

PERSISTENCE TO COMPLETION: IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT FOSTER STUDENT SUCCESS FOR  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to examine factors that led to the persistence of six African-American women in obtaining their bachelor's degree. Participants responded to seven open-ended questions related to their persistence and described parts of their journey to achieve their educational goal. Data was collected from interviews conducted via Zoom, and four themes emerged. The implications of this study provide insight into the importance of a sense of belonging, having support systems, being goal oriented, and overcoming barriers and challenges.

*Key Words:* African American Women, College Students, Retention, Persistence, Student Success

## DEDICATION

The journey toward the completion of this doctoral degree has been one that I have dreamed of, and I am proud of my accomplishment. I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband and two boys for their love, support, and patience as I devoted so much time to achieving this goal. I also dedicate this degree to all the Black women out there who will persist against all odds and obtain a degree in higher education.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### INTRODUCTION

It is August 1848, and 10-year-old Rosetta Douglas has successfully passed her entrance exam to gain entrance into the Seward Seminary in Rochester, New York which offers curriculum in reading, writing, geography, music, and painting. Rosetta and her parents are excited about this opportunity for Rosetta to improve her mind and consequently have a good life (Nash, 2013). Imagine their shock and dismay to learn that Rosetta is not allowed to go into the room with the other students because of the color of her skin. Rosetta is a young Black girl in a country trying to come to grips with how to integrate. Nash (2013) states that Rosetta's well-known abolitionist parents, Frederick and Anna Douglas, are heartbroken and write to newspapers about the racial prejudice taking place in seminaries. During this time, Frederick even attends the Seneca Falls Convention and speaks in favor of women's suffrage. Rosetta is eventually expelled from the seminary, and her parents send her to a public school that welcomes her initially but eventually sends her home because of her skin color. According to Fought (2017), at age 15, Rosetta attends the Oberlin College Preparatory school to study to become a teacher. She attends for only one year before departing early and going home to help her father at his newspaper office. Mr. Douglas is the publisher of an abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*, which he utilizes to advocate for women's rights. At age 22, Rosetta takes a local teacher's exam and teaches for several years before marrying and having children. She

eventually goes to work for her father as a clerk and supports his activism until her death in 1906 (Fought, 2017).

Our country has come a long way in terms of educational opportunities, but our history is marred with trials, tribulations, prejudice, and racism. In the early 1800s, racial prejudice restricted African Americans from attending White seminaries, and incidents of anti-Black violence destroyed African American educational institutions. When African American students were allowed to attend White institutions, they were discriminated against and even expelled because of their race (Nash, 2013). Rosetta's story is an early example of a long history of unfair educational practices inflicted upon African Americans that we must be cognizant of and change.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has not been a drastic improvement. The US census shows that African Americans lag substantially behind Asians and Whites in degree attainment. The numbers show that African Americans rank on average five out of seven for degree attainment by age, gender, race, and ethnicity (US Census Bureau, 2017). Figure 1 shows the educational attainment of adults ages 25 and older by gender, race, and ethnicity.

According to the US Census Bureau (2017), African American women are seventeen percentage points behind Asian women and nine percentage points behind White women in earning a bachelor's degree. Why do we see such differences? Are Black women not enrolling at the same rate as Asian and White women? Are they not being as successful? What affects their persistence? Are there systemic practices that are contributing to this attainment gap? Is there hidden discrimination? Although educators and policy makers have made great strides in higher education practices and policies, institutions need to better understand factors that

affect student persistence for African American women. This study focuses on the unique experiences of six Black women and their journey to earning their bachelor’s degree.

**Table 1: Educational Attainment of Adults Ages 25 and Older, by Gender and Race and Ethnicity: 2017**

	All racial and ethnic groups		American Indian or Alaska Native		Asian		Black		Hispanic		Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander		White		More than one race	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Less than high school	10.9%	10.0%	17.0%	12.8%	7.3%	10.6%	12.6%	11.4%	30.5%	28.4%	10.9%	10.5%	6.3%	5.5%	6.8%	6.4%
High school graduate	30.0%	27.7%	37.5%	33.2%	19.3%	20.4%	35.9%	30.6%	32.9%	29.2%	31.8%	37.8%	29.2%	27.5%	31.9%	24.4%
Some college but no degree	16.2%	16.5%	18.3%	17.0%	10.5%	8.2%	19.7%	21.0%	13.9%	14.9%	21.9%	17.0%	16.6%	16.6%	21.2%	23.6%
Associate degree	9.3%	11.2%	9.5%	14.0%	5.7%	7.0%	9.2%	11.2%	6.9%	9.0%	9.2%	10.5%	10.1%	12.1%	9.8%	11.0%
Bachelor's degree	21.0%	21.6%	12.4%	14.4%	28.9%	32.2%	15.2%	15.4%	11.4%	12.9%	19.8%	17.4%	23.6%	23.9%	19.9%	21.7%
Master's degree	8.7%	10.3%	3.7%	6.2%	19.6%	16.3%	5.8%	8.3%	3.3%	4.5%	5.3%!	5.2%!	9.5%	11.4%	7.2%	9.6%
Professional degree	1.7%	1.2%	0.9%!!	1.7%!	2.3%	1.9%	0.6%	0.9%	0.5%	0.4%	#	1.5%!!	2.1%	1.4%	1.0%!	2.1%
Doctoral degree	2.3%	1.5%	0.7%!!	0.5%!!	6.3%	3.3%	1.1%	1.1%	0.7%	0.7%	1.1%!!	0.1%!!	2.5%	1.6%	2.1%!	1.1%!

Source: US Census Bureau (2017).

## BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Vice president for research at the American Council on Education, Lorelle Espinosa, states that student populations in higher education will continue to become more and more diverse, and colleges and universities must make systemic changes that create learning environments that support students from wide-ranging financial and racial and ethnic backgrounds (Pullias Center for Higher Education, 2019). The Pullias Center for Higher Education and the American Council of Education published a report written by the director of the center on an innovative approach for higher education institutions to better support students from diverse backgrounds by creating a diverse infrastructure that empowers the whole institution to organize and serve diverse student populations (Kezar, 2019). African American women are persisting at lower rates than other racial and ethnic groups, so there is knowledge to be gained about factors that are affecting their persistence and institutional

practices that need to be put into place to improve educational outcomes for these women. To see how far African American women have come, we will take a backward glance at the history of higher education for African Americans.

## **HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Harper et al. (2009) state that the earliest access for African Americans in higher education was initiated in the 1820s. In 1823, Alexander Lucius Twilight was the first African American man to be awarded a degree from Middlebury College. In 1833, Oberlin College became the first institution to openly admit African Americans. In 1862, Oberlin College had the first African American female college graduate, Mary Jane Patterson (Harper et al., 2009). It was during this year that one of the leading policies for access for higher education was introduced. The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 provided funds and 30,000 acres of land for the establishment of public institutions in every state (Rudolph, 1990). This Act did not specifically focus on African Americans or women, but it helped them gain access to formal education. It was not until the second Morrill Act of 1890, which mandated funds for education be justly and equitably distributed, that access was specifically extended to African Americans (Brazzell, 1996). This Act also legalized the segregation of Black and White public institutions. The public historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) founded during this time were generally of poorer quality, had inadequately trained faculty, and unsatisfactory instructional facilities. Despite this fact, by the late 1940s, 3,400 African Americans had graduated from college, and 90% of them had been educated at HBCUs (Anderson, 1998; Davis, 1998).

Around the early 1950s, tension began to escalate as minorities saw that they were not getting a piece of the promised American dream from the American education system. There

were protests where people advocated for a fairer educational system in many of the major cities. In 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that the “separate, but equal” operation in public education would no longer be legal (Brown, 2001). This mandate did not reach higher education until ten years later when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Brown, 2001). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited “discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, and national origin in places of public accommodation, in federally assisted programs, in employment, in schools, and with respect to voting rights (Chambers, 2008, p. 326). The following year, the Higher Education Act of 1965 was passed, which provided subsidies to strengthen developing institutions. The funds were allocated for faculty and curriculum improvement, student services, exchange programs for faculty and students, and administrative improvement policies (Harper et al., 2009).

### *History of African American Women in Higher Education*

According to Perkins (2015), the first generation of college-educated African American women (pre-Civil War through 1880s) were educated in the northern parts of the US, and most were educated at Oberlin College in Ohio. By the 1890s, a small group of highly educated African American women expressed their feminist concerns to African American men and White women by speaking at conferences and publishing articles in newspapers and journals (Perkins, 2015). Their concerns fell on deaf ears because Black men put self before race, and the White women viewed the ambitions of African American women as a threat to the racial status quo. Despite this reality, African American women continued to fight for their right to have the same aspirations and educational opportunities as Whites. At that time, only 30 African

American women possessed a baccalaureate degree compared to over 300 African American men and 2,500 White women (Perkins, 2015).

Outside of the South, African American women had access to higher education prior to 1915. According to Perkins (2015), these college educated women moved to the South to teach, and many of them started normal and secondary-level teacher training institutions because there was a shortage of teachers for the Black public schools. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more Black colleges expanded and became accredited, and the percentage of Black women students increased. However, many institutions did not prepare women for leadership roles and reinforced women's inferior position in American society. In 1910, Lucy Diggs Slowe, the first Black woman dean at Howard University, sought to promote the growth and development of female college students, so she established two organizations specifically concerned with higher education of African American women: The National Association of College Women and the National Association of Colored Women. Perkins (2015) states that encouraging Black female college students to think beyond being a teacher, nurse, or social worker was difficult; however, in 1921, three African American women earned Ph.D. degrees. African American women were making progress, but they were still behind White women in obtaining graduate degrees. By 1940, Black women outnumbered Black men in college, but most of these women studied primarily in teacher training colleges and many were not equipped for jobs that became available after WW II. Due to their lack of experience, of the 381 African American students with doctorates and professional degrees, only 45 were women (Perkins, 2015).



In the 1950s and 1960s, with the start of the Civil Rights Movement, African American women began desegregating US institutions of higher education in record numbers. By 2014, African American women surpassed African American males in enrollment and earning a bachelor's degree. African American men overall had more doctorate degrees than African American women; nevertheless, African American women under the age of 40 held over twice as many doctorates as African American men (Perkins, 2015). African American women have made great strides in educational attainment in higher education and obtaining a college degree.

### **THE VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

The US has prided itself on the concept of the American dream, which is possibly the most compelling ideology in American life. James Truslow Adams coined the term "American dream" in 1931 as he talked about a dream in which life would be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. He believed that anyone could attain their fullest potential regardless of birth or position. He insisted that the American dream had attracted millions to America's shores for achievement, success, and materialism (DeVitis & Rich, 1996). Martin Luther King, Jr., in his memorable "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington stated that when the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were written, a promise was made that all men, Black as well as White, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Dr. King stated in his speech: "I say to you today, my friends, though, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream rooted in the American Dream. I have a

dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal” (King Jr, 1963).

