids researchers in the study of a human experience, also known as a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological studies are often focused on the meaning of the lived experiences for several similarly situated individuals (Creswell, 2007). It is understood to be a methodology that engages the researcher and participants not only in description but also an interpretative process. As Creswell (2007) mentioned, “Phenomenology is not only a description but it is seen as interpretive process” (p. 59). Creswell (2007) summarizes phenomenology as a “research method to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 58). Creswell (2007) also says that, “Phenomenological studies describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). Therefore, this methodology seemed to be the best fit for studying how female, African American, first generation college students experience college at a large, predominantly White research university.
There are two commonly acknowledged approaches to a phenomenology study; hermeneutic (or interpretive) and transcendental (Creswell, 2007). The hermeneutical/interpretive approach is focused on interpretations whereas the transcendental approach is focused more on the descriptions that the participants give of their experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). More specifically, hermeneutical phenomenology is to interpret or make clear and is typically employed to reveal a deeper or new understanding. Van Manen (1990) describes hermeneutical phenomenology as “oriented toward lived experience (phenomenology) and interpreting the texts of life (hermeneutics)” (p. 59). The hermeneutical approach “develops depth of meaning through iterative attempts to interpret text or other objects” (McKenzie, 2008, p. 124). Transcendental phenomenology is beneficial when participants can provide a description of their experiences (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2008). The transcendental approach offers a systematic method to analyze lived experiences data (Moustakas, 1994).

For the purpose of this study, I primarily used the transcendental approach, allowing my participants to fully describe what they were experiencing. However, the interviews generated moments of deep reflection by the participants, therefore, producing hermeneutic-like moments of self-discovery by participants. While the transcendental approach was mainly employed, the participants also demonstrated instances of hermeneutic thinking throughout their interview. Listening to the participants describe their experiences through the transcendental approach while also hearing the participants reflect and make meaning through the hermeneutic method enabled me to develop a thorough and clearer understanding of the experiences being studied (McKenzie, 2008).
Subjects, access, and setting

Due to the nature of a phenomenological study, all participants should have experience with a common phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In this study, this phenomenon is being a first generation, African American, female, college student in good academic standing at a large predominantly White research university. The large university setting was chosen because research has shown that these universities afford a different and unique student experience relative to other types of colleges and universities. Large university characteristics include: (a) desirability due to name recognition; (b) prestige based on research and resource base (Volkwein & Sweitzer, 2006); (c) a larger professor student ratio; (d) overall enrollment typically exceeding 25,000 students; (e) larger class sizes; (f) differentiated faculty reward structures; (g) and decentralized student services (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). As a result of the combination of many of these characteristics, the dynamic for students is different in a larger research university as it relates to adjusting, fitting in, learning and meeting new people (Morley, 2004). In addition, when the large research university also serves a predominantly White student population, the minority ratio is smaller and sometimes feels lonelier at a larger, predominantly White institution (Guffrifa, 2008; Nelson-Laird et al., 2007).

The participants for this study were recruited from a large, predominantly White research university located in the United States midwest region, which is ideal for the study given its location and profile. The university is accessible to and enrolls students from in-state, out of state residents, and international locations. In spring 2014, the institution had over 49,000 students, over 37,000 of which were undergraduates. The
student population was 51.6% female and 48.4% male. There were 16.6% students of color; 6.2% were African Americans. This site represents the desired university type for this study. This university was selected as a site that would enable me to more readily conduct face to face interviews given the location and my proximity to the campus. As an employee of the university, I have relationships with key administrators that also supported my access to offices that have listings of the population of students that I recruited for this research.

**Sampling, participant identification, and selection**

The sampling criterion for this study was that participants needed to be African American, female, first generation college students, in their junior or senior year of their undergraduate degree and in good academic standing. It was important for participants to be in their junior or senior year, because they were further along in their experience, thus, they would have more college experience to discuss. Also, being a junior or senior is closer to graduation, which further supports the criteria of being in good academic standing. Lastly, participants could not be a transfer student and could only have attended the large, predominantly White research institution in efforts to adequately address the full two to three year experience.

Convenience sampling along with purposeful sampling were the original methods of sampling. Once the study was implemented, criterion sampling and snowball sampling came into play and was used to recruit potential participants. Convenience sampling is typically employed when participants are conveniently accessible to the researcher because of their close proximity (Morse, 2010). Creswell (2009) suggests that
convenience sampling can be used to save cost and time. Since my research recruitment plan drew from a student pool from one university, I was able to start the recruitment process by making initial recruitment contacts through my connectedness to the University. Thus, convenience sampling was used due to the research site and setting.

I also strategically employed purposeful sampling to find students who could answer the research questions and best help me understand the phenomenon. As Creswell (2009) indicated, “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (p. 178). For this reason, purposeful sampling techniques employing particular criterion sampling was used to identify appropriate potential participants who met the specific requirements. I recruited students (see Appendix A) asking university personnel to forward my recruitment flier to students who they thought may meet my study criteria. Upon receiving contacts from potentially interested students, I followed up with a direct recruitment email (see Appendix B) reiterating the study participant criteria.

Once I began receiving responses from potential participants, I also used snowball sampling, the process involving participants referring additional participants (Creswell, 2008) in order to widely inform and promote participation in the study. Snowball sampling is a type of purposeful sampling where the researcher asks participants to identify and recommend others, who fit the study participant criteria, to participate in the study (Creswell, 2008). Snowball sampling is generally used because it can help to recruit a large number of participants, and it is convenient because you are able to use the suggestions and referrals of others (Creswell, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2001). In this study, snowball sampling was beneficial because I utilized the help of participants and
others in order to recruit more participants through their networks which maximized the opportunity for a good sample. This “chain-sampling” method assisted me in increasing the sample group causing it to enlarge more quickly, based on the recommendations of others, and maximize the likelihood that participants matched the study criteria (Creswell, 2008). Ultimately, the method of snowball sampling helped to spread the word about the study to other potential participants and helped reach populations that may not have known otherwise such as “hidden populations” (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004).

**Recruitment procedures**

This qualitative methodology required permission and approval from Western Michigan University’s (WMU) Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) before beginning this study. Prior to beginning the study of African American, female, first generation college students, an HSIRB proposal was submitted and approved to research human subjects and to protect the rights of the participants. In this study, participants were recruited and participated in in-depth interviews.

Participants were recruited and selected in a variety of ways. Once I secured HSIRB approval, I distributed a “Request for Assistance” letter (see Appendix A) to advisors, relevant program coordinators, and applicable student groups (i.e. African American sororities, African American student government groups, African American academic/major organizations, etc.). Advisors, coordinators, and student groups were asked to refer students that might fit the specific criteria of this study. I also contacted a variety of offices including the applicable offices at the institution that specifically and intentionally work with disadvantaged or “at-risk” students, especially first generation
college students. I asked them to send out a recruitment “Letter of Invitation” email (see Appendix B) to participate in my study to all of their African American, female, first generation college students. These offices were good, efficient resources because the primary population that is served through these offices is minority, first generation college students. Therefore, they already have a detailed and targeted database that they can access for recruitment purposes. Participants were also recruited via social media announcements.

Once potential participants responded to the letter of invitation, I sent them an email (Appendix C) to schedule them a time to learn more about the study and go over the consent form (Appendix D). Once the potential participant and I reviewed the consent form, I distributed a participant screening questionnaire (Appendix E) to make sure all criterion were met. Participants were required to sign the consent form before moving forward. Once I received the results from the screening questionnaire and the criteria had been met, I proceeded with the interview. There were two students who sent emails with an interest in participating in the study who did not meet my criteria since they had lower than a 3.0 grade point average. When I received responses from those students who did not meet the criteria, I thanked them for their interest and informed them that they do not meet the criteria and thus cannot participate in the study (see Appendix J). From the potential sample pool, I accepted the first 10 students who met the study criteria and completed the consent and screening process as participants. The final sample included 10 African American, female, first generation college students in their junior or senior year attending a large, predominantly White, research university in the midwest region of the United States.
The study began with 10 participants and I left the option open for additional participants to be added as needed to saturate the topic. Once the initial sample of 10 participants was selected and confirmed, I contacted and retained the names of the other potential participants who were initially identified as potential participants. I let the students know that I reached the amount of people needed for the study but that I may contact them later on if needed (see Appendix I). Retention of the names was beneficial to me in the event that one of my participants later decided to withdraw from the study. By having access to the names of students who were initially interested in my study, I had the ability to allow them to participate in the study later on if needed without having to go through recruitment again should a student withdraw. Additionally, the extra potential participants could be later contacted if I needed to add more participants to reach saturation on the questions guiding this study.

Saturation occurs once the researcher has determined that there is no new data or no additional information can alter the essence or key elements of meaning (Creswell, 2008). I reviewed notes after the interviews to help determine if saturation had been reached. Although there is no exact science or computation to know when saturation has been attained, it involves going back and forth between the data and analysis and is usually clear to the researcher (Creswell, 2008; Ziebland & McPherson, 2006). Reaching saturation was important because it validates that there is no new or additional information or key issues to emerge from the original participant pool targeted for study (Lingard, Albert & Levinson, 2008). Although additional names were retained, they were not needed because saturation was reached with the original 10 participants.
Informed consent and confidentiality

Before data collection began, each participant was given a consent form (see Appendix D). To ensure ethical research, participants agreed to be audio recorded during all interviews. Data recording strategies and devices were only used with the consent of the participants. All participants agreed to be audio recorded during all interviews. If they had not agreed to being recorded, I would have solely taken notes during the interview without using a recording device. Audiotaping the interviews gave me a precise record of the dialogue (Creswell, 2008). An electronic recorder was used so that the flow of the conversation would not be disrupted (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and notes were taken as needed.

Participants were notified that their identity would be protected. Their identity is not connected to any of the data as codes and pseudo names were used in place of the participants’ names to protect their anonymity. All information was maintained on a password protected electronic device that was only accessible to me during the study. All of these terms and conditions were listed on the HSIRB application. Participants were also informed that they may stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence. Through the consent form, they were also informed about data collection methods and any risks associated with the study. I explained to the participants that the purpose of the interviews, as noted on the consent form, was to understand the lived experiences that African American, female, first generation college students faced, how they internalized those challenges, and what motivated them. Before each interview began, I collected signed consent forms from the participants. I gave one copy to the participant and I kept one copy for my records.
**Data collection methods, procedures, and instrumentation**

To understand the phenomenon of African American, female, first generation college students and their lived experiences, this study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews for data collection (Creswell, 2007). According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), an in-depth interview can be described as a casual conversation between the participant and the researcher. Marshall and Rossman (2011) also explained that in-depth interviewing is meant to reveal the perspectives, thoughts, and feelings of the participant. In-depth interviews for this study were face to face in person. The setting that each interview took place was on campus in a private office to ensure a safe, neutral, quiet, and familiar environment to interview participants. If follow-up was needed, telephone calls and emails were options to collect more information. I perceived that this method would have been more convenient for the participants if any follow-up was needed.

Before interviewing started, I developed forms known as interview and data recording protocols (see Appendix G). Interview protocols include the broad interview questions and were used during the interview when asking questions, whereas data recording protocols were used to record information during the interviews (Creswell, 2008). An interview protocol was designed by me, as the researcher, and was meant to produce some structure during interviews and to provide any necessary instruction. The interview protocol form also provided me a convenient place to take notes (Creswell, 2008).
Interviews employed open-ended questions to obtain the voices and experiences of the participants. The in-depth interview strategies were employed in order to capture the deep meaning of the experience in the words of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Creswell (2008) states that “in qualitative research, the purpose is much more open ended than in quantitative research” (p. 55). Qualitative interviews and open-ended questions helped me to understand the significant phenomenon to ultimately answer the research questions (Creswell, 2008). Open-ended questions allowed the participants to discuss their experiences and feelings without restraint (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Open-ended interview questions also enabled further exploration (Patton, 2002). One-on-one interviews allowed for continuous, uninterrupted conversations and the articulation of feelings, thoughts and experiences. This method afforded the participants all the time that they needed to have the floor without having to share discussion time with other participants. One-on-one interviews also reduced and eliminated distraction and influence from other participants.

Interview questions were closely connected with the research questions. In order to get a complete and clear picture, the participants were encouraged to provide explicit details, stories and examples of their experiences through their interview responses. To obtain more information from the participants, I asked follow-up questions and employed probes when necessary (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Probes are sub-sets of questions that are used to clarify responses or when the researcher needs more detailed information from the participants (Creswell, 2008). Each interview was approximately 60 minutes and the process of completing all interviews took place over the period of a month. If needed, there was an option for a follow-up phone call or email after the transcription
took place in order to further explore certain areas or get clarification on certain topics. As part of quality assurance, a follow-up conversation via phone or email was also an appropriate choice in order to extract and discuss reoccurring themes amongst participants if needed be. This follow-up process was not needed.

After each interview was conducted, the next step was for the audio-taped information to be transcribed. An analysis of the interview results took place followed by a summary and my recommendations for future research.

**Data analysis processes and procedures**

The data analysis approach that was employed in order to investigate FGC students’ full college experience was the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, also known as Moustakas approach (Creswell, 2007). Using Moustakas approach, the analysis process went as follows: Before any analyzing took place, I provided my own descriptive personal experiences with the research. This helped to put my experiences and connections with the research on the front line so that people were aware of my association with the topic, also known as bracketing (Creswell, 2007). Since I, as the researcher, am an African American, female, first generation college student, it makes this study more interesting and personal for me. I was passionate about giving this population a platform and a voice to share their experiences with integrity while unveiling their encounters to the broader population. Although my experiences cannot be completely set aside, employing bracketing in the analysis helped to uncover my connection so that focus could then be fully placed on the participants of the study (Creswell, 2007).
The data analyzing process started with me organizing and preparing the data for analysis (Creswell, 2007). Before analyzing took place, I remembered to focus on the participants’ language keeping personal biases and stereotypes separate and away from my interpretations. This is known as bracketing. Bracketing is when a researcher intentionally puts their own belief and thoughts about the research topic aside so that they can sufficiently illustrate the experiences of the participants (Carpenter, 2007; Chan, Fung & Chien, 2013). The process of bracketing has been in my mind throughout the research process realizing that bracketing is not just limited to the data collection and analysis stage. To prepare for quality interviews, I put aside my related knowledge and beliefs in order to precisely and truthfully hear the experiences that the participants describe. Chan, Fung and Chien (2013) state that researchers should be aware of their preconceptions in order to effectively put them aside. Thus, I used a reflective diary to acknowledge my connection and beliefs about the topic at hand. Using a reflective diary helped me acquire and cultivate bracketing skills and entailed writing down opinions, feelings and perceptions (Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson & Poole, 2004).

Interview data was organized by date, time, and method of data-collection. Digital files were marked and labeled for organization and accuracy. Interview recordings and notes were then transcribed precisely by me to allow for total immersion in the data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by putting notes into text data and kept in an electronic data base.

As each interview was transcribed, I read through the transcriptions thoroughly spending significant time with each interview transcription. Reading through all of the data and re-familiarizing myself with the data enhanced my overall understanding of the
interviews and the experiences (Creswell, 2007). I paid particular attention to and noted significant phrases or sentences. From the thorough reading of the transcriptions, I pulled out significant statements (or invivo codes) from each interview that represented key points and concepts about their experience. Once I had a general comprehension of the individual interviews and significant statements, I began coding. The coding process consisted of organizing and clustering the data into related categories and then labeling categories using specific terms and color codes. Creswell (2009) noted that the terms are sometimes based on the actual language of the participant. The terms for this study were determined based on data from the interview using descriptive language to label the general ideas and comments that the participants discussed.