Higher education institutions provide Americans with the opportunity to obtain the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These institutions serve a public purpose by providing our society with advanced training, expertise, and new ideas. The opportunity for Americans to fully realize their educational aspirations through a variety of paths is an important part of higher education (Lagemann, 2012). Lagemann (2012) believes that universities serve society and that a degree in higher education is almost a necessity for a citizen. Valletta (2015) asserts that possessing a four-year degree gives a worker an advantage in the labor market. Workers with a college education have an earning advantage along with benefits such as greater stability, autonomy, and more leverage in their career choices. Growth in the wage gap has also been wider for individuals holding a post-graduate degree than those with only a four-year college degree. Obtaining higher levels of education helps secure financial advantages that filter down through future generations (Valletta, 2015). There are certain factors that lead to obtaining a college degree and being persistent is one of them.

## **PERSISTENCE**

In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, persistence is defined as the act of persisting and persisting is defined as going on resolutely or stubbornly despite opposition, importunity, or warning. Tinto (2017a) defines persistence as the quality that allows someone to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise. Tinto encourages everyone to see the issue of persistence through the eyes of the student and to support their perseverance and completion thereby reducing educational disadvantage. He believes that persisting is another way of

addressing motivation. According to Tinto (2017a), the three key dimensions to student motivation are self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and the value of the curriculum. Tinto believes “that universities have to see the issue of persistence through the eyes of their students as partners, learn from their experiences and understand how those experiences shape their responses to university policies. Only then can universities further improve persistence and completion while also closing the continuing equity gaps that plague our societies” (p. 6).

Students can take several paths students to pursue a degree in higher education. Regardless of the pathway, many college students who aspire to acquire skills, graduate, and obtain a sustainable living are not persisting and graduating. When analyzing the data, racial disparities are seen in college completion rates. For example, African American women persist and graduate at much lower rates than other subpopulations of women. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), for the cohort entry year 2010, African American women and American Indian women had the lowest graduation rates within six years for first-time, full-time bachelor’s degree-seeking students at four-year postsecondary institutions. Asian women had a graduation rate of 77%, White women had a 67% graduation rate, Hispanic women had a 58% graduation rate, and Black and American Indian women had a 44% and 42% graduation rate, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Why are African American women less likely to persist and earn their degree than other women? Zamani (2003) states that African American women are unique in that they belong to two marginalized groups and are invisible in colleges and universities and are impacted by race and sex and asserts that “being female and African American places African American women

at the confluence of two forms of oppression.” Although Black women have been subject to inequities, they are more handicapped by race oppression than by sex oppression and these barriers affect persistence (Zamani, 2003). This could be a reason that the current research on persistence is mainly focused on African Americans as a race and not by gender. The breakdown of persistence by race is missing in other studies and therefore more research is needed that focuses specifically on African American women, a gap this study is attempting to close. Zamani (2003) believes that institutions should focus on their mission, characteristics, and climate to foster postsecondary educational attainment for African American women.

Over the past 40 years, the doors to higher education have been opened to our country’s underrepresented minority and low-income students. However, open access is not enough because although there is access, African American students are persisting at much lower rates than other ethnicities. According to the US Department of Education (2007), among students of different racial/ethnic groups who began seeking a bachelor’s degree at a four-year degree-granting institution in fall 2010, the six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students was 40% for Black students. It was highest for Asian students at 74%, followed by White students at 64%, Hispanic students at 54%, Pacific Islanders at 51%, and American Indian/Alaska Native students at 39%. Adversely, the four-year graduation rates for first-time, full-time undergraduate students were 50% or less for each racial/ethnic group.

Although the rate of African American students enrolling in college has increased, especially for Black women, the graduation rates have not. This suggests that barriers to degree completion remain and must be addressed. When looking at women who hold bachelor’s degrees, Winkle-Wagner (2015) states that only one in five Black women older than twenty-five

holds a degree while one in two Asian women and one in three White women hold a bachelor's degree. More attention needs to be focused on Black women in higher education and their unique needs and experiences. When these insights are gained, institutional policies can be implemented that will maximize the academic performance and persistence for these women (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Although there is research that addresses Black women in higher education, it does not provide a comprehensive picture of the issue. My research will add to the body of knowledge about persistence for African American women and help paint a more complete picture.

#### *Current Research on Persistence*

Strayhorn and Terrell (2010) discuss the state of empirical research on African American college students. Although there has been progress in African American student enrollment, national trends suggest that Black college students face obstacles and stressors in college especially at predominantly White institutions (PWI). Gender disparities are also more pronounced among African American students. African American students' success rates also vary by family income with students from the highest income quartile enrolling at higher rates directly after high school graduation than those from the lowest quartile. Strayhorn also studied the relationship between resilience, academic self-efficacy, and academic success of low-income African American college students attending PWIs. His study suggests that academic self-efficacy and resilience influence achievement for African American students during their first year of college. This information can be used to see what interventions universities can implement or what policies can be put into place to help students achieve. Educational environments must be designed to facilitate college success for students.

Baker and Robnett (2004) conducted a case study on race, social support, and college student retention to understand the difference in the retention of African American and Latino students. The results of the study suggest that the experiences encountered by minority students once they are in college are important for their success. Social support from within the college environment seems to play a critical role in student retention. Baker and Robnett believe that retention rates can be improved by making administrative efforts to encourage minority students to connect with others on campus and to improve the efficacy of these groups.

Brooks (2015) studied ways in which African American college students perceive family structure, relationships, and support as affecting their academic persistence and college experience. There was no distinct pattern indicating that family background characteristics such as income, household make-up, and parent education level influenced academic persistence. Brooks concluded that family support, whether financial or emotional, was sufficient for African American students to persist.

Ledesma et al. (2015) believe that “racism shapes institutional environment and individual experiences within them” (p. 16). They believe that critical race theory has functioned to illuminate the voices of people of color in academia and their lived experiences but has not provided leaders and policy makers with a picture of what postsecondary institutional environments should look like. Ledesma et al. believe that the people of color who have lived the experience can provide a picture and vital information on this environment.

Kuh (2005) states that minoritized students are less likely than White students to be satisfied with their college environments and overall college experience. What is the cause of

this dissatisfaction? Educational leaders need to understand the types of environments that must be developed to ensure that racially diverse populations thrive in college. It is critical that educational scholars understand and pursue areas of inquiry on the barriers students encounter and how they will be addressed and provide culturally engaging campus support for minoritized populations. It is also critical that higher education professionals evaluate the current educational environment and create more inclusive environments so that racially diverse populations can be successful.

These alarming statistics have forced colleges and universities to investigate potential factors that may influence the academic persistence of African American college students. There is a plethora of research on the persistence of African American students in general but limited research on Black women specifically. More studies are needed for African American women, and this is what makes this study valuable. African American women hold the key to their success, and talking with them will reveal the solutions that are needed to ensure their success. Historically, women have had to fight for fair and equal treatment, and Black women have had to fight even harder. Our country has come a long way in terms of educational access for all but ensuring that everyone successfully earns a degree is another hurdle to overcome. To accomplish this, we must move beyond fancy statements about inclusion and diversity and truly change institutional climate and culture by “walking the walk.” We must address conscious and unconscious bias if we are to move forward with success for all.

Over the past few years, there have been many racially charged occurrences in the US, and these events have spilled over into our institutions of higher education. These high-profile incidents have sparked racial tensions in our higher education institutions and contribute to the

racial disparities on our college campuses. It is important that educational leaders and policymakers understand the ways in which racial and ethnic disparities occur on our higher education campuses and address these race-related problems (Ledesma et al. 2015). Carey (2004) believes that if these disparities are not addressed, they could have devastating economic and social consequences for our society. For example, on April 7, 2022, Ketanji Brown Jackson became the first Black woman confirmed to the US Supreme Court. In the 233-year history of the Supreme Court, no Black woman has held the title of “Justice,” which is a telling statistic for a country that touts itself as the land of opportunity and equality for all. We must create conditions that will prepare the pool from which her successor will come.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological research study was to obtain first-person accounts of the experiences of African American women in college and understand the factors that led to them persisting and graduating with their bachelor’s degree. This study adds to the body of research conducted on African American college student persistence. Given the low rates of persistence for Black women, findings are critical and can be used to implement interventions that will help other Black women be successful in college.

### *Research Questions*

The college success of Black women remains underexplored due to the trend of examining students of color as a race and not taking into consideration how African American women’s experiences may be uniquely racialized and gendered (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). This study examined the unique experiences of six African American students who had earned their



bachelor's degree. I hypothesized that grit would be an important factor in the persistence of the study participants. Duckworth et al. (2007) define grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (pp. 1087–1088).

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the factors that African American students consider in their college selection?
- What are the institutional and personal factors that positively impact African American student persistence?
- What are the institutional and personal factors that negatively impact African American student persistence?
- How can institutions better support African American students to graduation?

### *Methodology*

Phenomenology provides a theoretical guideline to help researchers understand phenomena in a subject's life. In this specific research, I attempted to gain an understanding of Black women and their obtainment of a bachelor's degree. Interviews are a data collection strategy used with phenomenological method of inquiry, and these discussions have both philosophical and methodological stances. A unique aspect of this approach is the interpretation of information obtained from the research participants. The data may not fall into neat categories, so reporting of the findings should be focused on detailed descriptions of the phenomena before interpretations are made. These findings can be reported using direct quotations from the research participants to ensure a nonbiased approach. The purpose of doing phenomenology is to study the lived experiences from those who have experienced the

phenomena so that society will have a deeper level of understanding and can bring about change (Qutoshi, 2018).

The collection of data process used was convenience sampling. I initially completed a Texas Public Information Act Information Request Form and submitted it to the Office of the General Counsel at the University of Houston to get the email addresses of students classified as seniors. I emailed an invitation to only women to participate in the study if they met the criteria of being African American. I also distributed flyers to instructors who taught ENGL 3396 African American Literature and Law and ENGL 3369 Caribbean Literature because these classes focused on African Americans and are areas that African Americans may be able relate to and are interested in. Since I had limited success, I used social media to find research subjects. This resulted in greater success in obtaining volunteers. I screened the participants who expressed interest and determined if they met the criteria. Once the participant agreed to participate, I emailed the participant expectations, procedures, and consent to digitally record the interview. When the participant returned the consent form, a mutually agreed upon time for the interview was scheduled. Data was collected through interviews using an interview guide. Participants were interviewed via Zoom and asked seven questions related to their persistence to graduation.

Interview Questions:

1. How did you decide on this college?
2. Tell me about your experience as an African American student at this college.
3. As an African American female student, what challenges have you faced in pursuing your degree? How have you dealt with these challenges?
4. What has kept you here in college and on track to graduate?

5. Have any services provided by the university helped keep you in college?  
Suggestions if needed: financial aid, university housing, involvement in clubs, organizations or sports, social network, relationships, mentors, advising, tutoring, orientation, and the Student Support Services program.
6. As you consider your college experience to this point, what do you feel have been your biggest successes or what do you feel most proud of?
7. Could the university have better supported you as you worked to complete your degree? (If yes) How?

The first question enabled me to see what factors attracted the interviewee to the college. Recruitment and enrollment are key factors for institutions, especially with declining enrollments, so attracting students, especially a diverse population of students, is beneficial. The second question focused on the interviewees' experience at the college. It allowed me to gain insight into the interviewee's experience and gather information that would be analyzed later for common themes across interviewees.

The third question addressed the challenges the interviewee faced in the pursuit of a bachelor's degree and how she dealt with them. This question provides key insights for higher education leaders and policy makers because it identified the obstacles students faced so that these problems can be addressed. It also gives them awareness about approaches that the interviewee took to deal with the obstacles which will allow leaders and policy makers to continue to support or create more of these approaches. The fourth question me to gain insights into what kept the interviewee in college and on track to graduate. This question is key to helping with understanding factors that affect persistence which is key to this research study. The fifth question specifically addressed services provided by the university that helped keep the interviewee in college. This knowledge will make institution leaders and policy makers aware of services that are utilized by students and which ones are not. If students are not

utilizing services such as financial aid, advising, tutoring, or student support, then institutions must evaluate why this is not happening.

The sixth question prompted the interviewee to consider her college experience and what she considered her biggest success or what she felt most proud of. This allowed me to get a glimpse into what the interviewee valued and can help leaders and policy makers make knowledgeable decisions about what is important to students. The final question gave the interviewee the opportunity to vocalize how the university could have better supported her as she worked to complete her degree. This question allowed me to gain knowledge that will be shared with institutional leaders so that these support systems can be evaluated and put into place for students.

Consent for the Zoom interviews was obtained via paper copy. The interviewees were emailed the informed consent that contained information about the purpose of the study, potential benefits, risks, and the researcher's contact information. The participants emailed a signed copy back to me indicating that they agreed with this statement:

I understand the information printed on the informed consent form. I have discussed this study, its risks, potential benefits, and my other choices with the researcher. My questions so far have been answered. I understand that if I have more questions or concerns about the study or my participation as a research subject, I may contact one of the people listed above in the Contact Information section. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to re-consent prior to my continued participation.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The theoretical framework for research is important because it holds the research together. Many researchers who want to improve society “especially for marginalized groups” choose a transformative framework because once “these issues are studied and exposed, the

researcher provides a voice for these participants, raising their consciousness and improving their lives” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25). I chose phenomenological study because it explores a phenomenon and describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. It has a strong philosophical component and is popular in the social and health sciences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices and policies. The researcher collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a description of the experience for all the individuals of what they experienced and how they experienced it. The researcher then analyzes the data and condenses the information into significant statements and then combines the statements into themes.

### *Participant Selection*

The women selected were students that had achieved success and earned their bachelor’s degree. I initially chose the University of Houston to conduct the research study due to the proximity of the campus to me and the diverse population of over 47,000 students. I tried the old fashioned, tried and true route of sending emails about the research to participants with minimal success, so I decided to use social media platforms to reach potential participants. In today’s world, social media is a way to network with many people without leaving one’s desk. It allows users the potential for a massive reach with people across the globe, especially if they form connections and have an active presence. This avenue provided me the opportunity to reach participants in four states versus the one state and one college that was the initial focus. I interviewed participants from institutions in Arkansas, Texas, Kentucky, and Florida.

Two participants attended the University of Kentucky, one of the state's two land-grant universities and the institution with the highest enrollment in the state with 30,545 students in Fall 2019 (University of Kentucky, 2022). One participant attended Florida International University, a public research university with its main campus in Miami-Dade County. It is the third-largest university in Florida with 56,592 students and the fifth-largest in the United States by enrollment (Florida International University, 2022). One participant attended Stephen F. Austin State University, in Nacogdoches, Texas. It is one of two public universities not affiliated with one of Texas's six university systems and has an enrollment of over 11,000 students (Stephen F. Austin State University, 2022.). One participant attended Hendrix College, a private liberal arts college in Conway, Arkansas. This college offers a secular curriculum and has approximately 1,300 undergraduate students from many different religious backgrounds (Hendrix College, 2022). The final participant attended Arkansas Tech University, a public university in Russellville, Arkansas. The university offers both baccalaureate and graduate degrees and has an enrollment of 8,892 students (Arkansas Tech University, 2022).

#### *Delimitations and Limitations of the Study*

There were delimitations and limitations that existed within this study. In phenomenological research, the interpretations of data incorporate the assumptions the researcher brings to the topic and how or if a newer approach fits within phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82). Interpretations should not be seen as "right" or "wrong," but rather as only interpretations or "plausible insights" because there is no such thing as omniscient perspective, only a personal one (Van Manen, 1990). All interpretations are potentially valid, and I tried to ensure the authenticity of the research through the data.

Another limitation was generalizability, making sure the responses were not unique to the specific institutions in the study. Although I interviewed students from four different states and institutions, each specific student's unique perspective that may have affected the results. A third limitation was ensuring that the sample was representative of the population. Determining what sample size is sufficient is a critical methodological factor. Researchers can achieve good results with small sample sizes because doing so minimizes participant burden and maximizes limited resources. By sampling six students at various size public research universities and one private university, there is a chance of not sampling students who may be representative of the population. Additionally, making sure that the participants answered the questions honestly and truthfully could be viewed as a limitation. There is evidence to show that bias may result under certain conditions that are out of the interviewees' control. Respondents have been shown to frequently answer differently based on the perceived social status or ethnicity of the interviewer. For example, as a Black woman interviewing other Black women, I may get a certain response, whether good or bad.

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

For the purpose of this study, many definitions were taken from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) since data was taken from this source to ensure reliability.

*Bachelor's degree:* An award (baccalaureate or equivalent degree, as determined by the Secretary, US Department of Education) that normally requires at least 4 but not more than 5 years of full-time equivalent college-level work. This includes all bachelor's degrees conferred in a 5-year cooperative (work-study) program. A cooperative plan provides for alternate class attendance and employment in business, industry, or government; thus, it allows students to combine actual work experience with their college studies. Also includes bachelor's degrees in which the normal 4 years of work are completed in 3 years. (IPEDS Data Center, 2022)

*Black or African American:* A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. (IPEDS Data Center, 2022)

*Degree:* An award conferred by a college, university, or other postsecondary education institution as official recognition for the successful completion of a program of studies. (IPEDS Data Center, 2022)

*Drop out:* A student who has left the institution and no longer returns to any form of higher education.

*Graduation rate:* The rate required for disclosure and/or reporting purposes under Student Right-to-Know Act. This rate is calculated as the total number of completers within 150% of normal time divided by the revised adjusted cohort. (IPEDS Data Center, 2022)

*Institutional commitment:* A student's commitment to the institution where he or she is enrolled (Tinto, 1993, p. 43).

*Institutional departure:* Students who depart from an individual institution (Tinto, 1993, 36).

*Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System:* The IPEDS Data Center is the single-entry point for retrieving IPEDS data. Using the data center, one can easily download data files for one or more institutions with information from any of the IPEDS components or download complete data files, produce a variety of reports, or create group statistics. The data center replaces the old IPEDS Peer Analysis System and Dataset Cutting Tool, and features improvements in navigation, institution selection, and variable selection, as well as increased on-screen help. (IPEDS Data Center, 2022)

*Persistence:* "One form of motivation that is shaped not so much by student behaviors and interactions with others on campus, though clearly it is, as it is student perceptions of those interactions and the meanings they derive from them as to their capacity to succeed in college, their sense of belonging in the institution, and their perceptions of the value of the curriculum they are asked to study for their degree" (Tinto 2017b, p. 263).

*Phenomenon:* "An 'object' of human experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 163).

*Phenomenological Study:* "Describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75).

*Race/ethnicity:* Categories developed in 1997 by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) that are used to describe groups to which individuals belong, identify with, or belong in the eyes of the community. The categories do not denote scientific definitions



of anthropological origins. The designations are used to categorize US citizens, resident aliens, and other eligible non-citizens. The categories include Hispanic or Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White (IPEDS Data Center, 2022).

*Retention rate:* A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For four-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelors (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall. For all other institutions this is the percentage of first-time degree/certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall. (IPEDS Data Center, 2022)

*Self-Efficacy:* People's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. Such beliefs produce these diverse effects through four major processes. They include cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes. (Bandura, 1994, p. 1)

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter described the purpose and rationale of the study and provided a brief overview of the study and its theoretical framework. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that led to the persistence of African American women obtaining their bachelor's degree. African American women are less likely to graduate from college than their female counterparts. Research on African American women college persistence is important and needed because of this educational gap. This study helps with the body of knowledge of identifying factors that lead to the academic persistence of African American women persevering in college. It will help institutions implement practices that will increase the persistence of African American women in college. The remainder of this phenomenological study will include four chapters. Chapter 2 provides a strong theoretical basis for the dissertation by analyzing and synthesizing the research on the topic. Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the design and procedures of the study. Chapter 4 gives objective results

and outcomes of the study, and Chapter 5 is a summary of the results and implications of the research data.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past 40 years, institutions of higher learning have done a better job of opening their doors to our country's underrepresented minority and low-income students. But access is no longer enough because African American students are persisting and completing college at lower rates than other races. There are many theories about the reasons African American students are persisting at lower rates than other ethnic groups. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the phenomenon of student success for African American women in college and the factors that fostered this success. For the purpose of this research, student success will be defined as the women persisting and earning a bachelor's degree. The literature review focuses on placing the study within the context of the current literature on college persistence for African American women through a review of several factors that affect persistence: background and pre-entry characteristics, institutional factors, faculty practices, mentorship, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and racial socialization and identity.