The next step was for me to create a spreadsheet list, using Microsoft Excel, of all key points and concepts for each interview. Once each interview key points and concepts were identified, I looked across all interviews to see if there were any commonalities. This is also known as horizontalization (Creswell, 2007). During horizontalization, the researcher “lists every significant statement relevant to the topic and gives it equal value” (Creswell, 2007, p. 235). I then created a brief narrative describing each participant using a pseudonym. Interview data was then analyzed by grouping common data according to categories and retrieving coded themes. Finally, analysis occurred as themes were explored (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Categories were further analyzed in an effort to identify emerging themes based on occurring statements that appeared in the data about how the participants are experiencing the phenomenon and the meaning they derived from their experiences. After themes were established, I recorded the participants’ phenomenon experiences.
This is known as the “textural description” and encompasses verbatim examples (Creswell, 2007). Next, the “how” of the experience was described. This is called “structural description” and is when the researcher reflects on the context and setting of the phenomenon experience. Both textural and structural descriptions can be combined to produce the general essence of the experience or phenomenon, also known as the “essential, invariant structure” (Creswell, 2007). This process ultimately resulted in me being able to explain what the participants experienced and how they experienced it.

While moving through the stages of data analysis, I developed analytical memos by writing down how I believed that the data was coming together in various patterns or themes. This form of analytic writing helps to uncover or explain meaning of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Analytical memos also enhance the analytic process by allowing the researcher to engage in a continuing dialogue with themselves about what is emerging or developing in the data (Creswell, 2008). Creswell (2007) noted that analytical memos can “make implicit thoughts become explicit” (p. 290). An in-depth description of the data can then be formulated from examining data thoroughly and attempting to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2008). After engaging in this process I suggested interpretations of what I learned. This “brings meaning and coherence, and tells a story” to make sense of it all (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Patton (2002) noted that “interpretation means attaching significance to what was found. Making sense of the findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, and otherwise imposing order” (p.480). Lastly, a thorough, clear description of the phenomenon was written in narrative form including information from both the textural and structural description. Data was then represented in the form of a
discussion and applicable tables. The goal throughout this process was to capture and represent the participants’ voice so that others (i.e. administrators, faculty, advisors, parents and others) can better understand the experiences and challenges that they face and how they internalize these challenges.

**Trustworthiness of Data**

When engaging in qualitative data, it is important to employ validity and quality assurance mechanisms. Qualitative research heavily relies on verification methods to ensure data credibility and quality (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Patton, 2002). There are multiple standards of quality for qualitative research such as validity, credibility, rigor, or trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005). It has been noted that, “Qualitative research is contextual and subjective versus generalizable and objective” (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2007, p. 524). While quantitative data is analyzed through statistical procedures and formulas, qualitative analysis uses verification or validation processes to ensure credibility and accuracy. Validity techniques ensure that the collected data, transcriptions, and interpretations are truly based on the responses of the participant interviews and not those of the researcher. Polkinghorne (2005) noted that, “the validity and trustworthiness of qualitative research is related to the selection of viable sources that promote a deepening of the understanding of the experience inquired about” (p. 5).

Marshall and Rossman (2011) outline several validity techniques to enhance trustworthiness such as: prolonged engagement, member checks, triangulation, peer debriefing, and external audits. Creswell (2007) suggests that researchers use a minimum of two validation methods and techniques in qualitative research. For the purpose of this
study, the two validity techniques that were employed to enhance trustworthiness were: member checking, and external audit.

One way that I tried to ensure validity was to perform “member-checking” (Creswell, 2007). Member-checking was used to check with the participants to be sure that the interview transcripts and the interpretations are accurate. Before the findings were complete, the participants were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts through the member-check process. Participants were able to add to or expand upon transcripts if they desired. Participants could also correct the researcher’s depiction of their words if they were not precise (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The actual process consisted of me sharing the interview transcriptions in writing with the participants through a written report via email and then asking them if the report was accurate or if they had anything else to add (see Appendix H). Accuracy questions were regarding the descriptions, themes, and researchers’ interpretation (Creswell, 2008). This method provided credibility of the results.

In addition to member-checking, to verify data, I conducted an external audit where I involved someone external who is outside of the project or research (Creswell, 2008). For this study, the external auditor was a professional in higher education with some experience with qualitative research who can provide an objective assessment of the study. The process of external auditing involved an external person doing a thorough review of the study, looking into various aspects, and then reporting the strengths and weaknesses of the study. The report can be done in writing or via verbal communication and resembles that of an evaluation (Creswell, 2008). External audits can happen either
during a study or once a study has concluded. I employed the external audit during the study so that if issues were identified, they could be addressed sooner rather than later.

The Researcher

My interest in the area of at-risk populations such as first generation college students began to develop in high school when I first became aware of supportive programs like Upward Bound, the Boys and Girls Club, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and many more. I was considered to be “at-risk” as a young Black child who lived in inner-city Flint, MI; a city that has been ranked in the top five for most violent places in the nation for several years. In 2010, 2011, and 2012, Business Insider’s cited Flint as the number one spot for most dangerous city. With a violent environment, and many business and school closures, it is the norm to deem the youth of Flint as at-risk, especially if they are African American. My parents did not have a college education but they always expected and encouraged me to graduate from college. They did not want me to be another “statistic” (committing a crime, being a victim of a violent crime, or succumbing to teenage pregnancy). Pushing me and keeping me involved in numerous extra-curricular activities was their way of making sure that I stayed on track and was surrounded by people who could help and support me throughout my education. Consequently, together we sought out programs that I became involved in as a participant during adolescence and then later on as a mentor.

My interest in at-risk populations was heightened as I transitioned from high school to college, as well as during my undergraduate education. During this time I came into contact with a large number of African American, first generation students who were
either struggling or on the verge of failing, threatening to give up, or trying to beat the odds to actually be the first in their families to attend and graduate from college. I will always remember attending a summer transition camp at my undergraduate university the summer before my freshmen year. The goal of this camp was to help prepare a group of incoming minority freshmen for the rigor of college by introducing them to campus resources and a network of MSU faculty and staff. During the welcoming introduction of this camp, the speaker said to the group “look to your left, now look to your right. One of them will not be here when you graduate in four years.” This statement was made based on the average retention rate of minority students at the university at that time. That statement resonated with me and stayed with me throughout my entire undergraduate experience. I knew that I did not want to be the student that did not make it and sadly, there were indeed students who attended that camp with me who did not remain at the university and who did not graduate.

During my undergraduate experience, while I always remained in good-academic standing, I still found myself struggling and having to study more than my non FGC peers. I graduated high-school with high honors so I was accustomed to getting good grades and getting them easily. It was typical for me to achieve the highest grade in my high school courses with ease. However, that was not the case during my undergraduate experience, especially during my freshmen year. I did not always get the highest grade in the class and in fact, there were times when I got a much lower grade than what I anticipated or was used to. This became troubling and discouraging and all of a sudden, attending a large university was a daunting experience that I questioned if I was ready for.
It was through my own experiences as an African American, female, first generation college student, as well as those around me, that I realized that this specific population truly faces challenges and disadvantages that are many times no fault of their own. Some of these challenges are internal (self-esteem, confidence, etc.) and others are external (academic, financial, social, emotional, racial, etc.). As an African American, female, first generation college student, I am highly connected to this study because of my own experiences as well as those experiences of my social group. As the researcher it is imperative to know and understand how my thoughts, feelings, knowledge and experiences connect to the participants and the topic that is being studied. I have a personal connection to this research and to this population.

As a first generation college student who attended a large predominantly White research university, I have faced many of the challenges that are described in past studies and have had to overcome them. Each time I entered a class for the first time, I always searched for another African American student and many times I found that I was the only one in classes with over 200 students, which could be uncomfortable at times. It was challenging for me to approach faculty to expose my uncertainties and confusion. Consequently, I struggled with developing strong relationships with my professors resulting in minimal support for recommendation letters and other futuristic endeavors. Often times it was intimidating for me to speak out, whether asking a question or simply commenting, in a large class setting. It was discouraging to learn about classmates receiving internships and research experiences because of the supervisor being a friend of their family’s when most of my professional network were not in fields that required or supported educational and professional fields. As tremendously supportive and
enormously encouraging as my parents and other family members were, there were even times when I felt completely alone because they were not able to understand the struggle or guide me accurately through the experience.

I saw these mentioned challenges amongst many of my FGC peers but I also seen that many of my FGC student peers allowed the various challenges to discourage them instead of motivate them. Therefore, I am especially interested in how some students are motivated and encouraged to be the first in their family to attend and graduate from college while others are discouraged and feel it is impossible to break the cycle, and therefore do not attend or graduate from college. I am very interested in how first generation college students make meaning of their college experiences and how they internalize these experiences. Overall, my interest in conducting this study aligns with my background, my personal experiences, and my professional aspiration of working with and serving at-risk populations such as African American first generation college students.

My own experiences has influenced the way I framed this study with the intention of getting the stories and hearing the voices of the participants and their individual experiences. Throughout this study, I dug deeper within myself to reflect on my experiences and to tell my story through epoche. Reflecting on my experiences revealed some predispositions that I had to bracket for the validity of this study. In order to set those biases aside, I wrote in a journal about my feelings and thoughts telling pieces of my story. Once the potential biases were identified they were set aside so that I could fully and clearly focus on the participants’ voice and experience.
Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how African American, female, first generation college students make meaning of their college experience at a large predominantly White research university. The results from my study may help parents, students, administrators and educators better understand this population and how to best serve and assist them. While the results from my study may not yield or test specific ways to go about serving first generation students and how to implement more support, the results do explain how to understand the population, what they encounter, their various experiences, and how they personally deal with them. Future studies can investigate the most appropriate types of support that these students desire and need.

There are some limitations to the study. Collecting such large amounts of data through an in-depth interview can be difficult to interpret correctly. In efforts to try to avoid this issue, the strategy of “member checking” was employed to ensure validity as mentioned above (Creswell, 2007). Also, my personal experiences of being a first generation college student may have influences on how I interpret the interviews. However the procedure of bracketing throughout the research process, even before data collection and analyzing began, was employed to address this potential limitation.

Another potential limitation of my study is the possibility that the participants did not go into as great of depth or detail during their interviews as they could have. Probing questions were employed to attempt to address this potential issue. Another limitation in my study could be the student’s fear of embarrassment. Perhaps the student did not want to fully disclose the lack of knowledge and awareness that they or their parents possess.
regarding college preparation and experiences. Perhaps they did not want to fully expose how they felt inadequate, underprepared or unaware because of embarrassment. I did my best to ensure that the participants understood that they were in a safe and comfortable environment.

Lastly, I specifically chose to study students who are successful. I also chose to draw the entire sample from one university. These sampling decisions might limit the use of this study’s results when looking at the population of African American, female, first generation college students. Because I am choosing to look at “successful” students, I did not hear the voices of those who were not successful. In addition, since I am only focusing on one university, then my study may be offering a narrow perspective.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS/DATA/FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of African American, female, first generation college students attending a large predominantly White research university. Based on previous literature, this population is disadvantaged in many ways (Engle, 2007; Love, 2008). Some challenges that are associated with this population include low socio-economic status, lack of guidance, and they are generally less prepared academically (McMillan, 2004; Nelson-Laird, 2007; Parks-Yancy, 2012). Although there is literature concerning first generation college students, this study focuses on the voice of the participants and gives them a platform to use their own words to discuss their experiences and associated motivation through individual interviews.

This study was viewed using the lens of Motivation Theory. It was important to understand what motivates these students when considering college student achievement. Specifically, motivation theory was used as a lens to view what motivates students to attend, persist, and be successful in college. Vohra-Gupta (2007) suggested that students achieve higher academic success when they are intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically. Hutchinson (2004) noted that motivation is not always constant as it can be impacted, positively or negatively, by many factors. While there is motivation theory literature about the academic success of college students (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), there
is very little about the motivation factors specifically associated with first generation, African American, female college students.

For the purpose of this phenomenological study, I conducted 60-90 minute, one on one, face to face interviews with 10 participants who agreed to be audio recorded. All participants were African American, female, first generation college students in good academic standing (with a grade point average of 3.0 or higher) in their junior or senior year of college. Convenience, criterion, purposeful, and snowball sampling were used to identify and recruit potential participants. Participants were recruited using a variety of methods such as participant referrals from administrators, faculty, and staff, connecting with student organizations on campus, social media announcements, and word of mouth. Below you will find brief profiles and narratives of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect privacy, confidentiality, and identities.

**Description of sample**

The sample consisted of 10 first generation, African American, female college students enrolled at a predominantly White university in Michigan. They were all traditional-aged undergraduate students (19-22 years old) in their junior or senior year in good academic standing with a GPA of 3.0 or higher. All participants completed face to face interviews and no participants dropped out of the study. In table 2, I provide a summary of the participant profile and demographics. This table shows a brief overall description of the group. Much more detail concerning the participants was gathered during the interviews and will be captured in their individual narratives.
Table 2

Description of Participants/Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Class Level</th>
<th>G.P.A.</th>
<th>Degree Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>Sophomore/Junior</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Zoology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Pre-Medicine and Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tia</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Social Relations &amp; Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariana</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shayla</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Pre-Med &amp; Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyra</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Below are the introductions for the 10 young women who participated in my study. Their pseudonyms are: Ariana, April, Brittany, Kim, Kyra, Kelly, Monica, Mia, Shayla, and Tia. They all seemed genuinely willing to participate in this study and expressed appreciation for being offered a platform to tell their story without reserve.

**Participant Narratives**

The following narratives present the women in my study as individuals first before I go on to attribute meaning to elements of their collective experience.
Participant 1: Ariana

Ariana is in her junior year of college and has a 3.3 GPA. She started off as a psychology major and is currently transitioning into Human Resources Development. She is an out of state student, originally from Northeast Ohio where she graduated from a distinct high school known for their excellent academics. She was well-prepared for college and had taken many advanced placement courses and many of her friends and high school classmates went on to Ivy League colleges.

It was never really a question “if” she was going to college or not. She came from a suburban family (middle to upper middle class), money was never really an issue and her entire family has always been supportive of her. Her mother had a track scholarship to Finley University but did not attend because she became pregnant with her. Although her family did not have much academic experience or knowledge, her parents and grandparents all came together to help her with college applications and financial forms, etc.

Ariana described herself as a silent leader and acknowledges that. She can handle difficult situations and tasks but gets anxiety about asking for help and being in front of people. She is very independent and likes to figure stuff out on her own. Ariana was not very emotional or dramatic during the interview. She was serious and her responses were straight to the point. Although she answered all of the questions fully, it was tough to “crack her shell” to feel some emotion from her. In her interview she mentioned that the social aspect and her social identity were the biggest challenges she had faced while on campus. She struggled with the campus culture of “Black versus White” distinction and actually found herself identifying and socializing more with White students than Black
students. Consequently, she is very confused about where she fits in and is often teased about “acting White or suburban” rather than “acting Black.” In agitation, she admits that she feels judged by Black people and does not feel like she fits in even though she is Black. Therefore, she stays to herself and away from uncomfortable situations. She says that she is “20 years old and is still having an identity crisis.”

**Participant 2: April**

April is a senior with a 3.0 in Psychology who originally started off as a Premed major. Although many of her high school class-mates did not attend college, she always did well and surrounded herself with people who also went on to college. Her parents always had the expectation that she would go to college so she felt like attending college went without saying. She did not necessarily understand the meaning of being a FGC student at first. She felt that FGC status was always portrayed as a negative stereotype. Accordingly, she neglected to apply to many applicable scholarships because she was turned off by the essay prompts asking for “sob stories” or hardship obstacles that she has overcome.