### **THE INDUCTION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Harvard University was established in 1636 and is the oldest institution of higher education in the United States. Harvard's doors have been open for over 386 years, but it was not until 1870 that the first Black student graduated from Harvard. However, there is a record that Alexander Lucius Twilight is the first African American to be awarded a degree from Middlebury College in 1823 (Harper et al., 2009). Slater (1994) believes that Lucy Ann Stanton

was the first Black woman to receive a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College in 1850; however, Harper et al. believe that Mary Jane Patterson was the first African American female to graduate from Oberlin College in 1862. This was just the beginning of African Americans' access and success in higher education. After the American Civil War ended in 1865, many private colleges were established by White religious groups to educate those freed from slavery. Most African Americans attended these schools, but a few gifted Black students were able to attend some of the nation's most esteemed colleges and universities (Slater, 1994).

### **THE CURRENT STATE OF EDUCATION**

In President Barack Obama's address to Congress on February 24, 2009, he stated that by 2020, America would have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. President Obama stated that the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, and a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity, but it is a pre-requisite (The White House, 2009, February 29). If America is to strive to continue to reach this goal of being first in the world in degree attainment, then postsecondary institutions need to do more to ensure that all students are successful. President Obama initiated the American Graduation Initiative in the summer of 2009 to increase the number of postsecondary certificates and degrees awarded in the US (The White House, 2009, July 14). It is important to have a highly skilled workforce so that our economy remains strong; thus, it is important to examine practices that will help advance our higher education system.

Duster (2009) expresses his belief that for us to advance in American higher education, we must review the past. He studied the caste system in India, the class systems of the US, and the post-apartheid struggles of South Africans to see how those with privilege subdue those

that threaten that privilege: “It is the task of a critical perspective to reveal the deeper embedded domain assumptions about taken-for-granted privileges that otherwise never ascend to public scrutiny and challenge. If we are to spur a new progressive era in higher education, be it in the US or anywhere else, we must address the systematic replication of privilege in society” (pp. 109–110). Duster believes that we can learn from the past to help us move forward.

### **THE WHY**

Studies conducted on the college completion rates of Americans show disparities between different racial and ethnic groups. Nguyen (2012) states that nearly 40 % of White 25- to 29-year-olds have attained at least a bachelor’s degree, while African Americans have earned the same level of education at only one-half that rate. She declares such discrepancy unacceptable and calls for actions to bridge the gap. Many institutions have increased success and decreased the graduation-rate gaps for African American students, and more institutions of higher learning should replicate the policies and practices of these institutions. According to Salaman’s (2016) report at the 2016 Navigate Summit, college leaders are facing challenges with recruiting, serving, and graduating students. Community Colleges, with their open access/open admissions policy, are experiencing severe enrollment declines on their campuses, which could be due to a lower number of students graduating, students entering the workforce right out of high school, and four-year universities drawing in students. In the past, colleges focused on expanding access, at present, they must focus on retention and preparing students for the workforce through clear academic pathways, student support and measurable outcomes.

The Lumina Foundation is a private foundation committed to enrolling and graduating more low-income students, students of color, first-generation students, and adult learners. By 2025, the foundation wants to increase by 60% the number of Americans who hold high-quality degrees and credentials. They plan to accomplish this by identifying and supporting effective practice, advocating public policy, and communicating and convening to build public will for change. The Lumina Foundation works with colleges and universities to provide critical educational reporting, verification, and research services. They also compile and interpret the data and develop reports to inform education leaders and policymakers. The Lumina Foundation provided a grant to study college completion rates by race and ethnicity. The findings showed significant achievement gaps between White and Asian students and Hispanic and Black students (Dundar et al., 2017).

Dundar et al. (2017) reveal that among students who started in four-year public institutions, Black students had the lowest six-year completion rate at 45.9%. The completion rate of Hispanic students was 55%. Over two-thirds of White and Asian students completed a degree within the same period. Nationally, 54.8% of students who started in any type of college or university in Fall 2010 completed a degree or certificate within six years. When examined by race and ethnicity, Asian and White students averaged about a 20% higher completion rate than Hispanic and Black students. Black men had the lowest completion rate and the highest stop-out rate, whereas Asian women had the highest completion rate and lowest stop-out rate. Stop-out refers to students who did not graduate and did not return to take classes. Even in two-year public institutions, White and Asian students had higher completion rates than Hispanic and Black students. The completion rate at four-year institutions for students who

started at a community college was dramatically different for students of different racial and ethnic groups. One in four Asian students and one in five White students had completed this transfer pathway by the end of the six-year study period, but just one in 10 Hispanic students and about one in 12 Black students completed it. The completion gaps shrunk as students grew older (Dundar et. al., 2017).

## **FACTORS THAT AFFECT STUDENT PERSISTENCE**

The following discussion presents various factors that have been researched that affect student persistence. Many researchers have studied and proposed various factors that contribute to the lack of persistence for certain groups of college students.

### *Background and Pre-Entry Characteristics*

Hall and Allen (1989) believe that a “lack of fit” between African American students and PWIs explains the difference in attrition rates. They pointed out that the better the fit between the person and the institution, the more likely integration will occur. Wilson (2007) evaluated the effect of attending a historically Black college or university (HBCU) on persistence and graduation of African American college students. She discovered that family background had significant effects on persistence. Students from single-parent or broken homes and students who were less academically prepared were more likely to stop out. However, the strongest determinant of college completion was academic ability, whether African American students attended an HBCU or PWI.

Most theories define student success in college as persistence and educational attainment or attaining the desired degree or credential. Bridges et al. (2006) synthesized relevant literature and compiled a report to address critical issues related to student success.

They hoped to develop an enlightened perspective on practices, programs, and policies that can make a difference in performance for students in postsecondary education. Their focus was to identify policies and practices that the government, states, higher education institutions, families, high schools, and the student could use to promote success. They realized that students are not entering postsecondary education with a clean slate but with many years of complex interactions with their family and various educational, political, social, and cultural experiences. Some students are more academically prepared than others, and some have greater confidence in their ability to succeed. This leads to many twists, turns, detours, roundabouts, and occasional dead ends that students will experience during their educational career. However, college integration and peer interaction can become key factors in whether students persist and reach their educational goals.

Rodgers and Summers (2008) conducted a review to evaluate the psychological aspects of retention for African American students as proposed by the Bean and Eaton psychological model of college student retention. Bean and Eaton believe that the retention process starts with a set of entry characteristics that students bring to the university setting. These characteristics impact the environmental interactions that students have, and these interactions affect their attitude toward the institution which affects different outcomes such as social and academic integration. This ultimately affects their academic achievement positively, which leads to a positive attitude and persistence. Rodgers and Summers support this model but with revisions related to the effect of race and culture on the interactions between African American students and PWIs.



Boyraz et al. (2013) state that African American college students report higher rates of trauma exposure and PTSD compared to other groups. They are more likely to live in at-risk areas and are exposed to greater numbers and more severe types of traumatic events; at the same time, they are less likely to have access to social and financial resources making them more vulnerable to the impact of these events. Their persistence into the second year of college was directly affected by their exposure to potentially traumatic events (PTEs). Boyraz et al. (2013) believe that “while both African American men and women may begin college with exposure to traumatic events in high numbers, PTSD symptomatology appears to increase the risk of dropping out of college only for African American women” (p. 589). They further comment that the academic success and college persistence of these students can be fostered through campus involvement and support. Gabriel (2008) identifies the issue of losing students as a problem for college officials. Many colleges and universities have added retention coordinators and specialists and increased academic support beyond the normal tutoring and writing centers.

Boyraz et al. (2016) believes that African American females are more likely to drop out of college before the end of their second year due to a history of traumatic events and posttraumatic stress. These risk factors lead to poor academic performance. Boyraz et al. (2016) assert that depressed individuals tend to evaluate both past and ongoing experiences negatively and this can interfere with the student’s academic performance. Depressed students blame themselves for failure and do not give themselves credit for success. They interpret events negatively, and this reduces their self-efficacy and limits their ability to complete academic tasks therefore reducing their likelihood of completing their degree. This depressive

state is higher for African American college students who may have fewer resources to support their college experience, especially at PWIs where they are faced with being underrepresented, alienated, isolated, overlooked, and misunderstood. A combination of risk factors such as entering college with depressive symptomatology, being female, and being a minority at a PWI affects African American students' college outcomes. Boyraz et al. (2016) found that "African American students who experience high levels of depressive symptomatology early in their college lives are at risk of academic difficulties and college dropout" (p. 156).

Hoover and Mertes (2014) conducted a study replicating previous studies on overall college persistence that included additional variables. Their research shows that over a quarter of students who enter a four-year institution and half of students who enter a two-year institution will drop out during the first year. Students enter college with a variety of characteristics and go through three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. As these students pass through these stages, their background and their interaction with the institution influence their commitment to the institution, and their ability to integrate determines whether they persist or not (Hoover & Mertes).

A study by the National Urban League Washington Bureau indicated that financial aid along with personalized supports is needed to aid in the persistence of underserved students. The Urban League believes that it takes a village of support from federal, state, and local governments and institutions to create systemic change and enable underserved students to "cross the finish line, break cycles of intergenerational poverty and lift historically disadvantaged communities into middle-class prosperity" (Chauhan et al., 2014, p. 9).

### *Institutional Factors*

Gosman et al. (1983) found significant differences between African American and White students in terms of attrition and graduation rates. However, racial differences disappeared when other student and institutional characteristics were considered. They found race is not a significant predictor of student progression, and institutions should focus on retention programs designed around the specific performance characteristics of its students. Latiker (2003) conducted a study at a private Black college and found that African American student persistence is greatly affected by student experiences and interactions within the college environment and not precollegiate characteristics. In addition, African American students educated in an environment that focused on their own culture strengthened their feelings of self-worth and desire to persist. Even though such culture is not easily replicated in PWIs, these institutions can incorporate images and activities that reflect African American culture into their campuses and develop relationships and help students feel valued.

Zamani (2003) has studied the historical roles and the educational challenges and opportunities for African American women. She believes that there are programs and approaches to meet the needs of African American women in college. Zamani suggests that there should be a substantive African American presence at institutions by making a commitment to attract African American students, faculty, and staff to reduce feelings of marginalization among African American women. Zamani also suggests that various higher education institutions should develop and maintain programs and policies to meet the concerns and needs of African American women on campus and allocate financial and human resources to support institutional efforts to address racial and gender bias. Finally, curriculum and

classroom experiences need to be augmented in order to be more inclusive of African American women and foster their academic development (Zamani).

Many factors influence student success in college and many theories that emphasize academic and social encounters and experiences that affect students' academic and social engagement at the institution. No theoretical perspective is comprehensive enough to account for all the factors that influence student success in college. Bridges et al. (2006) believe that there are precollege experiences such as academic preparation, family background, enrollment choice, and financial aid that affect student success; however, they also feel that students' behaviors and institutional conditions play a major part in the college experience. Student behaviors include the time and effort students put into their studies, faculty interaction, and peer involvement. Institutional conditions include resources, educational policies, programs, practices, and structural features. Creighton (2007) looked at factors affecting graduation rates of university students from underrepresented populations. She reviewed several sources and concluded that African American student retention focused on four things: pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, institutional experiences, and personal and normative integration. Creighton also stated that the retention of underrepresented populations is complex and issues such as commitment, belonging, and perseverance must also be addressed.

Ensuring the success of students enrolled in remedial or developmental classes is one of the biggest challenges facing institutions today. Gabriel (2008) asserts that the more developmental classes a student takes, the more likely that student will drop out of college after the first year. Losing students is detrimental to the student him/herself, his or her family, and the university: "Poor college completion rates and the racial-ethnic gap in graduation rates

mean that too many students are not acquiring the desired knowledge, skills, and competencies needed for the 21st century” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 3). Bray and Bourke (2012) studied African American student experiences and factors that contributed to their persistence despite a lack of support from the institution. These students had limited social integration with the institution but found social engagement with other African American subcultures at the institution. The study revealed that the students in question were more motivated to succeed even when faced with perceptions and experiences of discrimination. These students persisted although they felt the institution was not committed to their welfare, had not established a campus-wide community, had not invested in social integration practices, or have institutional integrity. However, institutions should not find this encouraging but rather must work on putting practices in place to promote a culture of inclusion.

Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, a professor in the School of Education at Colorado State University, has been focusing on the history and philosophy of higher education for the past 18 years of his professional career as an educator. He specifically looks at institutional systems and structures that affect minorities and LGBTQ students. Stewart addressed the College of Education at the University of Illinois on how institutional transformation requires doing the work necessary to examine institutional norms and challenging the status quo. He talked about listening to the minorities’ “truth” if we want to see real substantive change. He discussed having diversity among students and staff, having training on equity in the classrooms, and providing counseling and student centers for students that are experiencing microaggressions and need a place where they can share their feelings and heal. Stewart also addressed four topics in his speech that we need to ask questions about to fix the racial injustices in higher

education: diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. Diversity asks, “Who’s in the room?” Equity responds, “Who is trying to get in the room but can’t?” Inclusion asks, “Has everyone’s ideas been heard?” Justice challenges, “Whose safety is being sacrificed and minimized to allow others to be comfortable maintaining dehumanizing views?” Stewart stated that we must cover the distance between who is in the room and the nature of how the room operates and feels to those that are in it. He ended with a message to his audience that we should embrace revolution and not mere evolution (Education at Illinois, 2016).

### *Faculty Practices*

Faculty play an important role in creating positive educational outcomes for students. There are some key practices that faculty can employ to facilitate student success. Validation is an important practice that can be utilized by faculty and staff to help students persist and be successful. Rendon (1994) defines validation as “an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44). She believes that when validation is present, students feel capable, worthy, and valuable; when validation is not there, students feel crippled, silenced, subordinate, and mistrusted. Rendon found that the role of faculty in fostering academic validation is very important. Faculty actions that lead to academic development and success are the following: (1) demonstrating a genuine concern for teaching students, (2) being personable and approachable, (3) treating students equally, (4) creating learning experiences that allow students to see themselves as capable of learning, (5) working individually with students that need help, and (6) providing meaningful feedback to students. Holmes et al. (2000) also believe that it is important for faculty to validate students from the beginning of school by showing

genuine concern when teaching. They should be approachable, treat students with respect, and provide meaningful feedback. Holmes et al. believe that faculty can foster a validating classroom environment by considering their (1) course content, (2) method of instruction, (3) evaluation and feedback, (4) student-faculty interaction, and (5) reward structure.

Barnett (2011) conducted a study on factors influencing student persistence due to the current high attrition rates in higher education. She focused on the faculty's role in student persistence and found that faculty validation strongly predicted a students' sense of academic integration in college; in particular, caring instruction was shown to be the strongest predictor. Students feeling known, valued, and mentored significantly contributed to their intent to persist (Barnett). Wingle-Wagner (2015) also asserts the importance of positive faculty-student interactions for the success of Black women. She believes that the lack of a positive faculty-student relationship can be detrimental to students' success, and that crises can be averted with the advice and support of faculty. Faculty interactions are an important predictor of learning and a highly significant predictor of working hard for Black students.

According to Gabriel (2008), the behaviors of faculty have been shown to increase student success. Faculty and staff who have high expectations for all students regardless of background saw higher levels of student performance. Gabriel further suggested that faculty should build relationships with students in and out of the classroom. It is not enough to post office hours and expect students to show up. To ensure that students are successful, schools must balance academic challenges with different types of support. If students are not supported, then colleges have failed to fulfill their mission. Effective teaching practices, student engagement, and relationships with students contribute to student success and engagement,

especially for unprepared and at-risk students. Gabriel asserts that in learner-centered education, students must be met where they are, and gaps must be filled. When students know that their backgrounds are valued, they feel welcomed and empowered. It is very important for learner-centered teaching to create classrooms where students of different ethnicities and backgrounds feel included. Students should be encouraged to interact with others of different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds. Professors should have serious conversations with students about being respectful of peers with different values, religious beliefs, and political opinions.

Schademan and Thompson (2016) believe that faculty must serve as cultural agents to bridge the gap between a student's home culture and the distant academic culture, especially for first-generation and low-income students. They must employ instructional practices that foster increased interaction and engagement in the classroom. Miller et al. (2019) believe that faculty hold the key to the student academic experience and are instrumental in retention and degree completion. They believe that faculty need help in building their capacity to work with students from diverse backgrounds and this can be accomplished by offering the opportunity for critical inquiry, application to the discipline, and a deep understanding of the data. Miller et al. have created a program called Persistence Scholars Program to enable faculty to become more knowledgeable about practices that support student persistence. The program, which is described as a faculty professional development experience, extends over multiple weeks in a semester, and incorporates core readings with text by Tinto. The desired outcomes for participants in the program are to explain factors that contribute to student persistence; identify trends, disparities, and other patterns; identify and dispel major misconceptions;



discuss and apply concepts from the research literature; and advocate for practices that promote student persistence (Miller et al.).

### *Mentorship*

Mentoring is defined in the Cambridge dictionary as “the act or process of helping and giving advice to a younger or less experienced person, especially in a job or at school.”

Mentoring has been shown to have positive effects on college students. Terenzini et al. (1991) assert that students who have the most informal, out-of-class contact with faculty members show higher gains in knowledge and academic skills; however, more research needs to be done to assess whether students with higher cognitive capacities are more likely to seek contact with faculty members or whether the contact helps the development. Campbell and Campbell (1997) conducted research to examine whether and how participation with a faculty mentor played a role in academic success. They found that meeting with a mentor during a student’s first year affected grade point average and retention rates in later years. They also found that the ethnicity of the protégé, the mentor, or the ethnic match of the pair showed no significant difference on academic performance or retention.

Brittian et al. (2009) explored the effects of mentorship on African American college students’ mental health and academic outcomes. They evaluated 183 African American college students at a large state university in Southern California of which 36 were in mentorship programs and 147 were not. It was expected that students in the mentorship programs would exhibit more academic success, but mentorship students had lower GPAs than nonmentorship students. Although the GPA of these students was lower, these students initiated more campus involvement through clubs, organizations, and leadership opportunities. Brittian et al. believe

that “as students increase their connection with the university community, they will be more likely to continue on in their studies and seek academic assistance when needed” (p. 94). They stated that it would be more informative to follow up with students on their academic progress.

Chambers and Walpole (2017) conducted a study to explore the association between student achievement and Black sorority membership, specifically within National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) organizations. They found that NPHC sororities’ academic performance lagged significantly behind non-NPHC sororities. Additionally, there was a greater difference in mean GPAs within individual NPHC sororities than among the four female organizations. Chambers and Walpole recommend that the national organizations and individual chapters take responsibility for increasing achievement as indicated in their written rhetoric.

Crisp and Cruz (2009) conducted a critical review of literature on mentoring college students between 1990 and 2007 and found that mentoring has numerous positive outcomes. A significant positive relationship was found between faculty contact and grade point average. One study found that minority students attending a large metropolitan university who received faculty mentoring had higher grade point averages and retention rates than the control group. Fuentes et al. (2014) believe that faculty have the capability to contribute uniquely to college student outcomes. Faculty are an integral part of the college experience and play a pivotal role in student success and faculty mentorship is highly valued. Their study affirmed that a relationship with faculty and staff in a students’ first year of college leads to mentoring by their senior year.

Thomas et al. (2014) conducted a study of predominantly female subjects to examine the extent to which campus involvement, faculty mentorship, motivational beliefs, and sense of belonging predict the persistence of African American college students. They found that mentoring for African American students is very important, and the quality of these interactions is more important than the frequency. They found that many African American students have not developed student-faculty mentorship because of the perceived difficulty in establishing a relationship with a White faculty member. These students feel like they will be stereotyped, have to represent all African Americans, and the White faculty will fail to incorporate the African American perspective in their lesson. Bartman (2015) conducted a review of literature to examine the status of African American women students in higher education and recommendations to support their continued success. Bartman believes in a need for effective, evidenced-based strategies designed to promote growth and success for African American women in higher education. Based on the literature review, four significant issues impacting African American women in college were selected for discussion: having multiple marginalized identities, lacking critical mass, impact of gender gap, and lack of Black faculty. Bartman indicated that not one service, approach, or program can meet all the needs of African American women and suggests literature-based strategies such as Black sorority engagement, cross-cultural mentoring, and population specific counseling techniques to help build further success for African American women.

Mackh (2020) asserts that mentorship makes a powerful positive impact on student success by facilitating students' personal and professional growth. Scherer (2020) believes that formal or informal faculty mentorship contributes to student success in and out of the

classroom and is positively related to persistence and GPA. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to seek and secure faculty mentorship, whereas students from less-privileged families learn to defer to authority figures and maintain a low profile. These relationships are a crucial resource for student success.

### *Sense of Belonging, Self-Efficacy, and Self-Esteem*

Hausmann et al. (2009) conducted a study on belonging and persistence and found students' sense of belonging to the university community was a significant determinant of their commitment to the university, their intentions to persist, and their actual persistence. Universities should focus on making students feel like valued members of the school's community. However, they note that creating a sense of belonging requires different strategies for African American students than it does for White students. In designing programs to promote a sense of belonging with African American students, universities will need to take into consideration the unique issues facing African American students at PWIs. Strayhorn et al. (2014) conducted a study to measure the effect of various psychological constructs such as sense of belonging, self-esteem, and academic self-efficacy on Black student satisfaction. They found that each of these psychological constructs was positively related to satisfaction with Black collegians. Helping students develop confidence in their academic abilities and finding a sense of belonging by encouraging meaningful engagement with faculty, staff, and peers helps improve satisfaction of the college experience.