Throughout the entire interview, April was very sensitive and emotional. She really connected with me and immediately let her guard down and poured out her feelings. She cried a couple different times in the interview showing sincerity when she discussed her struggle, triumph, and pride. She had no problem discussing some of the challenges and failures that she had encountered while also proudly explaining her accomplishments. Ultimately, April appeared to be sensitive, emotional, fragile, and insecure in some regard. Socially, she flourishes but she admittedly lacks confidence with her academic abilities compared to her non-Black peers. She is quiet in class and
refrains from speaking because she thinks people are judging her vocabulary since it is not as extensive as theirs may be. Ultimately she believes in herself and she is proud of how far she has come. She relies on her religion and faith for strength and also credits her family for being there for her and rooting her on. April is really close to her family and her church family and she would go home very often during her freshman year to attend various family, church, and community events.

April was struggling with her premed major, she tried to hold on because she did not want to “be the black girl who did not know anything,” she also “wanted to prove to her roommate that she could handle it” after her roommate told her that she probably would not be a doctor because she had failed an exam. Initially, April thought that a pre-med major (engineering or business) were the only majors that could get her a really good job and she later realized that she had selected her major for the wrong reasons. Once she finally changed her major from pre-med to psychology her parents were not pleased. They always wanted her to be a pediatrician and were not really open to her majoring in anything else. So eventually she stopped talking to her parents about the thought of changing her major. They were not on board until after she changed it and they started to see her grades dramatically improving.

**Participant 3: Brittany**

Brittany is majoring in zoology. She has a 3.2 GPA with junior status. She graduated as salutatorian from a small high school with only 70 students in the graduating class. It was always her plan to attend college and her parents always had that expectation. In fact, her parents made her enroll in a specialized technological program
within her high school so that it would further prepare her for her future. Brittany explained that her parents were supportive and they were very happy and proud that she was a college student.

During Brittany’s interview, she started off what appeared to be hesitant, careful, and guarded and then suddenly she opened up and began to let her story flow out with emotion. She required a lot of probing because it took her a while to open up. Once she did open up, tears came along with it. She feels pressure to do well, to get a good job, and to make more money than her parents so that she can have a better life. Brittany is very shy and it was hard for her to adjust to college, coming alone to such a large campus with no friends, so “few people like her” as in African American students, and no parents close by to physically rely on. She called her transition a “culture shock.” She found it challenging to approach people to make friends and seek help from professors. Eventually she found comfort when she joined a campus Christian group.

Participant 4: Kim

Kim is a senior with a 3.7 GPA, formerly majoring in pre-med and sociology, who recently changed her major to nursing. She is from West Africa where her dad was a teacher. She attributes her academic preparedness to him because he started teaching her things very early on when she was a little girl. She skipped kindergarten and was immediately moved into first grade. Being from Sierra Leone, her mom did not have the opportunity to attend school and get an education at all. Kim is the only girl in a family of many brothers and thus, her mother was very strict with her, especially concerning her education and grades. Although she graduated high school with a 4.0 GPA, her mom would still have an issue with a B on an individual assignment. She also commented that
her mother was not pleased when she changed her major from pre-med to nursing; however, her mother’s lack of enthusiasm did not bother her much. She is tough, and knows what she wants. While she knows there is pressure to please her family, make them proud, and ultimately help them financially, she says that she does not let the pressure get to her. She does what is best for her. Yet, she and her mom are still very close. During the interview she laughed and jokingly says that she is “scared of her mother” and scared to let her down which is her ultimate driver.

After Kim’s father left the home when she was in high school, she felt obligated to help her mom with the bills. She worked part time and would sometimes give her mom money. This was actually never stressful for her. She explained that she did not know any different and felt balanced with work and school. Kim feels that it is her responsibility to continue with her education to pave the way for her family. She feels that she “has to better herself so that she can go back and possibly help her family members who are still in Africa.” She embraces her African roots and wishes to display them more publicly and prominently with her friends and classmates.

Throughout the interview, Kim focused the discussion on academics although it was evident that her family and background shaped who she is today. She mentioned that her mom did not let her go out and have much fun with her friends in high-school and she secretly resents her mom for not allowing her to have a social life because it transferred into her adult life. When she got to college, she said that she tried to go out and have fun but she realized that she did not know how to, she had no interest, or would be ready to leave early. She realizes that she is a little shy socially and she also does not like to ask questions in class.
Participant 5: Kyra

Kyra is a senior with a 3.4 GPA in accounting. Most of her friends graduated high school and went off to college throughout the U.S. and she acknowledges that her high school program helped her think through her future career goals. She is from Detroit, Michigan and was raised in a single parent home. Although she knows her dad, she did not really receive a lot of support from him and does not really talk to him much. Her mom just started college and is very excited that they are both college students simultaneously. Kyra is very close with her mom, talks to her often, and views her as a significant support system. Her mom is very encouraging and proud of her and wants to help in whatever way that she can. Most of the support that her mom gives is emotional because her mom is unable to help financially or academically. As a Christian who is working on her relationship with God, she has intentionally decided not to date so that she is not distracted in her commitment to her faith and religious/spiritual growth. She attributes her whole being, her successes, and her current path to her foundation in her faith and her values.

Kyra is very independent, determined, focused, and was not afraid of challenges or the college transition. She is comfortable talking to professors when she needs help and attends office hours. She says, “That’s what they are there for and that is what they are getting paid for, so I will utilize them.” She realizes that she has a purpose to be at the university and is very motivated, even by the challenges and adversity. She is not bothered by attending a PWI and views it as a learning experience to get adjusted to what the real world (corporate world) looks like.
Participant 6: Kelly

Kelly is a senior majoring in pre-med and Spanish with a 3.6 GPA. She attended a predominantly White high school where she was very involved, and graduated the top of her class with many AP courses. Her parents were supportive of her attending college and always stressed how important education was. It was never really a factor to not attend college and she never really realized that she was a first generation college student. She always knew that she was supposed to go. Kelly attributes much of her motivation from her supportive parents even though she says that they still do not really understand her college experience, especially that of a student in a high pressure, high level major.

Kelly only applied to two colleges because she did not really know much about college or what she wanted to do. She was overwhelmed during the application and transition process. Many of her personal friends stayed home at the local university. Once she arrived at college, she admitted to getting distracted, but not for long. Intuitively, she was able to encourage and remind herself to get back on track and keep working hard towards her goals. She handles difficulty well and adversity does not seem to throw her off.

Participant 7: Monica

Monica is a senior with a 3.0 GPA in Psychology. She is from Flint, Michigan and went to a very small charter high school with a graduating class of 35–40. She graduated as valedictorian and was heavily involved with many leadership roles. Her parents intentionally put her in a charter school with the hopes of her being challenged academically. She has several older siblings who did not attend college, so her parents are really depending on her to finish. Although she feels some pressure, it is not
overwhelming because her parents are very encouraging and always express their pride in her. She is also very proud of herself because she feels that she “made it out” (of bad environment).

Coming to college was lonely for Monica because she came alone without knowing anyone. Most of her high school friends stayed home and did not attend college and she feels like she no longer has anything in common with her original friends anymore. The ones that did attend college have dropped out and the others ended up in premature/unplanned pregnancies. Monica comes from a strict household, and although she was lonely on campus, she rarely went home because she wanted to experience independence. Coming from a strict upbringing, she took advantage of her “social freedom” when she got to campus and her grades reflected that. Rather than getting discouraged from her less than satisfactory GPA, she was motivated to get her priorities in order and focus on academics. Her only regret is not getting involved in many campus extra-curricular activities because her schedule was consumed with working. During the interview, Monica was very personable and relaxed. We had a lot in common and our conversation flowed very naturally and smoothly.

Participant 8: Mia

Mia is a junior with a 3.6 GPA currently majoring in a foreign language after switching from Accounting. She is from Detroit, Michigan and was very involved in high school, while also maintaining a high GPA and participating in accelerated math classes. Her mother encouraged her to go to college while her dad felt that it was not necessary so he was not paying for it. Along with not being supportive of college (essentially the associated tuition fees), he felt that withholding his money was teaching her
independence and responsibility. From my interpretation and Mia’s own description of herself, she is very independent, extremely bold, strong-willed, determined, and unbothered. This was also evident during her interview. She has a high confidence about herself that she acknowledges and everyone else sees as well. Sometimes her confidence has been labeled as cocky or arrogant. Her sisters tease her saying that she displays a demeanor that she thinks she is better than others. She acknowledges that people get intimidated by her and says that, “People tell me that I am different all the time.” Mia has no problem speaking her mind and she admits that she has a very dominante personality.

As an accomplished and recognized campus leader with many leadership awards, she is very focused and not easily distracted or pressured. She is not discouraged by the odds, negativity, or obstacles. She is very mature and that was evidenced when she explained her significant role in taking care of her younger (and older) siblings. She is clearly the strong pillar in her family and they all depend on her for emotional and mental support.

During the interview, Mia displayed a militant type of personality, very serious, non-emotional, and strictly business. There were no warm and fuzzy moments, no joking, and no smiles. While she freely expressed herself and was open to answering the questions, she kept a tough shell. She even discussed personal family situations but still showed very little emotion. She admitted to going through hard times as a child and said that school (more specifically, her activities) was all that she had and was something that she could control. She believes that when she is in control that is when she excels.
Participant 9: Shayla

Shayla is a junior majoring in Accounting and has a 3.6 GPA. She is from a single parent home in Detroit, Michigan. Although from the inner city, her mom’s preference was for her to commute to a predominantly White high school to avoid the local inner-city public school system and environment. This preference was so critical for her mom that she had to lie about her address and permanent place of residence to be able to attend the high school. She and her mom have a good relationship and her mom is really inquisitive about her college experience even though she does not fully understand it. Her mother is proud of her and she feels that her dad does not really care what she is doing. She expressed frustration with her peers from home who did not go on to college and commented that “women applaud you but it’s not like that with the guys. She felt that the guys who stayed home, “do not understand all of the work and effort that goes into earning a degree if they aren’t also doing it.” This has affected her current (non-existent) dating life and also caused issues in her previous relationships.

During the interview, Shayla seemed to be very comfortable. She was talkative and occasionally joked. She is also very humble and motivated and completely open to new experiences and diverse people. Shayla is a spontaneous person and actually changed her college decision just two weeks before move in time. She is not intimidated to get involved in initiatives or speak with professors and she attributes a lot of her success to the student organization that she is a leader in.

Participant 10: Tia

Tia is a junior majoring in Social Relations and Policy and she has a 3.2 GPA. She is an out of state student from Las Vegas, Nevada who graduated high school with a
4.5 GPA and an advanced honors diploma. Most of her friends also went on to college but stayed locally in Nevada. Tia had a rough childhood and is still seriously struggling with many family issues. She feels a lot of pressure, not just from the typical stress that college brings, but also because of the family burdens that she is carrying. She was very open to admit that both of her parents were functional drug addicts and that she did not really have good relationships with her parents as a child. She says that school was always (and still is) her outlet and stress reliever. She would go to school for food, for peace, and for happiness. She knew she would continue on to college since it was always her positive outlet. Throughout her education, she has thrown herself into many activities to stay busy and stay focused, but she admits that it can still get overwhelming at times with all that she is juggling. She is also very instrumental in her little brother’s life who is still at home in high school as she regularly mentors and guides him.

Aside from all of the personal hardships that Tia discussed, she appeared to still be in good spirits during the interview. She was very open with me, and was not afraid or ashamed to tell it all. She was comfortable and often joked about various topics. She explained that she is not really emotional and that she very rarely cries. She says that she, “hardly ever cries but when she does, it is severe.” Tia also explained that she is very open and has no problem asking questions or seeking assistance. She will seek help even outside of academics as she has gone to the counseling center for emotional help. She finds that talking to someone is helpful for her to cope. She also credits her Christianity and faith with helping her to deal with certain stuff. Additionally, she has found comfort in her significant other. When asked what her motivation was, she said “My life.” Tia knew what she had been through rough times and knew that she needed to
make a better life for herself. Family pressure and personal/economic trials are big burdens for her that guided most of the interview. Every academic or college topic that we discussed was almost always tied back to her family, background, or upbringing. Her motivation is “to make a way out of no way for herself.”

**First Generation Defined Through Participants Voice**

All participants had a general notion of what it means to be a first generation college student. However, there was some variation in when they actually realized that they were first generation. There was also some variation concerning how they each felt about being a FGC student. Most of the participants understood the meaning to be the first in your family to attend college. However, some participants encountered some confusion because they had a parent who was also currently in college with them. We determined that they were still a FGC student because they had enrolled and matriculated to college first, before their parent. So they essentially paved the way and set the first example.

A majority of the participants were comfortable with the notion of being a FGC student except for one participant who was an outlier. She initially had a very negative perception of being a FGC student. This came when she was in high school as she researched various scholarship opportunities. Many of the applications that required FGC status, also prompted the applicant to discuss the significant barrier, obstacles, and challenges that they had overcome. Consequently, she naturally associated being a FGC student with challenge, barriers, obstacles, negative experiences, misfortune. She felt that she did not associate or fit in with that status because although she was indeed the first in
her family to attend college, she did not face the struggle that she thought a FGC student represented.

All participants initially realized that being a FGC student had disadvantages. One of the participants actually saw a very real disadvantage first hand. Her roommate would call home to her college educated parents to get assistance on homework and other academic material. She witnessed her roommates’ parents helping her with essays and more. This was a resource and level of assistance that she was not fortunate to have as her parents were not educated enough to assist her.

**Themes**

Through individual interviews, I was able to listen to the stories of 10 African American, female, first generation college students to uncover themes among the participants. Significant statements taken from each interview transcription were put into many initial categories (over twenty). Categories with very minimal information and examples were later eliminated, and some associated categories were combined. The categories had enough information to indicate a common experience or theme. Ten final categories were further reviewed for patterns and reduced to come up with themes. The categories are represented in Table 3.
Table 3

*Coding/Category Summary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes/Categories</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Prep</td>
<td>Describes college preparation including students’ mindsets and personalities, high school involvement, college preparation, application process, and associated feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships/Dating</td>
<td>Discusses their high school and college friendships, and how those relationships evolved (or not) throughout college transition and experience. Also discussed the role of dating in college and impact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Influence/Involvement</td>
<td>Includes parents’ background and educational information; amount and type of parental influence and involvement as they prepared for, transitioned to, and progressed through college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Various challenges ranging from emotional, personal, mental, spiritual, social, financial, racial, academic, and more is addressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishments</td>
<td>Participants explained accomplishments, big or small, and the true meaning of those accomplishments to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful Resources</td>
<td>Includes information about helpful resources throughout college which included people, places, things, traditions/rituals, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes and Coursework</td>
<td>Coursework was discussed regarding content, rigor, and necessary study habit adjustments. Class environment, and comfort level was also addressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regrets/Advice</td>
<td>Participants discussed regrets and offer helpful hints or advice for future college students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Motivation to attend college, select majors, pursue certain career paths and continue when they wanted to give up was addressed. Personality characteristics and background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending PWI</td>
<td>Experiences specifically attending a PWI and what that meant for them was explained.</td>
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</table>
After reviewing interview transcripts and paying close attention to significant statements from the 10 participants, there were 5 emergent themes. I want to acknowledge that there are some interrelated components of each theme and I recognize the relationship between pieces of the data. It was a challenge to decide where some of the information and quotes fit within each theme since the data was clearly related to more than one theme. Thus, it was not a clean process to determine the sub themes as intersections became more prevalent during data analysis. The data, including quotes that were gathered from participants, were largely relevant to more than one theme.