Tinto (2016) wrote an opinion piece about three major experiences that shape students' motivation to persist in college and graduate. Tinto believes that self-efficacy, a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed, is crucial to understand whether someone will persist or not. A

person with high self-efficacy will engage more in a task, expend more effort on the task, and persist longer than a person with low self-efficacy. Students not only have to believe that they can succeed, but they must also feel a sense of belonging. Tinto (2016) also believes that students who feel a sense of belonging are more motivated to persist. Institutions can ensure that students feel welcomed and supported by developing programs and activities that support inclusion and therefore result in increased student development, learning, and completion. Finally, Tinto determined that students' perceived value of the curriculum typically influenced their persistence. Students are motivated to learn if they believe the material is beneficial to their goals. Institutions should ensure that students enroll in their field of interest, ensure that the curriculum is inclusive of everyone's backgrounds, and that students understand how the course content is relevant to them.

Butler-Barnes et al. (2017) conducted a quasi-experimental pilot study to test social belonging to help educators, policymakers, and institutions. For decades, educators, policymakers, and institutions have worked to increase rates of college graduation, but about half of students who enter college drop out without getting a degree (Butler et al., 2017). Colleges and universities know the importance of having programs to support students with persistence and retention. Within college systems, some racial minorities, and stigmatized groups question whether they belong. Cultivating social belonging positively affects student behavior and increases retention.

For the racial minorities and stigmatized groups, a toxic campus culture and climate marked by identity-based stereotype threat and overt and covert microaggressions can erode the motivation to persist via heightened stress and mental load and subsequent negative psycho-emotional and somatic outcomes, including acute belonging uncertainty. (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017, p. 778)

Because of the high drop-out rate, social-belonging programs need to be evaluated to help with persistence and retention (Butler-Barnes et al.).

### *Racial Socialization and Identity*

Fisher (2010) explored the effects of stereotype threat on college outcomes for minorities at elite institutions and found that interventions are needed to reduce stereotype threat and improve outcomes for minorities. Fisher states that although colleges have been successful in recruiting a diverse group of students, equality in outcomes among students from different backgrounds is unsuccessful. Beasley and Fischer (2012) examined the effects of group performance anxiety on the attrition of women and minorities from science, math, and engineering majors. They evaluated whether the reputation of STEM fields as being hostile, racist, and sexist environments for minorities and women provoked these students to withdraw from these majors. Beasley and Fischer found that African Americans are more susceptible to negative stereotypes and that stereotype threat is influential in weakening the aspirations of minority and female students in STEM fields.

Bailey-Fakhoury and Frierson (2014) assert that African American women continue to attend PWIs, but factors related to their academic success are underdeveloped. They believe that an intersectional analysis of racial socialization and racial identity development will help understand academic success for African American women. They believe that the African American motherwork will help experts and researchers better understand what contributes to academic success for African American women so that these women can be supported. Bailey-Fakhoury and Frierson (2014) define motherwork as the “reproductive labor” that Black women engage in to ensure the survival of the family and entails focusing on three tactics: presence,

imaging, and code-switching. PWIs can educate the university community on countering stereotypes and not perpetuating the unfeminine connotations associated with intelligence, persistence, strength, and expression of anger that African American females believe are positive and functional. These institutions can also help women code-switch by helping them develop bicultural skills to navigate PWIs (Bailey-Fakhoury & Frierson, 2014).

Chavous and Leath (2018) conducted a quantitative study on racial climate and stigmatization. Black women experience unique stressors based on the intersections of their racial and gender identity. They face a multitude of unique challenges including identity-based stigmas such as discrimination and microaggressions that threaten to undermine their academic success. Black women also experience additional challenges when pursuing degrees in STEM-related fields, and although they are showing more growth in degree attainment than other racial and ethnic groups, they are vastly underrepresented in STEM majors. Black Americans are likely to encounter verbal and behavioral indignities that communicate derogatory or hostile racial slights to the target person or group. Race-related campus experiences impact Black students' adjustment at PWIs, and findings indicate that these microaggressions are common experiences for Black students and cause a decrease in motivation. Black women reported a more hostile racial climate and more pressure to change who they are to fit in. If they felt accepted for their identities, they were more satisfied academically and more confident about maintaining their academic interests.

Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019) emphasize that in higher education research, Black students are often grouped together, and the assumption is that they all share similar social, cultural, and economic backgrounds and therefore need similar types of support. These

programs and practices do not consider Black students' unique identity such as race, gender, and class which reinforces the marginalization of both their race and gender. Institutions need to find ways that support rather than hinder intersectional identity development so that Black women will thrive and graduate.

### **GAPS IN THE LITERATURE**

Winkle-Wagner (2015) conducted a review of research and found that in theoretical analyses and literature reviews, there was limited research that focused specifically on African American women; most literature combined Black women with Black men. This is problematic because it limits the body of research on African American women and college persistence.

Leppel (2002) conducted a study on the similarities and differences in the college persistence of men and women and found that differences in the characteristics of male and female students affect students' relative persistence. She also found that Black women had significantly higher persistence rates than Black men. Future researchers should consider the different characteristics of African American men and women when conducting research.

### **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter explored relevant literature on the persistence of Black students in college. There is a plethora of research on factors that affect the persistence of Black students collectively in college, but the research is limited when separating Black women from Black men. As the literature review has revealed, there are many factors that come into play when looking at the causes of the low persistence rates of Black students. This study is unique in that it examines factors through the lens of the women who persisted and were successful in



earning their bachelor's degree. This research contributes to the limited research focused specifically on Black women.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research procedures used in the study. The focus of this study was to identify factors that lead to the persistence of African American women earning their bachelor's degree. As the literature review in Chapter 2 has shown, the number of Black women entering college is increasing, but the persistence rate is not. African American women are less likely to persist and graduate from college than their female counterparts. This chapter discusses the research purpose, study participants, data collection method and analysis, theoretical framework, and delimitations and limitations. A deeper understanding of factors related to African American female student persistence is needed to ensure these women persist to completion and are successful.

### OVERVIEW TO THE STUDY'S PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify factors that lead to African American women persisting in college. This study sought to provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon of persisting to earn a bachelor's degree. This understanding allowed me to generate themes that can be beneficial in helping institutions put practices in place to increase the persistence of African American women in higher education. Themes are "broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 328). The knowledge gained from the participants' lived experiences will help other African American women and contribute to a more educated

citizenry who will ultimately benefit the economy and nation. An additional benefit for the participants in the study was a sense of personal gratification in contributing to the understanding of how race and gender influence persistence and success in college.

### *Research Questions*

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the factors that African American students consider in their college selection?
- What are the institutional and personal factors that positively impact African American student persistence?
- What are the institutional and personal factors that negatively impact African American student persistence?
- How can institutions better support African American students to graduation?

The research questions attempted to delve into the experiences of African American women who obtained their bachelor's degree to study the factors that positively and negatively affected their journey and how institutions can better support them.

### **RATIONALE FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Qualitative research is aimed at making the world more visible by putting the researcher in it as an observer to gather and implement practices that can transform the world (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 7). Merriam (2002) believes that qualitative researchers are interested in learning how individuals experience and interact with the world. Qualitative researchers seek to understand and make sense of a phenomena from the participant's perspective. This qualitative study focused on the lived experiences of six African American female students who persisted and earned their bachelor's degree. In this research, I sought to gain an

understanding of the Black women and their path to obtaining their bachelor's degree, so a qualitative research method was deemed most appropriate.

### *Phenomenological method*

Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Creswell and Poth state that data should be collected from the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon by using in-depth interviews. Interviews are a data collection strategy used with phenomenological method of inquiry and have both a philosophical and methodological stance. A unique aspect of this approach is the interpretation of information obtained from the research participants. The data may not fall into neat categories, so reporting of the findings should be focused on detailed descriptions of the phenomena before interpretations are made. These findings can be reported using direct quotations from the research participants to ensure a nonbiased approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qutoshi (2018) agrees and asserts that studying the lived experiences from those who have experienced the phenomena will give us a deeper level of understanding so that we can bring about change.

Case study is an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2002) and is a part of scientific methodology that can be a disciplined force in the reflection on human experience. Stake (2003) defines case study as interest in individual cases, whether simple or complex, and the process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry. Stake identifies three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Stake (1995) asserts that the cases of interest in education are people and that we seek to understand them through their stories. We must put aside presumptions while we learn how these people function in

their environment. A case study begins with a research question that needs understanding and we gain insight into the question by studying a particular case. The goal is to record objectively what is happening so that a thorough understanding can be had so that interpretations can be drawn. Interpretations are a key component of all research because this is how researchers draw their conclusions or make assertions.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) uses portraiture to shape her research. With portraiture, the researcher is more evident and visible than in any other type of research. Lawrence-Lightfoot believes that all researchers “are selective in defining and shaping the data they collect and the interpretations that flow from their findings” (p. 11). Even the most impartial investigation will expose the hand of the researcher in the study, but this is offset by the skepticism and scrutiny that is typical of good research. Good research uses rigorous procedures and methods to get rid of personal bias that could affect the validity of the research (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

## **STUDY PARTICIPANTS**

### *Population and Demographics*

The study participants consisted of six Black women who graduated and completed their bachelor’s degree in the spring and summer of 2022. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that in phenomenological studies, a group may vary in size from three to four individuals to ten to fifteen (p. 76). Participants were selected based on their interest in volunteering to be part of the study. Convenience sampling was ideal for this study because it allowed me to utilize individuals who were willing to share their story on their persistence. This also provided me the opportunity to collect data from students in various institutions across the United States. Research participants attended institutions in Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, Kentucky, and Florida.

### *Timeline and setting*

The research participants were selected because they graduated in the spring and summer of 2022 and volunteered to participate via Zoom. This study took place two years after Covid-19 wreaked havoc and took a devastating toll on the world and impacted our economy. In February of 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine and started a war that has affected the nation with disruptions to the food supply chain, heightened political tensions, spiraling inflation, and the risk of a nuclear disaster. A controversial Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade*, was overturned and has created a lot of tension amongst the Supreme Court and the public. President Joe Biden announced that he would forgive \$10,000 in federal education debt and up to \$20,000 for recipients of Pell Grants who meet the income threshold. This plan created a controversy that has made its way to the Supreme Court and created more controversy.

Not only did Covid-19 change the economy, it also changed our education system. Marcus (2022) wrote about how the pandemic has continued to change how we approach education. There were breakthroughs in education that came during the pandemic, such as new levels of comfort and proficiency with online learning platforms. This comfort and proficiency have led to an increase in online learning in higher education. However, the pandemic revealed and exacerbated the inequities in education especially for students of low socioeconomic status and those who are unprepared academically. Before the pandemic, men, Black students, and academically unprepared students did not perform well with online education. This group had lower grades, higher dropout rates, and poorer performance; however, this could be attributed to the characteristics of students enrolled in online courses before Covid-19. Postpandemic data may reveal different outcomes (Marcus, 2022).

Covid-19 has also changed the workforce and workplace. Smart (2022) believes that employee satisfaction has taken a backseat to company profits for many years. The pandemic caused many employees to become unemployed or quit. Once the economy began to recover from the pandemic, many employees did not return to the labor market, and this has created a workforce shortage. This shortage has been compounded by skilled workers quitting their jobs in what has been termed the “Great Resignation.” Smart also asserts that many workplace norms were upended permanently during the pandemic. Before Covid-19, the luxury of working from home was not an option for many employees. Now, millions of people have become experts at navigating online platforms and working from home (Smart, 2022). These factors will have long-term effects on the labor market and our educational system because our education system must fill these talent shortages and skills gap.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

The pandemic caused the way we perform tasks to shift. Old school paper-and-pencil research or knocking on office doors to get information has given way to social media. I used social media to recruit research participants. After the participants expressed interest in the study, I sent the participants an informed consent form that contained key information about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, benefits and risks, confidentiality, use of recording, and participant rights. Once the participants agreed to take part in the study, I scheduled a time that was convenient for the participants. Since the participants were in various states, I used Zoom to conduct the interviews.

I asked the participants seven open-ended questions that took approximately 15 to 20 minutes. One measure I took to mitigate threats to validity and reliability was to focus on the

development of the interview questions. I focused on (1) determining the question content, scope, and purpose; (2) choosing the response format for collecting information from the respondent; and (3) determining how to word the question to get at the issue of interest. Once the questions were written, I placed them strategically in the interview guide to ensure that the necessary information could be obtained.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), data analysis can follow a system that moves from a narrow analysis to a broader analysis. The researcher can go through the data and highlight significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide the researcher an understanding of how the participant experienced the phenomenon (p. 79). In this study, the interviews were conducted via Zoom which allowed me to utilize audio recordings that could be transcribed. I generated themes by analyzing the transcribed statements, focusing on common experiences of the participants, and reporting on an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon. Focusing on the statements and themes helped me bracket out my own experiences. Bracketing will be defined later in this chapter.

### *Validity and Reliability*

It is important that a researcher check the accuracy of a qualitative account through employing accepted strategies. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest looking at strategies for validation through at least two of three lenses: the researcher's lens, the participant's lens, and the reader's or reviewer's lens (p. 260). It is important to make sure that research findings are transferable between the researcher and those being studied and that the observations, interpretations, and conclusions are credible. To assess the accuracy of the findings, validation



can be generated through rich, thick descriptions of the participants under study. Details about physical description, movement description, and activity description can be captured using video which provides a broader scope of recording human behaviors. Reliability is enhanced by employing good quality recording devices and transcribing files (Creswell & Poth). I used Zoom, which is a cloud-based video conferencing platform, that can be used for video and audio conferencing, webinars, meeting recordings, and live chat. The Zoom platform allowed me to video and record the interviews that were later transcribed.

### *Trustworthiness*

It is important that findings are trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest several steps that can be taken to ensure that the data is credible: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation. Prolonged engagement entails investing sufficient time and building trust with interviewees so that persistent observation will reveal characteristics and elements that are most relevant to the problem being studied. I ensured consistency in communication through email and social media messaging. After the participants expressed interest, I sent an initial email introducing myself and the purpose of the study. I followed up by giving the participants clarifying information such as rights, anonymity, and confidentiality. I used social media and email to confirm the interview time and answer any questions that the participants had and followed up with a thank you email and gift. I had four to five contacts with the participants over several weeks. I utilized Zoom for the interviews, which enabled me to watch the videos over and over and for clarification and to ensure accuracy.

Triangulation involves the use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories. By using social media to attract participants, I was able to interview participants

at different institutions and in different states. Another component of trustworthiness is transferability, and this can be accomplished by providing thick descriptions necessary to enable someone interested in the research to reach a conclusion about whether a transfer is possible. Dependability and confirmability can be determined simultaneously by examining the data, findings, interpretations, and recommendations and attest that it is supported by the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### *Bracketing*

Tufford and Newman (2012) state that there is a lot of debate about the definition of bracketing along with deciding how, when, and if to use it as a qualitative research method. They define bracketing as a method used in qualitative research to reduce the potentially harmful effects of preconceptions that could discredit the research process. Creswell and Poth (2018) agree and assert that it is important for investigators to set aside their experiences and take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under study. I had to bracket out my experience and focus on the statements and quotes from the participants to understand how they experienced the phenomenon.

### *Researcher Biases*

Chenail (2016) states that the researcher of a study can be the greatest threat to trustworthiness in qualitative research if proper planning does not take place. It takes training and practice to write open-ended questions, which are the hallmark of qualitative interviews. I spent time developing the questions that were used in the interviews and indicated in this chapter. I focused on structuring the questions to start with words like who, what, where, when, why, and how to encourage the participants to respond in a more expansive way.

Instrumentation is critical in qualitative research, and the researcher is the key person in obtaining data from subjects using this instrument (Chenail, 2016). For this reason, it is important that researchers who conduct qualitative research understand how they impact the findings of a study.

### *External Validity*

Findley et al. (2021) define external validity as the extent to which inferences drawn from a given study's sample apply to a broader population or other target population. I ensured external validity by revisiting the transcribed data to add further descriptions that aided in developing themes. By revisiting the data, I could confirm critical elements and write plausible interpretations from them. This process attempted to ensure the accuracy of the findings as best described by me. Incorporating these steps aids in being able to replicate the study to evaluate if the results will generalize to other contexts.

### *Ethical Considerations*

It is important to consider the ethical issues that might arise during a study and have a plan to address these issues. Ethical considerations in qualitative research should occur prior to conducting the study, at the beginning of the study, during data collection, in conducting data analysis, in reporting the data, and in publishing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, approval was obtained from the Ferris State University Institutional Review Board prior to conducting the study (Appendix A). Every subject was thoroughly informed of the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, anticipated benefits, potential risks, confidentiality, use of digital recording, and participant rights.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### *Phenomenology*

The theoretical framework for research is important because it holds the research together. Many researchers who want to improve society, especially for marginalized groups, choose a transformative framework because once “these issues are studied and exposed, the researcher provides a voice for these participants, raising their consciousness and improving their lives” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25). These frameworks have specific approaches that can be taken to conduct research. I chose phenomenological study because it explores a phenomenon and describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of the phenomenon. It has a strong philosophical component and is popular in the social and health sciences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Understanding these common experiences can lead to the implementation of policies and practices to improve the educational outcomes for African American women. I collected data from women who had experienced the phenomenon and developed a description of the experience. I analyzed the data and reduced the information to significant statements and then combined the statements into themes. These themes will be shared with individuals in higher education to provide insight and understanding of the factors that impact African American women persisting in college.

## **DELIMITATIONS AND LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY**

### *Delimitations*

There was a delimitation that existed within this study. Determining what sample size is sufficient is a critical methodological factor affecting researchers. Researchers can achieve good results with small sample sizes because doing so will minimize participant burden and maximize

limited resources. By sampling six students at various size public research university and one private university, there is a chance of not sampling students that may be representative of the population.

### *Limitations*

There were also limitations that existed within this study. In phenomenological research, the interpretations of data incorporate the assumptions that the researcher brings to the topic that can be viewed as a limitation (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82). Interpretations should not be seen as “right” or “wrong,” but rather as only interpretations or “plausible insights” because there is no such thing as omniscient perspective, only a personal one (Van Manen, 1990). All interpretations are potentially valid, but the researcher must ensure the authenticity of the research through the data.

Another limitation is generalizability, making sure the responses are not unique to the specific institutions in the study. Although I was able to interview students from five different states and institutions, each student interviewed had her unique perspective that may have affected the results. Additionally, making sure that the participants answer the questions honestly and truthfully can be viewed as a limitation. There is evidence to prove that bias may result under certain conditions out of the interviewees control. Respondents have been shown to frequently answer differently based on the perceived social status or ethnicity of the interviewer. For example, as a Black woman interviewing other Black women, I may get a certain response, whether good or bad. Although I cannot control interviewees’ biases, I can recognize, anticipate, and address possible issues through the interpretation of the results.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

A qualitative research methodology was used for this study to assess factors that fostered student success for Black women. A phenomenological approach was considered to be the most appropriate approach for this study. This chapter examined the study participants, data collection and analysis, framework, and limitations. One-on-one interviews were utilized to collect data for this study since it allowed the researcher to capture the lived experience of each interviewee. Chapter 4 provides the narratives from the interviews that are categorized by theme.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND RESULTS

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to seek factors that fostered the retention and persistence of African American women in college. The women in this study provided valuable insights into what affected their commitment to earn their bachelor's degree. The participants' experiences provide first-hand knowledge of factors that foster perseverance for African American women. The six participants had unique experiences at different institutions in different states. The participants shared their experiences and what they believed helped them and allowed them to stay in school and complete their degree. The findings and the analysis of their experiences and insights will help researchers understand institutional practices that nurture persistence and develop approaches, strategies, and policies to help with the persistence of African American women in college. There is a plethora of research on student persistence and student success, but the research is limited for African American women. For this study, student success is defined as students graduating with a bachelor's degree. This chapter presents the findings that emerged from the data collected from the interviews and analyzed for codes and themes.

### OPEN CODING

Open coding is coding the data for its major categories of information. In open coding, the researcher forms categories of information about the phenomenon through segmenting the information and reducing the categories into codes and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data was analyzed via open coding and resulted in four major themes: sense of belonging, support system, goal-oriented, and barriers and challenges. The four themes illuminate how the women described their retention and persistence.

**INTRODUCTION TO THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS**

This research sought to discover factors that foster the retention and persistence of African American women in college. The research participants consisted of six Black women who graduated with their bachelor’s degree in the spring and summer of 2022. The women graduated from five different institutions of higher education. Table 2 provides the demographic characteristics of each institution.