Although all participants had experiences within each theme and they all touched on all of the themes, there was clearly more passion expressed with some themes more so than others. Therefore, some themes have more data and direct quotes associated with them than others. The five themes that emerged are as follows: (a) College Preparation (b) Parental Influence/Involvement (c) Changing Relationships (d) Challenges and (e) Important Resources. These five themes are illustrated in Table 4.
Table 4

*Themes and Sub-Themes Table*

<table>
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**Theme 1- College Preparation**

The theme of college preparation captured experiences and feelings that the participants had prior to attending college. This theme summarized the participants’ academic achievement and involvement throughout high school, and their experiences with and thoughts about their college application process and all associated elements. More details regarding the sub-themes will follow.
Sub-theme: High school involvement/preparation

The participants in this study were extremely involved in a variety of extra-curricular activities during high school. Many of them stayed involved and active in quite a few initiatives while also holding leadership roles. They attributed some of their high school success, and college preparation to the activities that they were involved in and to the leaders of those said activities who actively guided them. The participants explained that they learned a lot from being involved in certain activities and organizations. They also believed that their high school involvement helped to encourage, prepare, and groom them for college. Monique proudly asserted, “I did really well in high school. I got valedictorian. I was always in organizations and always in clubs, so I kept busy and kept focused.”

Academics were always very important to these students and they all performed very well in high school. Most of them graduated at the top of their class and some were valedictorian or salutatorian. Many of them were in advanced placement (A.P.) and honors classes, which boosted their confidence. These students were confident going to college because of their exposure to rigor and their academic success in high school. Myya explained, “I was in the top of my class, and I was very, very involved in high school. I took a lot of AP classes because I accelerated in math.”

Sub-theme: Application process

Although the students in this study felt that they had some emotional support, it was clear that many of them were lacking assistance throughout the college application process. Most of them said they received little to no help with their application
processes, which made them feel alone and overwhelmed. Although parents frequently asked and inquired about the processes, they were unable to offer the necessary assistance and guidance that the students felt they needed. Mia discussed her experience, “I did it all by myself (applying to college). It’s not that my parents didn’t want to help me, it’s just that they didn’t know that they had to do all of that stuff.” Kayla said, “I only applied to like two colleges; here and Detroit Mercy. I don’t know, I guess I just didn’t have a big idea…. I guess if I was really knowledgeable about college and knew more about what I wanted, then I would’ve applied to more but I only applied to two.”

When reflecting on their college preparation, most of them recognized that they really started thinking about and getting serious about college when it was time to prepare for and take the ACT. While they always knew that they would attend college, they did not necessarily have college at the forefront of their mind during their entire high school tenure. Again, they felt that if they would have had more guidance, then they would have known the more appropriate way to study for the ACT, how to research more universities, the benefits of applying to more scholarships, and much more.

The overall college preparation experience for these participants can be summarized by noting that the participants felt optimistic and confident about going to college. Although they felt alone and sometimes overwhelmed when applying to college, they still said that the process was exciting. They initially believed that they were prepared because they attended high schools focused on academics and college readiness and they had also performed so well. They were taking steps to prepare for college during high school without really realizing that they were doing so. Their parents encouraged extra-curricular involvement and achieving academic success because it was
the ‘right thing to do’ not because they were necessarily strategically positioning for college.

**Theme 2- Parental Involvement/Influence**

The parental involvement and influence theme highlighted the extent of the parents’ participation in the students’ college process. This theme also reveals the impact, inspiration, encouragement, guidance (or lack thereof) that the parents offered during the students’ college experience. This was a theme that intersected with other themes. Parental involvement and influence was evident from the beginning to end. Although parental involvement and influence emerged as its own theme, there was no way to clearly separate this information from other themes. The role of parents was discussed by the participants in relation to high school, the college application and transition process, and the college experience. So you will also see fragments of parental influence data throughout other themes. The sub themes below will offer more details concerning the parents’ role in relation to college and also describe their feelings about their student attending college.

**Sub-theme: Parent’s feelings concerning college**

All of the students proclaimed that their parent(s) were extremely proud of them for attending college. Many of the students reported how happy they were to have a supportive parent who cared about their education and future. It was also noted that many of the parents had a pre-established expectation that they would go to college. The majority of the participants felt that there was not really a choice to not attend college; it was almost an unspoken requirement or expectation to attend. There was only one outlier
where, although the mother was extremely supportive of college, the father was leery and skeptical, and warned her against attending college. His perception of college was that it was too expensive and that it was designed to simply take your money. In the interview, Mia mentioned:

My daddy really didn’t care (about college) cause he is one of those people that are like the white man is going to get your money. My dad didn’t discourage me cause he knew what type of person I was. So he was just like if you’re going, I’m not paying for it then. So figure out how to pay for it on your own. I knew though that if I really needed help with anything, he would help me out. It was just like don’t expect him to cover every single thing, find a way to get the money yourself. Cause he was like that with everything. He was teaching us how to be independent. That’s just the way he was.

Regarding parental feelings about college, the students largely said that their parents wanted them to attend a college that was near home rather than an out of state school. Some of these feelings were due to the parents’ fear of having their student so far away for the first time, and some of the rationale was in effort to save money by trying to avoid out of state tuition fees.

**Sub-theme: Parent’s influence**

Most of the students cited their parents’ feelings as having a major influence on them attending college and where they attended. They all knew from childhood that they would go on to college because they did not think they had an option of not going. April jokingly commented, “I felt like I really didn’t have a choice (to attend college) because of my parents. Well I knew I had a choice ‘cause it was really my decision to go, but the expectation was like I really didn’t have a choice (giggles).” Kim candidly explained,

My mom did not go to school at all because she grew up in Sierra Leone. There wasn’t much of an opportunity for her to go to school (no kindergarten, no elementary, nothing like that). My dad graduated high school and has always
encouraged education. My mom loves it and shows me off to everyone. That maybe is also a reason why she was so hard on me because she was a girl and didn’t get the opportunity to go to school. So with me she really wanted me to have the opportunity to go to school.

Whether the parents influenced the students directly or indirectly, the participants clearly felt their influence in their decision making regarding college.

**Sub-theme: Parent’s involvement**

The participants all discussed their parents’ involvement in their general lives, but more specifically, they discussed their parents’ role in relation to college preparation, and current college enrollment. All of the students noted at least one parent being heavily involved in a mental, emotional, and/or spiritual sort of way. While most of the parents truly cared about what their student was experiencing, they were only able to offer emotional support for the most part, and not academic guidance or financial tuition support. There was only one outlier where the students’ parents (and even grandparents) fully immersed themselves into the application process with her. In this situation, the student would research the colleges and universities (the parents gave suggestions) and then while she was completing the applications, her parents were learning how and even helping her complete the financial aid process and other logistics. Ariana explained how involved her parents and grandparents were, “My grandma did my FAFSA. She was like researching everything cause none of us knew! I was researching the schools and what I needed for the application and my parents and grandparents were the ones looking over the financial stuff.”

Many of the other parents encouraged their student as they were in the college application and transition process but did not have the tools to actually guide or direct them through the process. One hundred percent of the participants said that their parents
were very inquisitive and still wanted to be informed about what was going on in the process, whether they fully understood it or not. The parents always asked a lot of questions, even though they still did not fully understand the process or could not really make sense of the full situation. Some students appreciated their parents asking questions and trying to understand and empathize, whereas other students did not even attempt to answer the questions or explain their experience to their parent(s). The students thought it took too much energy and patience to explain their college requirements, academic demands, logistical and administrative arrangements, stressful experiences, and all that they were going through. One example of this lack of understanding is that some of the parents did not understand when their student earned an unsatisfactory grade. They could not comprehend how their student could be such a great high school student and then come to college and struggle academically. Some of the students had to constantly explain to their parents that college was much more challenging than high school and that the rigor and demand was far greater. They had to explain that it was a different level of thinking and studying that they had to get adjusted to. It was frustrating for the student to have to keep defending what they were doing in college in efforts to make their parent understand.

Some of the participants also noted how their parents would still pile home responsibilities and burdens on them, without acknowledging or empathizing with the stresses that they were already experiencing in college. Parents would call them to tell them about the problems and issues that were happening at home which only worried and stressed them out even more. The parents would also ask for them to come home frequently because either they simply missed them or because they wanted them to attend
a family or community event that was happening at home. This made the students feel even more pressure because they felt that their parents did not understand the strain, pressure, and burdens that they were already facing while away at college. Tia frustratingly noted,

…and then my mom, I had to tell her to stop asking me for things so she can understand that I’m kinda going through the same things. I would just listen to her but she never like took on any of my burdens, I always felt like I was taking on her burdens.

April discussed the expectation of her being home to attend various events and how she went home often because of that expectation.

I wish I wouldn’t have went home as much as I did freshman year, not necessarily because I didn’t like it up here, but because my parents would call and say the church is having this, or it’s this person’s birthday party, so I just always went.

The overall summary of this parental involvement and influence theme was that the parents were extremely encouraging and supportive of their student attending college. The parents always had an expectation that their student would attend college which naturally influenced the students to attend. All of the students felt that emotional support from their parent(s). However, they all discussed how their parent(s) were not able to guide them effectively and also not able to offer the financial support that most of the students needed for tuition and other related living expenses. Nonetheless, the parents were very proud and supportive of the students. Although there is some frustration and an obvious disconnect with their parents understanding their college experiences (or lack thereof), the parents are still curious and ask frequent questions in an effort to try to understand what is happening.
Theme 3- Changing Relationships

The theme of relationship captures information about the associations and interactions that the students had with others prior to college and how those relationships changed or remained consistent throughout college. Specifically, this theme covers dating experiences and friendships. More detailed information concerning these changing relationships and sub-themes will follow.

Sub-theme: Friendships

Most of the students still had solid friendships from home. Although they did not all attend the same college, mostly all of their friends from high school did attend college. The participants had something in common with their friends from home and that was that they all were attending college, which made them still feel connected. They still talked frequently and still had a close relationship. Since they still kept in touch with friends from home, they actually felt that they had a support system that actually understood all of the elements of their college experience. They would enthusiastically share their accomplishments, talk about their issues with their friends from home, and help each other find ways to cope with the challenges and disappointments. Although the majority of the students shared this commonality of still having close friends from home, there were two outliers where Monica and Shayla noted that they did not still talk to their friends from home. Monica said:

As far as friends, very little of my friends I know are still in college. Some of them started, dropped out, they either got pregnant or it wasn’t for them. They stayed home in Flint. I didn’t know anybody that came up here. The closest friends that I did have at home, like I said they have like 3 or 4 kids now and they’re my age! So it’s like we don’t have anything in common anymore. We don’t talk as much and I am very rarely at home.
Since they had not gone to college, Monica no longer felt that she had anything in common with them. They were now on two different paths and naturally drifted apart from each other. Shayla, another student who was no longer close to her original friends from home, explained:

I identify more with the friends I found in college definitely. I really don’t talk to the girls I use to go to high school with. The girls I use to hang out in high-school with, they’re doing the whole ‘work a full time job and then go to a community college’ thing, but it’s like slowly slipping away for them. When you stay home you get too comfortable.

For these participants, it was not the distance that came in between their friendships, but the experience. If the students felt that they no longer had anything in common with their friend, they were no longer interested in continuing the friendship and trying to maintain it was more challenging than rewarding.

**Sub-theme: Dating**

When asking the students about their dating life, most of them cited dating as a distraction from their academics or just simply being an unnecessary challenge to deal with. There were some participants who intentionally stayed away from dating for various reasons. One reason was due to their aspirations of a stronger spiritual foundation and relationship with God. These students felt that dating was a distraction in developing a closer relationship with God. They did not want to find themselves in a compromising situation that could hinder their spiritual growth. Another reason they stayed away from dating was due to the size of the African American community on campus. The participants thought that the number of African American males and females was so small that the dating scene would be uncomfortable with everyone dating the same people. They wanted to avoid the potential drama that dating within the same
circles could bring. Lastly, they cited staying away from dating because there was a smaller amount of African American men available to date who they believed were also on their same level, mentally and academically, with the same goals and ambitions. They were only attracted to those men who seemed to be just as ambitious and successful as them, and unfortunately the number of those men were not that large.

There was one outlier, Kim, who said her boyfriend has been a positive influence throughout her college experience and even helps her with her academics. They both had the same goals and priorities and so they helped each other stay focused. However, that was after a bad experience with her first boyfriend who she had broken up with earlier in her college experience. She now has an understanding with the new boyfriend and they help keep each other focused. During the interview, Kim explained her situation with both boyfriends.

With the boyfriend that I had coming in, because we weren’t living together in the same city, he did want to talk a lot on the phone. So I would like make sure that I did my homework ahead of time and even if I didn’t have something done, I would feel bad and still talk to him on the phone. There were times when a week was stressful when I should’ve gotten a lot done and I didn’t because I was talking to him. So now with this boyfriend that I have now, we do try to study a lot together. If I have questions in my classes (because he’s really smart too), I go to him and I ask for help. So we balance each other out I guess. He was also a premed major. So we both knew how busy we were. We prioritized, before dating we told each other that first and foremost we are here for school. So if we get too busy with school or anything else that we will have to put our relationship on hold.

The overall theme of changing relationships can be summarized by saying that their relationships changed once there was no shared experience or commonality of college. If their friends and boyfriends from home did not attend college, then the relationship organically dissolved because there was a lack of commonality and ability to
relate to one another. The students only kept relationships with those who were on the same path as them, those who could relate to their college experience and career aspirations. They were also now gravitating towards young men to date who were trying to achieve what they were, or intentionally not dating at all to avoid distractions from their academics and spiritual growth.

**Theme 4- Challenges**

There was a theme of ‘challenge’ amongst the young women who participated in this study. Amongst those challenges, many sub-themes emerged that illustrate the difficulties that they faced during their experience. Such thematic challenges included: financial struggle, internal and external pressures, campus and class environment, regrets/advice, coursework and study skills.

**Sub-theme: Finances**

When discussing challenges that occurred throughout their college experience, finances were a repetitive topic. As an example, many of the participants wanted to go out of state to college as their first choice. They later changed that choice due to overwhelming costs of out of state tuition. To attend an out of state college, it would have been too expensive. Thus, their college choices became based on finances and the costs of tuition. One student said they *only* chose this university because there were less loans that she would need after all of her financial aid and scholarships were applied. There were recurring statements about how having little money was a burden that spilled over into many elements of their experience. A lot of the participants had to work while in college to sustain themselves and to help pay for the associated college costs. As a result of some of them taking on so many work hours, they felt that their academic
performance and social life suffered. They were spending more time working and recovering from the tiredness and fatigue of working that there was very little time and energy left to study, socialize, and get involved in other activities. Monica reflected on the financial burdens that she felt and her experience as a working college student:

My parents, they helped out a lot but they wanted me to work and basically have some responsibilities. So I was paying all of my bills myself. My parents aren’t the highest income financially and I know they have their own bills and my siblings to take care of. I very rarely reached out to them but if I did, they would help out. So that was kind of like some kind of burden that I was dealing with. I didn’t really get too involved in organizations up here because I worked and whenever I wasn’t working, I was in school, or doing school work, and whenever I wasn’t doing school work I was at work. My parents were wondering why I didn’t join more orgs because I was so involved in my high school in a lot of organizations, but they didn’t understand that in high school, I didn’t have to work so I had that free time and school wasn’t that hard. So I didn’t have to put in that many study hours as I did here. But I really wish I would’ve gotten involved in more of the orgs when I was here. I would definitely say not work as much and get more involved in campus in orgs.

Having a financial burden was not only stressful for the students to figure out how they would pay for college and maintain a standard of living. It was also disheartening for some of the students since they did not feel that they had adequate time leftover to study and engage in other activities.

Sub-theme: Pressure

Participants felt pressure to not just succeed solely for themselves but for their entire family. They felt pressure to be ‘smarter’ than what their parents were, to achieve higher positions in their careers than what their parents had achieved, and to ultimately make more money than their parents made. They felt pressure to help their younger family members in school and to serve as a positive role model. They also felt the pressure of maintaining the academic and leadership excellence that they achieved in high school. The participants expressed that they continuously feel the weight of their
parents and families depending on them. April reflected on a situation where she felt tremendous pressure from her parents.

I told my parents that I wanted to be a pediatrician. So when I decided to leave that program and pursue a major of psychology, it was a lot of backlash from my parents. They were like ‘psychology is not really a get a job type of major and are you changing because it’s too hard?’ So that was really challenging because I was like should I change, should I? Should I just keep pushing my way through being mediocre or should I do something that I can excel in and that I’m passionate about.

Some of this pressure was natural and organically felt while some participants had these words and sentiments drilled in their heads from their parents and families. Whether direct or indirect, the pressure was felt and it was a constant element in their life.

Sub-theme: Campus (attending a PWI)

The participants thought that the campus was diverse in the sense that there were more races, ethnicities, and cultures other than Black and White. Some of them initially considered attending an HBCU to be among more African American students. However, they were eventually ok with attending a PWI because they thought it was good experience to interact with and learn about the “majority culture.” Tia offered her thoughts on attending a PWI.

This is a predominantly white university and we are in a predominately white society so I don’t want to pigeon hole myself to be doin like racial work all the time or like black power this or black power that all the time. I want to be dynamic across the table so looking back that’s probably a better thing that I was here (and not a HBCU) for an intercultural experience.

Attending a PWI taught them to be comfortable being around different people and cultures. Some of the participants already had experience with being in a predominantly white environment because of their high school demographics, so the transition and adjustment was not that difficult. Monica said,
As far as being predominantly white, it definitely didn’t affect me cause my high school was mixed. It wasn’t like all black or all white. So I was used to being around different crowds. I actually think it’s better to be more mixed and diverse because it makes your learning experience better and different.

There was very little concern with attending a PWI and being a minority on campus, although there was some initial reservation and hesitation with being a roommate with another race or ethnicity. None of the participants expressed a concern for racial discrimination from their professors or staff members, yet some felt they had experienced racial discrimination from their peers and classmates. Kyra explained,

I never really felt like ohhh people are looking at me differently because of my skin color or who I am but when I got here I noticed there IS a distinct difference! Where I’m from is predominantly white but I’ve never ever felt I couldn’t do this or I couldn’t do that, but sometimes in classrooms and labs me and my friends get that vibe that people don’t want to be our partners. People don’t think that we’re are as smart. And I’ve had that happen sophomore year here in my bio lab.

Other participants also commented on attending a PWI. Kyra expressed her thoughts.

It’s like I’m here, so ok I was meant to be here, but at the same time it’s a little discouraging when you are the only black person. Literally it was this one class where we had assigned seats and he put me dead smack in the middle. So I’m like the ONLY one and when I look around I feel like everyone is just looking at me. At the same time, that’s my point to shine and let them know why I’m here.

Kyra also explained how being on a “diverse” campus can be beneficial.

Talk to everyone and don’t be so selective of only staying with black people or white people, you need to talk to everyone because you never know what kind of experience that you will gain from them, or vice versa. They may know some things that you don’t know and why not talk to that person.

Some noted that the size of the campus and the size of their classes were overwhelming. One student said the campus was “like a little city.” The large size of classes and campus was distracting, challenging and hard to get use to especially when there were so very few other African American students.
**Sub-theme: Classes**

Most of the participants discussed how they felt in the classroom along with their relationships or lack thereof with their professors. Participants differed with their approach to class and professors. Some of them sat in the back whereas others intentionally sat in the front to avoid unnecessary distraction. There was a correlation that students who sat in the back also had a fear or were intimidated to ask questions in class and speak with their professors. They were also intimidated or avoided attending professor office hours. Some were just simply too shy while others blamed it on their perception of how the professors and other classmates negatively perceived them. They did not want to exemplify any weakness or display that they were not as knowledgeable for fear of embarrassment, judgment or confirming stereotypical racial thoughts. Ariana explained where she sits in the class and why.

I sit in the back row. I don’t like to be in the front. I get anxiety. If I have a question I just figure it out on my own. I think it’s just my personality because I was never the type of person who knew what questions to ask. Always wondered if this question was stupid, and I get anxiety going up to the professor.

April also discussed some of the feelings that she has had in class.

I was the only black person in my classes out of like 100. So that was discouraging because I didn’t want to be the black girl who didn’t know anything so I just tried to figure it out on my own and that wasn’t good.

The students who sat in the front of the class were also the students who typically asked the questions whenever they had them and attended office hours when needed. These students did not have as much intimidation or fear and were determined to succeed by any means. These students also generally had a more dominating personality which helped them to not be shy and speak out without fear of ridicule, judgment, or criticism.
Mia asserted, “That’s what they (professors) are there for and that is what they are getting paid for so I will utilize them.”

Some students also commented that the classes were just so big and it was much easier speaking with their instructors and asking questions in a smaller class setting like in high school. Some felt that the larger classes were overwhelming to speak in and learn in.

**Sub-theme: Coursework/study habits**

One hundred percent of the participants commented on the rigor of the coursework and the need to adjust their study routine throughout college. They acknowledged that once they started college, they realized that they did not know how to study effectively or the appropriate way to study to achieve academic success. Almost all of them had a false sense of confidence because of their high school academic success. In high school they were all very high achievers compared to their peers. They all graduated at the top of their class and so they all thought that they would be really prepared for college. After a few failed assignments and exams, they soon realized that they were not as prepared for the rigor of college as they thought they would be.

It was devastating to many of them when they received their first failing (or below satisfactory) grade. Most of them had never received such bad grades before because of their high performance in high school. When earning their first failing grade, they all cried, felt embarrassment and lost confidence. They admitted that they did not know how to study. Some of them felt that they never really had to study intensely, or at all, throughout high school. While some of them just had to learn how to study in general or employ new effective study techniques. Some of them realized that you have to study
differently for each class because they are not all the same. The students who were not prepared for college work did not necessarily know it (until the reality of a bad grade hit them), which was a big shock to them.

Some of them were embarrassed to get help because (from their perspective) they did not want to be the only black student who did not understand the work. Many of them noted the regret of wishing that they would have gotten help when they first started struggling with academics in the way of office hours, study groups, and tutoring. They all said that academics were much harder in college than in high school, the classes were much more rigorous, and they sometimes felt that they were not as prepared as some of their peers. The participants explained that they (and various other students on campus) who were in pre-professional programs such as pre-med, pre-law, pre-nursing, and business discussed a much more difficult and demanding class load. They felt that their majors were more intense and caused them more stress than other majors that were maybe in the social sciences, arts, or humanities. Some of them felt that they took too many credits and were not aware of the load, which contributed to their poor performance or lack of knowing how to study for so many subjects simultaneously. Kelly said, “I had to learn HOW to study because I didn’t really know how to when I first got here because it’s all different, and even for each course, you have to study differently. You can’t study the same. So that was the big learning adjustment.” Brittany noted, “Academics…coursework was definitely harder and more challenging than high-school because high-school seemed like it was kind of easy and then I came to college and it was a totally different story!”
The theme of challenges can be summarized by explaining that the students all experienced challenges during their college transition and experience. The common challenges were finances, internal and external pressure, the campus and class size and environment, the coursework and learning new study techniques. Even though the students had these challenges, they were not enough to break them. Yes, they had their discouraging and frustrating days, but they kept going. They continued to persevere and some of them proudly explained that the challenges absolutely motivated them to do better. Monica discussed how she felt after a bad semester. “It wasn’t a huge discourager because those kind of things actually motivate me more to do better. So it wasn’t really all that discouraging but it was a self-check. I knew I needed to get it together.

**Theme 5- Important Resources**

All of the participants cited at least one thing, person, place, resource, or service that was extremely instrumental in their college motivation and success. Some people described services and programs that were key and some people described specific people who were significant in their life.

**Sub-theme: People/mentors**

Some of the participants discussed how older friends who they later affectionately called their “big sisters” stepped in as role models or mentors. They felt really connected and guided by people who were older but who could also still relate to them and their experience, who were not so far removed from the environment. Friends who were their peers and classmates were also helpful. Monique explained, “It was also friends here that
were taking the same courses as me. They were helpful because they could basically understand everything that I was going through and help motivate me.”

High school guidance counselors and college academic advisors were also said to be helpful during college preparation and the college experience. Kelly discussed, “my pre-dental college advisors were helpful too because they bring in admissions people from dental schools like University of Detroit Mercy and Michigan so I got a chance to sit down with people and that’s really nice.” The participants were also thankful for their college advisors who helped to keep them on track and select the appropriate courses and amount of credits to take.

**Sub-theme: Campus/student services**

All of the participants discussed how high school college prep programs, and pre-college summer programs were helpful, along with the programs and student organizations that were offered on campus relative to their majors and career choices. These programs and initiatives helped the students meet more peers who shared similar interests, helped them meet people who were in their profession who they could network with, and also helped them to become more involved in other applicable activities. These programs were also helpful with regards to advising and made the transition to college much easier. Particularly the programs with specific connection to their major and career interests were most helpful, beneficial, and impactful. Other helpful programs were the student organizations that were geared towards racial ethnic minorities. These programs help them get connected and made the campus feel smaller, more intimate, and more geared towards their needs, desires, and comfort level.
Other resources that were beneficial were applicable to religion. Since many of the students were focused on their spiritual journey and growth, applicable religious outlets and forums were helpful to the students. Such outlets included: church services, bible study, and campus activities that were relevant to their faith. Tiffany noted, “I’m Christian and I grew up religious, and I go to church and stuff to cope.” Other students cited religion and spirituality, especially relevant campus organizations, as resources that helped them to continue to have faith and believe in themselves and also remain motivated.

Although many of the students discussed how various organizations and student services were beneficial, they still mentioned that some of their regrets were wishing they had gotten involved in ‘more’ activities or different type of activities. Some felt they spent too much time working and studying that they could not get involved while others were involved in social groups and wished they had more involvement in groups relative to their majors. Some advice that was given was to get involved and not to get a student job that’s too demanding, but do not over-involve yourself. This was a realization that happened too late for some of the students after they realized how important and advantageous such resources and student services were.

The overall summary of this theme of helpful resources was that campus resources, student services, and professional organizations based on academic majors and career fields made the campus feel smaller and more intimate. These programs made the students feel more connected and helped them to have a more individualized, customized, tailored experience. Those resources made the students feel like they were a part of a smaller community where they felt safe, comfortable, and supported. The mentors and
other professionals that students were able to interact with through these resources made their dreams and aspirations feel attainable. Once they seen that another African American female could do it, then they felt even more confident that they could do it and more motivated to do so.

**Motivation Theory**

Through the lens of Motivation Theory, I heard participants discuss a variety of elements related to their college experiences and their sources of motivation. I will further explain the participants’ experiences in terms of motivation using the lens of motivation theory. The data reveals how each of the themes are linked to motivation and also demonstrates the participants’ sources of motivation in relation to their college experience.

The various theories that were discussed in my literature review are as follows: Choice Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, Expectancy Theory, Maslow’s Hierarchy Theory of Needs, Academic Self Concept, Self Determination Theory, Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, and Self-Efficacy. Below I will reintroduce a summary of these theories found in Table 1.
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*Motivation Theory Summary*

| **Choice Theory** | Internal motivation based on five needs: survival, belonging, power, autonomy, fun. Understanding/meeting needs yield more satisfying results. Student more interested in work, has more fun, thus learn more. If these needs are unmet, the void overshadows need for learning causing less chance of academic success. |
| **Achievement Goal Theory** | Emphasizes mastery and performance goals. Mastery concentrates on learning and comprehension. Performance focuses on competence and ability. The decision to tackle goal (or not) is based on personal motivation and other external factors/situations. Less concerned about actual goal, more so motive of goal. |
| **Expectancy Theory** | Motivation and choice to engage influenced by two key beliefs: competence & value. Motivational level dependent on perception of ability to achieve, the potential reward, and value of reward. |
| **Maslow’s Hierarchy Theory Needs** | A person’s needs are their main motivation such as: psychological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs). Fulfilling lower fundamental needs (hierarchy order) makes it more possible to pursue higher level needs. |
| **Academic Self-Concept** | Knowledge/perception about own achievement ability; compared with other students. Benchmarks to evaluate accomplishments. Positive self-concept enhanced intrinsic motivation. Students who believe in themselves tend to be more motivated. African American students have high level of self-concept even with low achievement; perceive issues to be external. Discouragement due to dissatisfied in performance, not because they doubted ability. |
| **Intrinsic Motivation** | Content with engaging with incentive being actual activity. For self- gratification/accomplishment/stimulation or excitement. Linked with positive well-being and adjustment. |
| **Extrinsic Motivation** | Participating to achieve a specific outcome/reward. For the sole purpose of a specific goal or anticipated reward. Linked with negative impact on well-being; less favorable performance. |
| **Self – Efficacy** | Experiences to increase self-efficacy beliefs will enhance motivation and ultimately increase academic adjustment. Students with more confidence in their ability to do well had more motivation to do well. |
Below I will outline a few of the motivation constructs that made the most sense for my findings and themes.

**Extrinsic/intrinsic motivation**

Given what I found in my themes, my findings fit the motivational theories from previous literature. In thinking about my population and my findings, the most prevalent motivation theories were Intrinsic and Extrinsic motivation. My findings agreed with past literature citing that extrinsic motivation is linked with a negative impact on well-being and lower performance, while intrinsic motivation linked to positive well-being and good academic performance (Deci et al., 1991; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). When my participants were initially extrinsically motivated by the anticipated reward of a high paying career, they were not performing well and feeling stressed. However, when they shifted to intrinsic motivation and worked towards internal self-gratification, stimulation and excitement, their performance increased and they felt more gratification and commitment to their work.
**Academic self concept**

Academic Self Concept has been connected with intrinsic motivation (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Cokley, Bernard, Cunningham, & Motoike, 2001) and was also a prevalent motivation theory that fit with my themes. This theory says that students are aware of their own academic achievement ability and they employ benchmarks to evaluate their accomplishments, sometimes in comparison to other students. This theory also says that a positive self-concept can enhance intrinsic motivation. This was consistent with my findings in that my participants always assessed themselves and their performance and many times compared themselves with other students. When my participants received less than satisfactory grades, they were dissatisfied with their performance and disappointed that they did not do better. They always remained confident that they could achieve higher and did not doubt their ability, which is consistent with the literature on the Academic Self Concept Theory.

**Self determination theory**

Self Determination Theory says that there is likely to be more self-motivation when the student experiences autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Based on my findings, my participants were largely self-motivated and very autonomous. They perceived themselves to be competent and believed their high school success was also evidence of their competence. Encompassing the relatedness component of Self Determination Theory, as they became more connected with their coursework, major, and career choice, their motivation increased.
Participant Sources of Motivation

Throughout the interviews, the participants discussed what motivated them during their preparation for college, their transition to college, and then throughout their college experience. This motivation was demonstrated and discussed throughout the emergent themes: College Preparation, Parental influence/involvement/support, changing relationships, challenges, and important resources.

College preparation

The students believe in themselves and always knew that they could be successful. Even during the times of temporary doubt and frustration, they always knew deep down that they could succeed. Most would deem themselves as self-motivated. This type of personality continuously motivated them and helped them to prepare for and make it through college. This self-motivated personality characteristic was beneficial during the college preparation process. Students were motivated to do well in high school and take advantage of various extra-curricular activities, which essentially groomed them for college.

Parent involvement/influence

Having a supportive family (and church family) was cited as a huge inspiration. To know that people believed in them and were counting on them was motivation to not let them down. Specifically, participants largely discussed how much going to college meant to their parent(s). Participants enjoyed and appreciated the pride that their parents had concerning them attending college. Most of the participants came from humble beginnings where there was not a lot of money and they were considered to be low
economic status. To continue to make their parents proud while also aiming to provide a better life for themselves and their parents was a consistent source of motivation.

In addition to their parents’ pride, the participants’ own pride was a source of motivation. They wanted to make others feel proud of them while also proving the naysayers and the doubters wrong. The accomplishments and the pride that they felt from their own achievement motivated them to keep going and achieve more and greater. Once they realized that they could be successful and their realization was an actual reality supported by evidenced accomplishment, they were motivated to work even harder towards more accomplishments and to achieve more success.

**Relationships**

The various relationships that the participants have were also motivating. The friends and peers that they surrounded themselves with were motivating them to continue and do better. They helped each other out, they studied together, and they encouraged each other. They were able to share their challenges and accomplishments with one another and able to understand what each other was going though. They inspired each other, but more importantly the relationships served as a support system that the participants could depend on for support and assistance.

**Challenges**

Some of the participants were specifically motivated by their challenges and obstacles. Students who had family and economic challenges were motivated to work harder so that they would not experience such challenges long term. Because of the participant’s humble beginnings or lack of finances, they were motivated to work hard
towards a secure career and nice future. With their future always in mind, the motivation to succeed was always primary.

Students who had academic challenges were motivated to study more to achieve higher grades. Once they seen that they could do it and actually achieve like their peers, they were even more motivated to continue being successful. Once they accomplished good grades, or secured an internship, or was successful in a leadership role on campus, their motivation only increased to continue on the right/successful/productive path. Their accomplishment along with their failures added fuel to their fire and ultimately served as key sources of motivation.

The overall summary is that these students are self-motivated. They have the personality to motivate themselves and follow their dreams. They had a background of low finances which pushed them to focus on achieving highly to make good money. They are determined, strong-willed, and are ironically motivated by their accomplishments as well as their challenges and failures. They have a strong sense of self but are also inspired and motivated by their surroundings. They were largely motivated by their self-confidence, their support system, their background, and their challenges.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced the participants of the study and outlined the key themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interview transcriptions. Themes were explained in terms of their connection to the participants’ motivation. Chapter five will offer a
discussion about how the results from my study answer my research questions, and
recommendations for additional research in the future.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of African American, female, first generation college students attending a large, predominately White research university, and to understand what motivates this particular population. The 10 participants in this study, selected on a first come, first serve basis, were in their junior or senior year in good academic standing. They participated in individual, face to face, 60-90 minute interviews discussing their college preparation, college transition, college experience, and what they considered to be motivation.

The five main research questions in this study were: 1) How do African American, female, FGC students (in good academic standing) describe their college experience? 2) What issues and challenges do African American, female FGC students face when attending a large, public PWI and in what ways do they link those issues with the fact that they are the first in their families to attend college? 3) How do African American, female, FGC students describe the ways they responded to the challenges of being a college student at a large, public PWI? 4) What do African American, female, FGC students identify as their strongest sources of motivation, encouragement and discouragement as a college student? and 5) What factors, institutional or otherwise, does this population believe contributes to their success or what assisted them in continuing their education?
Answers to the research questions cannot be best explained by addressing each research question individually and exclusively. With themes that are so interrelated, my research questions will be answered and discussed within each theme. From the data, there were five emergent themes (a) College Preparation, (b) Parental Influence/Involvement, (c) Changing Relationships, (d) Challenges, and (e) Important Resources.

My first research question is: How do African American, female, FGC students (in good academic standing) describe their college experience? This question is addressed throughout all of my themes as each theme gives some description of the participants’ college experience. For example, theme one (college preparation) explains that students felt more confident to attend college based on their high school achievement and involvement. They felt prepared for college but once they arrived to college, they did not feel as prepared as they did in high school. They regretted not researching and applying to more colleges and scholarships and they acknowledged that they needed to adjust their study habits. This description of their college preparation (theme one) answered the first research question by describing how elements of their college experience were impacted by their college preparation. Research question one, regarding participants’ college experience can also be described through theme two (parental involvement/influence). Theme two (parental involvement/influence) answered the first research question by describing the college experience as being bitter-sweet in summary. The participants appreciated their parents’ involvement when it came to emotional support and encouragement which served as a key motivator. However, their parents influence created tremendous stress and pressure on them when it came to decision
making and managing their parents’ expectations throughout college. Participants felt burdened and stressed throughout their college experience due to the pressure that they received from their parents. The third theme of challenges also answers the first research question by describing how their experience was full of challenges and difficulty but notably did not break them and actually motivated them to work harder. For example, the participants discussed how the coursework was a challenge at times and when they received their first bad grade, they were disappointed. However, those bad grades motivated those students to work harder to achieve better grades. Another example of a challenge throughout their college experience was finances. Due to their financial struggles they had to work while in college which impacted their experience in a variety of ways. Yet because of their financial situation, they were inspired to work that much harder in school in efforts to make a good living for themselves through a career with a good salary. Theme four (changing relationships) also answered question one by describing their college experience in regards to their relationships. The participants explained how their relationships from home changed but they were still able to create and develop new relationships that were meaningful. Their experience was strengthened because of the new relationships that they were able to establish once they arrive to college. The new relationships enabled them to have peers who they could interact with on an academic, professional, and social level. Sharing a common experience with their college peers made them feel more comfortable throughout their experience. When it came to dating, the participants’ experiences can be summarized by explaining the participants’ focused mindset. Participants were either heavily focused on their spirituality and did not want to hinder their spiritual growth, or they were focused on
academics and career development and did not want to be distracted by an unfulfilling romantic relationship. Lastly, theme five (important resources) also answers my first research question. Participants felt that important resources were necessary and critical to their success and comfort at the institution. For example, the campus organizations that focused on majors and career fields were extremely beneficial for these students. These organizations amongst other resources provided professionals for the students to network with, peers for the students to interact with, and tools for the students to use for professional development. Overall, they described their college experience as being impacted positively by important resources and they attributed some of their success in college to these important resources.

My second research question is: What issues and challenges do African American, female FGC students face when attending a large, public PWI and in what ways do they link those issues with the fact that they are the first in their families to attend college? This second question is best answered through the fourth theme that discusses challenges. For example, findings from my study uncovered a number of challenges that participants faced such as: finances, pressure, campus and class environment, coursework, and study habits. Financial struggle was linked to them being a FGC student because they believed that if their parents had college degrees then their parents would have a job making more money, thus being able to assist them more financially. They also linked the issue of pressure to being the first in their families to attend college. They knew that their parents (and entire family) were counting on them to do well in college since they were the first. Some of them were expected to pave the way
for their younger siblings and some of them even felt pressure to eventually earn a good salary to help take care of some of their family members.

My third research question is: How do African American, female, FGC students describe the ways they responded to the challenges of being a college student at a large, public PWI? The answer to this question can be found throughout all of my themes as participants discussed how they navigated through college. Specifically, the participants discussed that they handled the challenges by working harder and continuing to have faith in themselves and in God. They were self-motivated and had self-discipline which helped them stay focused regardless of challenges. They kept their mind on the bigger picture and on others who had done what they are aspiring to do. They always told themselves that if someone else could do it, then they could do it too. Ultimately, participants responded to challenges by embracing their confidence and absorbing family support which helped them to handle the challenges and difficult times. They described the challenges as a test of faith and personal commitment that required dedication, perseverance, and self-assurance. All of the themes spoke to this third research question since challenges were interrelated and prevalent in every theme.

My fourth research question is: What do African American, female, FGC students identify as their strongest sources of motivation, encouragement and discouragement as a college student? The data that answers my fourth research question is aligned with the Motivation Theory lens that I used to view this study. Participants identified the belief in themselves as a source of self-motivation. This research question is also answered through theme two (parental influence/involvement), theme three (changing relationships), theme four (challenges), and theme five (important resources). For
example, the involvement of parents was a key source of motivation. The participants wanted to make their parents proud and did not want to let them down. Knowing that their parents were counting on them was a source of motivation. Theme three addressed changing relationships which was also a source of motivation. Participants did not want to end up like the peers that they left back home and also did not want to be left behind the peers that they were now in college with, which motivated them. Theme four (challenges) also addressed the fourth research question. Participants identified challenges as being a source of discouragement and motivation. For example, students were initially disappointed and even slightly discouraged by their first bad grades. However, that disappointment turned into motivation to study more in efforts to turn those bad grades into good grades. Theme five (important resources) was also cited by the participants as a source of motivation because they were inspired through the resources that were presented to them.

Lastly, my fifth research question is: What factors, institutional or otherwise, does this population believe contributes to their success or what assisted them in continuing their education? This question concerning contributors to success, is answered through all five of the themes as they all contributed to the success of these participants. College preparation gave them the tools and confidence to attend college and begin college level coursework. Parental involvement and influence encouraged them to continue working towards success. Changing relationships enabled them to interact with peers who shared a common interest and experience, which made a big campus feel smaller while providing comfort, support, and social interactions. Challenges motivated them to rise above their circumstances to create a better situation for themselves. Lastly, important
Further details concerning answers to the research questions will be presented in the form of a discussion about the findings from my study. Implications, recommendations, and suggestions for future research will also be presented.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study largely agree with some of the literature that was presented in my literature review. However, there were some findings that contradict previous research regarding first generation college students. There were some interesting findings that were contrary to what was expected, and new insights are also offered. A discussion of the findings are presented below.

Theme 1: College preparation

The findings from my study regarding college preparation were intriguing. My participants were all high achieving high school students who took what they felt were the necessary steps to prepare for college while in high school. They all reported confidence about attending college since they had taken accelerated, advanced, and honors courses and had done very well in them. Most of them considered themselves to be independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient for the most part, so they also were not concerned or nervous about the transition to college. Yet during the interviews, my participants all admitted to struggling academically once they were in college because they were not aware of the rigor that college would bring.
Participants from my study acknowledged that they did not know how to study effectively. Many of them admitted that they never had to study in high school because a lot of the work was naturally easy to them. They were not prepared for the amount and type of studying that needed to be done to master their college courses with excellence. They confessed that they needed to learn how to study differently and effectively for each course because each class required a unique study method to tackle the content successfully. These findings from my study agreed with previous literature explaining that first generation, African American college students are not as prepared academically as other students for college (even when they think they are). Fries-Britt Turner (2004) and Nelson-Laird (2007) explored the academic preparedness of African American college students. They found that the challenges that these students face while in college are intensified due to their lack of academic preparation. Those studies had findings that were similar, yet also dissimilar from the findings in my study.

The college prep finding from my study that was dissimilar to findings from previous studies was that my participants actually were prepared for college, which is atypical based on past literature. Previous literature explained that first generation college students commonly completed fewer high-level math courses, and do not complete a rigorous collection of precollege coursework (McMillan, 2004). My participants had done the necessary groundwork, coursework, and provisions to be ready and primed for college (unlike first generation college students from previous studies). Quite frankly, some of this was unconsciously and not necessarily intentional. These students were not exactly calculated and strategic in their preparation for college. However, during high school they inescapably ended up working towards college through
their normal schedule of courses, high academic achievement, and extra-curricular activities. Even though these students did not have college at the forefront of their mind during high school and did not deliberately prepare, they still ended up acquiring the necessary coursework, grades, and test scores to be prepared for college, unlike findings from previous studies.

Although the participants from my study had done essentials to be groomed and prepared for college, their reality was quickly questioned in the same vein. The intriguing factor was that the reality was not necessarily that my participants were not academically able to handle college coursework or that they were so far behind academically, but that they had to significantly and strategically adjust their approach to coursework and studying once they were in college. This was inconsistent with the literature in that findings from previous studies noted how first generation college students often struggled tremendously with college coursework and were often put in remedial courses because of their lack of exposure to rigor, lower grade point averages, and ultimately lack of college preparation in high school (Chen & Caroll, 2005; Ishitani, 2004; McMillan, 2004; Vargas, 2004).

For my participants, they were not lacking the ability to obtain good grades and achieve highly, they just did not have the tools or did not properly understand how to use certain tools and resources that could have assisted them. Ultimately, it was not about deficit or academic inability for my participants, but more so about lacking the social capital needed to be successful. They did not have the proper network as they entered college to guide them on tools for success in college. They needed to be prepared for college in more ways than just academically. These participants had achieved highly in
high school, so it was clear that they were able to focus on their academics, digest and retain knowledge. Based on high school achievement, they were on the right track to achieve highly in college. However, college was a very different experience for them in comparison to high school. They thought that their high academic achievement was evidence that they would be academically equipped for college.

Upon entering college, they quickly found out that they were not as prepared as they thought they were regardless of their high school preparation. They needed to adjust their study habits. They needed to feel comfortable approaching their professor for assistance, and they needed to now learn how to take advantage of helpful resources on campus (that they did not need in high school) such as tutoring and study groups. For these reasons, it was believed that academic inability or deficit was not the key issue for these students, which is contrary to the findings concerning students from previous studies. My participants prepared for college in high school (unlike first generation college students from other studies). Yet these students still struggled initially, but more so because of lack of awareness, experience and social capital.

**Theme 2: Parental influence/involvement**

The parents of my participants were very instrumental in encouraging and motivating their students to attend college while also encouraging them to take the necessary steps to prepare for college while in high school. Due to the parents’ lack of college experience and awareness, the parents did not necessarily know that certain initiatives were strategically preparing their student for college. Yet, they always encouraged high academic achievement, leadership, and extracurricular involvement just simply because it was the “right thing to do” or because the parents believed that these
things would keep the students out of trouble. This encouragement towards obtaining
good grades and extra-curricular involvement naturally helped the students take steps in
the right direction towards college preparation. Such findings regarding my participant
parent involvement were consistent with other studies done previously that cited parents
as a key encourager of first generation college students (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco,
2005; Higher Education Research Institute, 2007).

A finding from my study regarding parent influence was that the participants
focused heavily on the pressures and influence of their family. Their families’ opinions
and influence was always in their mind as they made decisions and thought about their
future. Some of their majors were based on the influences of their parents and even when
they wanted to change their majors, they were reluctant to share that information with
their parents for fear of disapproval or persuasion. Those that finally informed their
parents of career path changes internalized their parents’ negative reactions and criticism.
These participants cared very much about what their parents thought of their experiences
and college decisions. They valued their parents’ opinions even though the parents did
not fully understand the situation, the students’ decision making process, and more
importantly the implications behind their decision-making. This finding from my study
was consistent with a finding from Park-Yancy (2012). In that study it was noted that
families tend to encourage their students to pursue the most popular or profitable career
paths which essentially narrows the range of viable options.

Like previous studies, the parents of my participants had no college experience or
knowledge about the college application process or transition and could not adequately
advise or guide their student due to their lack of awareness. This lack of awareness
discussed in my study was consistent with previous literature (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). Many other studies have noted that regardless of parents being supportive and encouraging, they still are not able to provide key knowledge and insight to help their college student (Choy, 2001; Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002; Vargas, 2004). Also consistent with previous literature, the participants’ parents from my study were still very involved in the best way that they could be. Participants explained how their parent(s) wanted to know what was going on every step of the way. Even though their parents did not fully understand the process or the experience, and could not guide their student, they still wanted to be involved. If nothing else, the parents were largely emotionally supportive. These findings agreed with results from Higher Education Research Institute (2007) noting that FGC students state parental involvement as being a critical component in their preparation and graduation from four year colleges and universities.

Theme 3: Changing relationships

Findings from my study suggested that students were closer and more connected to the new friends (and boyfriends) that they met on campus once arriving to college, than the friends that they initially had from home. The participants noted how they were no longer close to their original friends from home who had not gone to college because they no longer had much in common with them. These participants enjoyed their new friendships and were able to share common experiences, whether positive or negative, with their new college friends. They found fulfillment with their new friends and felt that they had more of a connection with the new friends who were experiencing some of the same things that they were in college.
These findings from my study were inconsistent with findings from those of Guiffrida (2005). In that study, students reported difficulty to building a social life on campus and that they traveled home frequently to reconnect with their friends (and family). These students found it challenging to break ties with friends from home thus making it even more difficult or desirable to integrate into campus life. Unlike findings from Guiffrida (2005) and Schmidt (2003), participants from my study did not feel a burden of maintaining two different social groups, cultures, or comfort zones. While my participants acknowledged that their home culture and community was much different than their campus culture and community, they did not feel obligated or feel the need to act differently in each environment or balance two different cultures. They were not embarrassed or ashamed of their new college-student identity and did not feel a burden to maintain two separate social identities. My participants were ok with fully assimilating into their campus environment and leaving those behind who were not on board. The initial friendships that they did have from home, for the most part, were only maintained if the friends also attended college and could identify with or relate to their new role as a college student.

The same held true for my participants’ dating experiences. They were largely no longer attracted to the males who were not pursuing college and they were not interested in dating those who did not have the same ambition and goals as them. Those relationships naturally phased out instead of my participants having to “straddle both cultures” in comparison to findings from previous studies. Participants from my study wanted to surround themselves with people who could relate to their experiences and who were immersed in the same collegiate environment as they were. These outcomes
were consistent with Dyson and Renk (2006) noting that it is important for African American females to have a social network who can identify with their college experience.

**Theme 4: Challenges**

A significant finding from my study that was inconsistent, in comparison to previous studies, was the feelings about attending a PWI. My participants found value in attending a PWI and did not find it to be a considerable or challenging factor in their college experience, while past literature explained the discomfort and racism that African American students faced at PWI’s (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Harper, 2007; Jehangir, 2010, Merullo, 2002). Most of my participants felt that being exposed to the majority culture would prepare them to work in a majority culture career in society. Participants from my study had not experienced the racism and prejudices that students from previous studies had experienced. In fact, they were less concerned with the amount of White students that attended the university and were more impressed by the amount of other ethnicities that they were able to come into contact with. They welcomed and enjoyed the diversity that they were exposed to and were excited about and intrigued with the various races, ethnicities, and cultures that were represented on their campuses.

Admittedly, I was surprised that attending a PWI was almost a non-factor for these participants. Based on previous research, I expected these participants to discuss an experience that included racial discrimination, stereotypical comments, and/or feelings of isolation. However, this was not the case for my participants. They largely discussed how they believed that attending a PWI was probably beneficial for them since they
would be working in a predominantly White career industry. They expressed how being one of few African Americans in their courses inspired and motivated them to be above average and also gave them a platform to present a positive, smart, example of a Black woman. What other students viewed as a challenge in other studies, my participants used as motivation to succeed. Their challenges inspired them to work harder.

In relation to the challenges that my participants discussed, attending a PWI was not one of the major struggles that they emphasized. It was attending a large university with large class sizes that was difficult for them. Findings from previous studies have noted that attending a large university can be intimidating to navigate, to get used to larger classes, and difficult to receive less individual attention and assistance from professors (Guiffrida, 2008). A larger university can also magnify social issues and limitations making it more difficult to meet people and adjust (Caldwell, 2007).

The findings from my interviews supported these claims and findings from previous literature. My participants commented on how difficult it was to adjust socially at such a large campus. All of them came to the university alone not knowing anyone on campus. It took them a while to meet new people and even longer to feel comfortable identifying and associating with people who they could relate to socially. They also all discussed the challenge of the larger classroom environment. Like findings from Caldwell (2007), many of the participants discussed the anxiety and reluctance that they felt to speak or ask questions in class, especially the larger ones. Consistent with Nelson-Lard et al., (2007), that African American students have less faculty interactions at larger PWI's, many of my participants did not approach their professors to ask questions in a
class setting or during office hours resulting in less faculty interaction than their White peers.

**Theme 5: Important resources**

Participants from my study were grateful and appreciative of the various people and services that were available to help them through their college process and experience. The students who participated in my study discussed how their involvement in various cultural programs and co-curricular activities made a large campus feel like a smaller community. Such programs included sororities, academic and pre professional organizations, and academic living-learning residence communities. The students discussed how these involvements and affiliations helped them meet their first group of friends on campus who are now some of their best friends. These affiliations helped them to find mentors and helped them identify professionals who were in the very same positions that they aspired to be in. More importantly, these involvements created space for students to connect and communicate with others like them.

Consistent with findings from Jehangir (2010), my participants felt more connected to campus when they were involved with a cultural student organization. Jehangir (2010) examined first generation student participation in a multicultural learning community and its impact on their experience at a large PWI. This study was done to help these students with their feelings of isolation at the PWI. The findings from Jehangir’s study suggested that these students felt more comfortable, embraced, and welcomed by being a part of this cultural learning community. They were able to share similar challenges, background, and experiences with people who could also relate. It allowed them to connect on a deeper level and created a safe space for them to share in
efforts to understand their own identity and encounters. The suggestions from that study are in agreement with what I found from my participants experiences with their campus involvements.

**Motivation**

Based on my literature review of previous studies, motivation is increased when students are intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically motivated. This theory was consistent with how participants from my study made meaning of their experience through the lens of motivation theory. Through the interviews, my participants offered a lot of information about where their motivation came from, how it was impacted positively or negatively, and how it ultimately shaped their college experience.

Some of the participants from my study discussed how they initially selected majors that they thought would result in a higher paying job. Some participants focused on being a doctor, lawyer, engineer, or some field in business because their parents and others instructed them to select a prestigious career path that would result in a stable, well-paying job. Some of the participants who were dealing with this external pressure explained how they were struggling with such majors. Once they switched their majors to fields that they were truly interested in and passionate about, their grades improved almost immediately and their involvement in applicable organizations and initiatives increased. These outcomes from my study were consistent with Vohra-Gupta (2007) who suggested that motivation played a significant role in academic achievement. More specifically, it was noted that extrinsic motivation contributed to lower academic achievement and ultimately a lower grade point average (Vohra-Gupta, 2007). My study
supports the findings from Vohra-Gupta’s study since my participants’ grades increased as their intrinsic motivation influenced their academic and career decisions.

Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deco (2006) also explored extrinsic and intrinsic motivation in terms of student goal framing. Like Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deco (2006), my study revealed that students who had an idea about the long term intrinsic meaning of their work were more likely to participate in associated activities, understand the material, and ultimately perform at a higher level than students who operated with an extrinsic motivation. This was demonstrated by students in my study who were involved in various campus activities, student organizations, and academic professional development programs. When my participants were presented with intrinsic benefits through these programs, they felt more connected to their fields and performed well.

**First generation students**

Results from my study supports previous findings that it is more valuable for first generation college students to be intrinsically motivated instead of extrinsically (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). With the students from my study being involved in programs that heightens their true interests in their academics and fields of studies, they felt more committed to the fields and to doing the coursework to the best of their ability. As their internal gratification increased, so did their motivation and commitment. During the interviews, the students articulated how they began to really see the purpose of education and the difference that they could make in their fields once they were studying and associated with fields that they were passionate about. As less focus was put on career titles and future earning potential, a sincere interest and
dedication began to develop causing their intrinsic motivation to increase while their extrinsic motivation decreased.

**African American students**

Unlike findings from Watson et al. (2002), my participants did not feel a lack of diversity on a predominantly White campus. Although they recognized that they were the minority and they were outnumbered by White students, they still felt that the campus was diverse. The participants explained how they appreciated the amount of diversity that was on the campus and how they felt exposed to a variety of cultures and ethnicities, which overshadowed the fact that they were drastically outnumbered by White students. When asked the question, “what are your feelings of attending a PWI?” There was very little said about racism and feelings of isolation and discomfort like in previous research. My study actually contradicts past literature about PWI’s not having much diversity. My participants were actually amazed with the amount of diversity displayed through the various cultures and ethnicities that were represented on the campus. Being around other cultures helped them to look past the fact that the majority student population was White. They were actually grateful to be at a PWI so that they could be exposed to other cultures and races other than their own. Many of them initially had aspirations to attend an HBCU but later became satisfied with their decision to attend a PWI for the sake of being exposed to the majority culture in college in order to prepare for the majority culture in the work force.

There are views and findings from previous studies that suggest that when African American students face negative stereotypes and racial prejudices in college, they
internalize those beliefs which negatively impacts their self-esteem (Solorzano et al. 2000; Solorzano et al., 2002). Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) also found that the negative stereotypes that Black students faced could decrease their sense of self and academic confidence. The participants in my study challenged this notion of decreased confidence when faced with adversity or racial stereotypes. Very few of the participants had encountered racial discrimination or racial prejudices on campus (that they blatantly knew of) and the couple that did have those negative encounters felt even more motivated to prove the offenders wrong. The participants were not bothered extensively by these issues or detrimentally emotionally impacted. Yet, they used these negative experiences as fuel to their fire to do well. Negative situations such as these actually motivated my participants to work harder and strive for greatness. If anything, their confidence was boosted and amplified by the negative perceptions unlike some of the findings in Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) as mentioned above.

Female African American students

Results from my study agree with the findings in the previous literature that African American females connect academic achievement and motivation to racial identity (Cokley, 2003). My participants realized and acknowledged that some of their motivation came from their background and self-identity, specifically their identity as an African American female. The participants asserted that they wanted to represent themselves well as a Black female student. They wanted to be above average, and prove any negative stereotypes wrong. Specifically, if they were in male dominated fields, their identity as a Black woman motivated them to demonstrate their strengths, knowledge, and capabilities. Therefore, they worked hard to promote, demonstrate, and exemplify a
positive image of a smart, educated, successful Black female student. Some of the participants articulated using their racial and gender identity as a source of motivation to show others that they too could be smart and successful. Their racial and gender identity was a tool that was constantly used to motivate them to do better and be better, to work harder, and to always exemplify a positive model. These findings from my participants experience as an African American female student agree with the notion that racial identity is linked to motivation in African American women.

Self-efficacy is a significant element to consider when exploring the motivation and academic outcomes of African American females. Thomas et al., (2009) explained that when self-efficacy increases, there is also an increase in resilience and persistence stemmed from motivation. Results from my study agree with these findings. Participants explained how they believed in themselves which triggered or enhanced their motivation. Participants identified themselves as self-motivated with a strong belief in themselves. Many of them attributed their success to their belief and confidence in themselves. Although they acknowledged and were very grateful for their support system, it was their self-motivation that carried and sustained them during tough times, difficulty, and stress. Findings from my study support the statement, “Providing experiences to increase self-efficacy beliefs will enhance motivation and ultimately increase academic adjustment” (Thomas, et al., 2009, p. 167). Information from my participants validated that when they had more confidence, then they had more motivation to achieve and work towards goals that seemed reachable. Having the confidence made them feel that their goal was attainable and within reach. Therefore, if they had the confidence, then they worked hard to achieve the goal since it felt more realistic.
In the next section I will present implications and recommendations. Factors that could have enhanced this study and suggestions for future research will also be presented.

**Implications and Recommendations**

In order to further understand, support, and assist African American, female, first generation college students who attend a large predominantly White research university, I make the following recommendations for future students, parents, and higher education faculty, staff, and administrators:

1. Based on the findings, I recommend that engaging the parents in the pre-college or college discussion is beneficial. All of the students very much wanted their parents to be involved and knowledgeable about what they were going through and experiencing (the good and the bad). However, very few of the participants actually had the patience to explain in detail to their parents what they needed to do to prepare for college and what their full college experience was like. I believe that institutions should intentionally involve and engage parents (of this population) in the pre-college preparation process. For example, much like the parent orientation that some higher education institutions facilitate just before the student begins college. Through such parent informational initiatives, a platform is provided to educate and address concerns and parents can be introduced to the various elements of college. This way parents can have a sense of the experience, all of the associated elements, and learn ways to be able to better support, encourage, and understand their student and what they will be dealing with in college. Participants listed their parental influence and encouragement as one of their main motivational factors and support systems.
Based on the findings that parental influence is significant on the students’ decision making and thought process, I recommend to get the parents involved in the pre-college and transition process to appropriately teach and educate them about the experience and the associated elements and implications.

2. Participants from this study appreciated being involved in organizations that provided a safe-place and comfort zone for them. It is particularly important to make a large campus, and perhaps a large class feel smaller and more intimate for these students. The smaller the environment, the easier it may be for these students to adjust and feel more comfortable being themselves, asking questions, and engaging in the classroom and the campus as a whole. Based on these findings, I recommend that this population of students should always be encouraged to strategically get involved in extra-curricular activities and participate in supportive programs that are in place. I further recommend that institutions have these programs and activities widely in place for students to take advantage of.

3. Based on the findings, specifically professional development programs and initiatives linked to academic majors and career fields are valuable and appreciated. Therefore, I recommend that such programs should be available for all majors or career fields. For example, a student majoring in accounting should have access to the campus chapter of the National Association of Black Accountants, much like a student majoring in engineering should have access to the campus chapter of the Society of Women Engineers. Participating in Living-Learning communities is another example of an initiative tied to academics.
and/or career fields. These communities also play a significant role in the students’ achievement, comfort level, and overall motivation. Students cited these programs and communities as major sources of support, guidance, mentoring, and avenues to build friendships. Therefore, I recommend to have academic professional development programs, which includes living-learning.

Learning communities, linked to all majors and academic colleges, and also

4. Lastly, I recommend that institutions consider promoting and facilitating initiatives that increase self-efficacy to ultimately increase and sustain motivation within this student population. These participants cited their ambition as being fueled by their self-confidence and belief in themselves. It was their faith in themselves (along with their faith in God) that sustained them through difficult times. These participants also saw themselves as being independent and self-sufficient for the most part. Therefore, I recommend that high schools and higher education institutions put more support in place to help build, develop and strengthen self-efficacy, and self-esteem. If students have more confidence in themselves then they may be able to withstand challenges easier, persist longer, and set and achieve greater goals.

These recommendations specifically address the issues that have been uncovered in this study. I have included information on what can be done and why it could be beneficial. Next, I will present factors for enhancing the study also known as possible limitations of the study.
Factors for Enhancing the Study

As with any research project, there are always ways to enhance the study. One way to enhance the study is to focus in on sampling as it relates to the particular academic colleges and majors to which the participants belonged. There may be value in exploring African American, first generation, female students within certain majors or academic colleges. A large portion of these participants were in majors that were connected to specific supportive programs on campus. These students attributed a lot of their support, comfort, guidance, and sense of belonging to these academic supportive programs. I wonder about the experiences of African American, female, first generation college students who are in majors that are not linked to such support programs. I wonder where that population primarily gets their guidance and support from if not connected to these pre-established academic professional development programs. Therefore, I think it is worth studying students who are involved in such programs versus students who are not involved in those particular programs to assess the success level and the impacts that they have on students, particularly who are in this targeted population.

As I reflect, I am curious if looking at specific majors would have enriched my study since many of the students would most likely have the same courses, professors, advisers, and possibly even the same supportive academic and professional organizations and support that are applicable to their majors. This would have been worth investigating to see if potentially some of their experiences were related in this regard. It would have also been interesting to include a larger variety of majors to see if experiences were drastically different among the many majors.
Suggestions for Future Research

There are areas of this study that are useful for future research to further add to the understanding. There is a need to explore the experiences of African American, female, first generation college students of all academic levels. There were additional students who were interested in participating in my study who did not meet the criteria of being in good academic standing because their grade point averages were lower than a 3.0. This implies that there is a broader population of African American, female, first generation college students who need a platform to tell their story. Students who may not have a GPA of a 3.0 still have experiences worth being explored. It is also important to understand what their motivation was for persisting with college even though they had lower academic achievement or success.

Another future research study could be to look at students with multiple identities who are also first generation college students. Underrepresented students who identify with other race and ethnicities such as Latinos are worth exploring to learn about their college experience. We know from the literature that underrepresented students have a different experience at a large predominantly White institution, so investigating the experiences of Latino students would be interesting to see if it compares at all to the experiences of African Americans. I would be interested to see what new findings and insights would surface.

This study contributed to the research by sharing the voices and perspectives of African American, female, first generation college students. They were given a safe platform to tell their story and discuss their experiences broadly. A distinctive contribution that this study made was regarding the motivation factors contributing to the
preparation, persistence, and success of this population. Although there is previous literature about college motivation and achievement, there was little about the motivation of this particular population specifically. While motivation has been explored in other ways such as its relation to academic achievement and African American students, this study looked at a population that has not been explored heavily in relation to motivation. As such, future studies should look at the motivation of students who are not as academically successful as the students in my study.

This study also contributed positive factors and elements that these African American, female, first generation college student participants demonstrated. Previous studies on FGC students and/or African American students have largely profiled the challenges and negative feelings and outcomes that these students experience. This study reveals sources of motivation and feelings of accomplishment for these students. Notably, these participants were confident, self-motivated, had been successful in high school and were now successful college students. While they did discuss their challenges and discouragements, they also explained how those challenges helped them to be successful by motivating them to work harder and achieve higher. I believe the results from this study contributes a positive profile of the African American, female, first generation college student experience.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This qualitative phenomenology study explored the experiences of African American, female, first generation college students who attend a large PWI. After analyzing categories derived from 10 individual interviews, five themes emerged from data concerning their college experience. The themes were: a) college preparation, b)
The theoretical framework or lens that I used to view this study was Motivation Theory. The motivation theory proposed that as motivation increases, academic achievement also increases. More specifically, various theories tied to motivation propose that African American, first-generation college students have greater success when they are intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically and that many external factors can impact their motivation. According to the 10 participants who were interviewed in this study, self-efficacy and self-confidence is their primary or one of their major sources that fuels their motivation and is suggested for this population to successful. Participants experienced extrinsic and intrinsic motivation throughout their college preparation and experience. They noted that their motivation and ultimately their success increased as their extrinsic motivation decreased and their intrinsic motivation increased. As they shifted from external rewards (such as a prestigious career title, and potential earning salary) and turned towards internal and meaningful rewards, their motivation increased, they felt more of a commitment and sense of ownership and connectedness to their studies and future career. Findings also revealed that another major source of motivation was parental encouragement.

While themes and external factors varied as to individual experiences and motivation levels, the overall and primary conclusion was that it is the belief in themselves and the encouragement from their families that fuels their ambition and motivation to persist and achieve success in college. Self-efficacy, self-confidence, and encouragement is needed for this population to be successful in their college experience.
Both of these findings (self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation) are consistent with the motivation literature.

This chapter concludes the research from this study. Exploring the experiences of African American female first generation college students who attend a large PWI provided a platform for this population to share their perspectives broadly. This study examined a population that has not been explored heavily in relation to persistence, academic success, and sources of motivation. The findings produced five themes that described the college experience and how they relate to motivation: a) college preparation b) parental influence and involvement c) changing relationships d) challenges and e) important resources.

I would like to conclude with a summary of key take-aways. Motivation theory proposed that as motivation increases, academic achievement also increases. African American, female FGC students have greater success when they are intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically. Although participants from this study experienced both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, their motivation and success increased as extrinsic motivation decreased & intrinsic motivation increased. As they shifted from external rewards (such as career title and potential salary) and turned towards internal and meaningful rewards (such as gratification), their commitment, connectedness, and success increased. Self-efficacy and self-confidence is a primary source of motivation and parental encouragement is another major source of motivation. Overall, the belief in themselves and family encouragement fuels ambition and motivation to persist and achieve in college. Recommendations encourage all stakeholders to contribute to the success of African American, female, first generation college students, in good academic
standing, attending a large PWI. Recommendations also encourage family involvement and supportive programs relevant to majors and career preparation. Additional research is suggested to explore these students who are not necessarily in good academic standing, who have a grade point average of lower than a 3.0 to understand their experience and what motivates them.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A

Request for Assistance Email Script
Hello,

My name is Ashley Green and I am a doctoral student in Western Michigan University’s Educational Leadership program. I am also Director and Coordinator of Scholarships with MSU’s National and International Fellowships and Scholarship (NIFS) office.

I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled “Experiences of African American, Female, First Generation College Students,” and your assistance is desired. In order to complete this study, I will need to interview students who meet certain criteria and I am seeking your assistance to help me contact those students who you think meet the criteria.

I am asking that you forward the attached message to students who meet the following criteria:

- First Generation College Student
- African American
- Female
- Junior or Senior class level in good academic status

Thank you for your willingness to help me recruit potential participants for my study.

PLEASE DISTRIBUTE THE ATTACHED MESSAGE TO ALL JUNIOR OR SENIOR AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALES WHO YOU THINK MEET THE CRITERIA OF GOOD ACADEMIC STANDING.

Sincerely,

Ashley Green
Appendix B

Letter of Invitation for Participation
Dear Student,

My name is Ashley Green and I am a doctoral student at Western Michigan University. I am writing to ask if you are interested in learning more about participating in a research study on the college experiences of African American, Female, First Generation College students. The research that I am conducting is part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. As an African American, female, first generation college student myself, I understand that there are unique experiences that you may have had and I’m interested to learn more about those experiences.

Participating in this study will include an interview conversation that should last approximately 60-90 minutes. If you agree to participate in this study, your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

If you are interested in learning more about participating, please respond to this email as soon as possible.

In addition to my graduate school responsibilities, I am also a full time administrator and student affairs professional at Michigan State University. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email at agreen@msu.edu or by phone at (810) 610-4429. By responding to this email, you are consenting to be considered for this study and you can withdraw at any time.

Sincerely,

Ashley Green
Appendix C

Scheduling Consent Form Review Email
Appendix C

Scheduling Consent Form Review Email

Hello,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study, Experiences of African American, female, first generation college students. I appreciate your interest and willingness to participate. Attached you will find the consent form that you will need to sign and submit before the interview begins.

Please click the link below to access a “calendar” that will allow me to schedule a time to review the consent document with you and proceed with the interview.
Appendix D

Consent Form
Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology

Principal Investigator: Dr. Donna Talbot
Student Investigator: Ashley Green
Title of Study: Experiences of African American, Female, First Generation College Students

You are invited to participate in a study examining the experiences of African American, female first generation college students. This project will serve as Ashley Green’s dissertation for the requirements of the PhD in Educational Leadership with a concentration in Higher Education. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in this study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

The following information is being provided for you to determine if you wish to participate in this study. In addition, you are free to decide not to participate in this research or to withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with the researchers or Western Michigan University. Please do not hesitate to ask questions about the study before participating or while the research is taking place. I will be happy to share the results with you at the completion of the study. Results can be emailed to participants upon request.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of African American, female, first generation college students in college.

Who can participate in this study?
To participate in this study you must be an African American, female, first generation college student in their junior or senior year of college at a large research university with over 25,000 students. You should be in good academic standing, and should not be a transfer student.

Where will this study take place?
Data collection will take place at your university. Interviews will take place in a quiet location with little to no distractions (e.g., office or library space on campus).

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
If you decide to participate you will be asked to take part in an interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
If you participate in this study, you will be asked questions during an interview
concerning your college experience. These interviews will be audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the collected information and all interviews will be transcribed into transcripts that you will be able to review and edit or expand on if needed.

**What information is being measured during the study?**
During your participation in this study, I will be attempting to obtain your thoughts, and feelings concerning your college experience.

**What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?**
The risks that are related to this study are minimal. There is a slight chance that you could feel discomfort or negative emotions while answering some of the questions. Measures that will be taken in efforts to alleviate these potential risks are making sure that you are comfortable and in a comfortable environment. As the researcher I will be careful not to pressure you in to answering uncomfortable questions. I will inform you that they can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. There are no other known risks associated with participation in the study.

**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**
There are several expected benefits from participating in this study. Results of this study may serve to further the understanding of leaders, advisors and support staff that interact with first generation college students. Results from this field test may also begin to provide information about what first generation college students are facing and how they feel about what they are experiencing. This information may encourage more targeted support programs for this population. There are no known or obvious costs associated with participating in this study.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**
The costs that are related to this study are minimal. However, your time that you commit to participating in this study is one cost. There are no other costs associated with participating in this study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**
Your name and school name will not be used in the dissertation dissemination process; rather it will only be known to the researcher. Pseudonyms will be used for participants (i.e. Student 1, Student 2, and so on). Every effort will be taken to protect your identity. Interview transcriptions and other data will be stored on a password protected electronic device which will be stored and locked in the office of the researcher. The transcripts will be transported directly by the researcher and stored on the campus of Western Michigan University in the archives for at least three years. The audio transcripts will be destroyed once the transcription process has been completed and a written or electronic record is produced and you are confident that the written transcript accurately reflects your comments during the interview.
**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**
You may withdraw from this study at any time without any penalty. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study.

The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Ashley Green, the primary investigator at (517) 884-7654 (office) or (810) 610-4429 (cell) or via email at agreen@msu.edu. You may also contact the Chair of the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (269) 387-8293 or via email at hsiirb@wmich.edu, or the Vice President for Research (269) 387-8298 if any questions or issues arise during the course of the study.

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

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Please print your name

________________________________________________________________________

Participant Signature  Date
Appendix E

Participant Screening Protocol
Appendix E
Participant Screening Protocol

Dear Student,

Thank you for your interest in my research study on the college experiences of African American, Female, First Generation College students. The research that I am conducting is part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at Western Michigan University. Again, as an African American, female, first generation college student myself, I understand that there are unique experiences that you may have had, and I’m interested in learning more about those experiences.

Participating in this study will include:

An interview conversation that should last approximately 60-90 minutes that will be conducted at your university in a campus office or library. Your interview with me will be tape recorded, and I will also be taking written notes. If needed, a follow up meeting may occur which will allow me to check for the accuracy of my notes and to ask any follow up questions I had after reviewing the transcripts of our first meeting.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and there is no penalty for not participating or for withdrawing from the study. If you agree to participate, your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Your name and school will not appear in the study. Your stories will be referenced using a pseudo name. All transcripts will be kept on a password protected electronic device in the researcher’s home until my dissertation is completed. At that point, all transcripts and results from the study will be kept secured in the archives at Western Michigan University for up to three years after the study.

If you are still interested in participating in this study, please complete the short participant screening questionnaire. There are only a few questions that will take a couple of minutes to complete.

Participant Screening Questions

1. Do you identify as a first generation college student (your parents have never attended college and you are the first in your immediate family to attend college)?

2. Do you self-identify as African American, or Black? Yes or No

3. Are you a female? Yes or No

4. During the 2014-2015 academic year, will you be a junior or senior class level?

5. What is your grade point average (g.p.a.)? 3.5-4.0, 3.0-3.5, 2.5-3.0?

6. How long have you attended this university?
Appendix F

Follow-Up Email to Initial Interest
Hello,

My name is Ashley Green and I am writing because you responded to a message to participate in my study “Experiences of African American, Female, First Generation College students.” This study is in partial fulfillment of my Ph.D. in Higher Education Leadership at Western Michigan University.

Thank you for your interest. I would like to schedule a time to review the consent form and proceed with an interview with you lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. Please provide me with a couple of days and times that you can be available over the next two weeks to participate in an interview on campus. I will confirm your interview time and location soon after hearing from you.

I will review the consent form and if you agree to participate, you will sign and submit before the interview begins. Your participation is greatly appreciated. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,

Ashley Green
Appendix G

Interview Protocol
Appendix G

Interview Protocol

Project: Experiences of African American Female First Generation College Students

Time of Interview: ________________________________________________________

Date of Interview: ____________________________________

Location: ___________________________________________________________

Interviewer: _____________________________________________________________

Pseudonym: ____________________________________________________________

Thank you for consenting to participate in this study. I would like to audio record the interview so that the study can be as accurate as possible.

Intro/Background Questions that the participants will be asked include:

Tell me about your (participant’s) background:
*Prompts if needed:
  • High school class level
  • Number of classmates and peers that went to college or stayed in college
  • Level of success that they achieved in college (GPA, involvement, etc.)

Tell me about your parent(s) academic background:
*Prompts if needed:
  • Level of education completed
  • Feelings about their student attending college
  • Level of support and participation the students college experience
Interview Questions

1. Please describe your understanding and any feelings you have about what it means to be a first generation college student.

2. Take me back to when you first thought about college and what was that like?

3. What was it like as you prepared to apply to and enter college and what was the transition like?

4. What challenges did you face throughout your college experience?

5. What accomplishments did you achieve during college?

6. What helped you get through college?
   Prompt: What actions, procedures, services or people helped you through college and what actions, procedures, services or people do you think could have helped you more?

7. What were the motivations for you to enter college? What were the motivations for you to stay in college and work towards success?

8. Was there anything that was discouraging as you entered college? Was there anything that was/is discouraging during your college experience?

9. What feelings do your parent(s) or guardians have about you attending college? What are their perceptions?

10. Knowing what you know now, would you have done anything differently? What advice would you have for students preparing to enter college? What do they need to know?

Thank you for participating in this interview. I will be contacting you after your interview has been transcribed via an email with questions about accuracy or perhaps to clarify some of your responses.
Appendix H

Thank you and Interview Transcription Accuracy Message
Appendix H

Thank you and Interview Transcription Accuracy

Dear:

Thank you for participating in my dissertation study “Experiences of African American, Female, First Generation College Students.” I really enjoyed speaking with you about your college experience.

I have attached your interview transcription. Please read for accuracy. If there is anything else that you want to share, please do not hesitate to let me know. If I don’t receive a reply from you within one week, then I will assume that is everything is accurate and there are no necessary revisions.

Again, thank you for taking the time to participate in my study and share your experience with me. Best wishes!

Sincerely,

Ashley Green
Appendix I

Students Not Needed (after reaching desired number of responses)
Appendix I

Students Not Needed (after reaching desired number of responses)

Hello,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study of the “Experiences of African American, Female, First Generation College Students.”

There were many students who contacted me and unfortunately, I won’t be able to interview everyone. I have reached the maximum number of students I need to complete the study. However, I will retain your name and contact information, and I may contact you later on if someone withdraws from the study.

Thank you again.

Sincerely,

Ashley
Appendix J

Students Who Do Not Meet Criteria
Appendix J

Students Who Do Not Meet Criteria

Hello,

My name is Ashley Green. Thank you for your interest in participating in my study of the “Experiences of African American, Female, First Generation College Students.” I really appreciate you completing the short demographic survey. Unfortunately, you do not meet the criteria to participate in the study. All participants needed to identify with all of the following criterion:

- African American; Black; Bi-racial (identifying as African or Black)
- Female
- First Generation
- Junior or Senior Class level in good academic standing (3.0 or above).
- Must not be a transfer student

Again, thank you for your interest. Best wishes!

Sincerely,

Ashley
Appendix G

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board
Letter of Approval
Date: September 10, 2014

To: Donna Talbot, Principal Investigator
   Ashley Green, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 14-08-23

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Experiences of African American, Female, First Generation College Students” 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: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. 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.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

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

Approval Termination: September 9, 2015