**Table 2. Racial Demographics of Each Institution**

UNIVERSITY	WHITE (%)	HISPANIC (%)	BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN (%)	ASIAN (%)	TWO OR MORE (%)	NATIVE HAWAIIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER (%)
1	76	9	6	1	4	0
2	9	67	12	2	2	0
3	69	9	7	4	5	0
4	58	21	13	1	4	0
5	75	6	7	4	4	0

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2021).*

Each participant’s interview was conducted and recorded via Zoom and then a verbatim transcription was completed. The transcribed texts were organized and coded by participant, question, and response and then sorted and analyzed to identify emerging themes. This chapter presents the findings that surfaced from the data collected from the interviews to answer the research questions.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions guided this study:



- RQ1: What are the factors that African American students consider in their college selection?
- RQ2: What are the institutional and personal factors that positively impact African American student persistence?
- RQ3: What are the institutional and personal factors that negatively impact African American student persistence?
- RQ4: How can institutions better support African American students to graduation?

## **PARTICIPANTS' VOICES**

### *Kathy*

The first research participant, who we shall call Kathy, chose her college because she loved the atmosphere when she first visited. She also received a scholarship so that pushed her into going. Kathy shared that she had family who were nearby to help if needed, and her sibling attended a nearby institution. As an African American student, Kathy felt like she had to work harder than everyone else just to be on the same level. She felt that she had to put more time into assignments than others. Kathy described a time when students in her class commented that they finished something in ten minutes, and she was thinking, "I'm over here doing this in a couple of hours." As an architect major, she was sometimes the only Black student in the class and didn't know if certain incidents happened because she was Black or if that was the way she perceived them: "Well, there were times when some things I was like, was that because I'm Black, you know, like did that happen? Because I'm like one of the only Black people in my classes or in my studios."

Kathy stated that she wanted to finish her degree in three years and that kept her in college and on track to graduate. She even took 18 and 19 hours a semester to accomplish her goal. When asked about challenges she faced, Kathy said that she faced the challenge of being

heard in class and that she would say something and then a White guy would say the exact same thing and he would get praise for saying it. She was determined to never stop talking and would still put her opinions out there in hopes that someday they would be heard.

Kathy acknowledged that she did not utilize services provided by the university like she should have, but she did meet someone in advising who she talked with daily and built a relationship with. This advisor provided Kathy with encouragement and became her go-to person for anything she needed. This advisor encouraged her to go out to events and socialize. When asked to reflect on her biggest accomplishment, Kathy stated that graduating early in the tough field of architecture was her biggest accomplishment, especially since her professors stressed the amount of time that needed to be spent in the studio. Her professors would say, “You should be spending 24 hours out of studio time working on stuff.”

Kathy did not feel that the university could have supported her better, but she felt that she could have utilized the institution’s resources more. Specifically, she stated that even her mother asked, “Did you go to the career’s office?” and she did not, but if she could go back and do it over again, she would. She stated that she “should have used those resources more.”

### *Laura*

Laura initially went to a military school but chose her college because it was the only one near her with an accredited program in her area of study and she also received a scholarship. Laura’s first day at the institution was a culture shock because everyone was White, and she only saw a handful of Black students. As an architecture major, most students in her class were male, which was another culture shock as well. Laura explained that she got involved with an African American organization that made her feel more comfortable.

Laura believes that she “chose two of the craziest professions that were both the same.” She knew she wanted to be in the military and be an architect and that kept her going. Laura set goals for herself that kept her in college and on track to graduate. She had rough days and sometimes felt that she could not do it, but she had a friend who motivated her. As an African American female student, Laura felt that she faced challenges being in male-dominated fields. From pursuing an officer route in the military to obtaining an architecture degree, Laura reflects that she has been surrounded by Caucasian, blond-haired, blue-eyed males. She “rarely saw other African American females pursuing that degree” in her classes. Laura feels that it has been hard to find someone with her background to provide her with guidance because both her military aspirations and college major have minimal to no African American females pursuing these careers. She asks herself if she “can push past these like last 300 years of this being the same thing.” She asserts that she will finish what she has set out to do.

Laura found a close mentor and this person became someone that she talked to every day. During her third year of school, Laura discovered an organization for minority students that opened her eyes to the African American students on campus and provided her the avenue to have discussions about the African American experience. She enjoyed talking with people from “different walks of life” who looked like her, sounded like her, but had a different perspective.

One conversation still resonates with Laura today:

I went to one seminar, we're talking about how roles of like African American males and females have shifted over time, and how those roles work within like the White majority. And so, I think that was one conversation I like still hold on to this day.

Laura feels most proud of her work ethic. She feels that it was always ingrained in her by her parents to either go to the military or go to college. She asserts that her work ethic is what

pushes her as well and her desire to make a difference. She felt that the university provided support, but they needed to advertise the support a little better because she did not know what resources were available. She had to “go out there and find it.”

### *Alice*

Alice had a lot of choices for college after graduating from high school but chose her specific college because her older sibling graduated from there, and her parents really pushed her to attend the same school. Her institution is a PWI, but she was immediately introduced to a small community of Black students who made her feel comfortable, safe, and supported by her roommate who was active in group chats.

Alice feels that her parents kept her on track to graduate, and she did not want to disappoint them or her peers. Alice also had a personal desire to succeed. She had set goals for herself, and those goals kept her on track to go to class, get good grades, and graduate in four years or less. When asked about the challenges she faced pursuing her degree and how she dealt with them, Alice stated, “I didn't really have people that looked like me. So, our worlds were very different, like the way that we talked or the way we just communicated in class.” She dealt with these differences by being “a lot more open to the idea of communicating and being around people who maybe didn't understand my world 100% or in the way that I viewed it.”

Alice was asked if there were any services provided by the university that helped keep her in college, and she spoke highly about an advisor who really helped her. She firmly believes that it is important to have “professors who are really wanting to just see you be the best you in every way, like not just academically, but personally, emotionally.” Alice felt that her institution could “probably implement and maybe hire more professors outside of just the normal old, you

know, like, old....Maybe hire professors who are young and who look like me and who are able to be supportive in all aspects of life.” When asked about her proudest moment, Alice felt that making it to graduation was her proudest moment, and she felt accomplished making it to the end.

### *Mary*

Mary chose her institution because her mom felt that it would be a good fit for her. Mary felt that she had a “pretty rich experience” although it was hard at first being a student of color. She had to find her place and people who made her feel comfortable. Mary credits her friends and parents for keeping her on track to graduate.

Mary feels that motivation was her biggest challenge and by being a student of color at a PWI, she experienced a lot of imposter syndrome that made it hard to stay motivated. She dealt with this by socializing and being around people of color and getting off campus.

Mary became active in the Students for Black Culture club that promotes Black people and African American culture and that helped keep her in college. In her junior year, she joined a new club, Sisters in Solidarity, which focused on bringing awareness to the issues faced by women of color on campus.

Mary is most proud of sticking through and finishing college even after failing a class her freshman year. When asked how the university could have better supported her, Mary feels like the university was very supportive of her, especially supporting her with a few deaths that happened in her family while in college. Those in the college community sent her flowers and were “warm and comforting.”

*Kim*

Kim chose her university because she had a lot of coworkers who attended, and they spoke highly about the institution. Kim enjoyed her experience and feels everything went well. She attended classes online and felt that her professors, the assignments, and student support were awesome. Kim was motivated and determined to obtain her degree so that her kids could see her succeed.

Kim felt that the most difficult challenge she faced while pursuing her degree was juggling between being a single parent of three, working full time, going to school full time, and all her children's extracurricular activities. She dealt with these challenges by prioritizing everything. Kim states that her children understood the importance of school for their mom, and they would go to their rooms whenever it was time for her to focus on her classes. As a student taking classes online, Kim felt that student support was helpful. She stated that "even in the middle of the night if it was late and I couldn't figure out homework or assignments or I was having problems logging in, they were real accurate on time of calling me back and getting the problem resolved."

Kim credits the institution with providing her with an inspiring advisor who was helpful and resourceful. Kim felt that although it took her longer, she was proud of herself for getting her degree and showing her kids that she could succeed and reach her goals. Kim does not feel that the university could have better supported her to complete her degree and she does not have any complaints.

## *Barbara*

Barbara chose her institution because it was close to her hometown, and she wanted to stay close to family. As an African American student attending a diverse school in Florida, she never felt out of place or that her race was underrepresented because there was a “good mix” of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Barbara stayed on track because her parents pushed her, and she wants to have a good career to support herself and her family when she has one. Barbara felt that the biggest challenge she faced in pursuing her degree was working full time and going to school full time, and she had to stay organized “at the beginning of every semester, in the beginning of every week, and keep good time management.”

Barbara did not utilize any services provided by the university and did not feel that the university could have supported her better. Barbara was most proud of graduating at a young age while maintaining good grades and not taking student loans:

The fact that I was able to graduate with my bachelor's at 21 and that I was able to go through my entire college experience with only having A's and B's, of always being on a dean's list, and being able to finish without having any student loans.

## **UNDERLYING THEMES AND INSIGHTS**

The interviews with the women provided insight about factors that led to them earning their bachelor’s degree. Their experiences revealed four themes that were common to all of their journeys. First, the women identified sense of belonging as being key to their persistence and success. They discussed finding a place to feel comfortable while being in the minority. Second, each woman referenced someone whom they had a relationship with who supported and motivated them to keep going. Having this relationship was critical to helping the women

reach their goal. A third theme that resonated amongst all the women was being goal oriented. Each woman had a goal and was driven to achieve this goal. A final theme that emerged with the women was overcoming barriers or challenges. All of the women experienced a barrier or challenge that they overcame to obtain their bachelor's degree. Although faced with these obstacles, they found a way to persevere. The rest of this chapter examines these four themes as they relate to the journeys of these six persistent women.

### *Theme 1: Sense of Belonging*

The women at PWIs spoke about finding their place in an environment where a lot of people did not look like them. These women had to find a place where they felt safe and accepted. The Office of Diversity and Inclusion at Cornell University defines belonging as “the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group” (Cornell University, n.d.). They assert that establishing genuine feelings of belonging for all is critical in improving engagement and performance. Kathy, Laura, Alice, and Mary all found support and acceptance with Black organizations on their respective campuses.

Kathy battled with trying to understand if instances of not being affirmed were because she was Black or if that was just her perception, especially with sometimes being the only Black student in the class. This thought was reinforced when a White person would get the praise for something that she previously stated:

I guess a challenge I face was kind of being heard sometimes, because I could say something and then someone else, like a White guy would say the exact same thing, but then he would get like the response. I just said that, but I felt like sometimes I wasn't being listened to. And I didn't feel heard sometimes.



Laura experienced a culture shock being surrounded by so many White people but became involved with an African American organization that made “it a little bit easier to feel a bit more comfortable.” Laura also felt that even though she saw other African Americans, they were male, so that made it difficult as well.

Like Laura, Alice discussed being introduced to a small community of Black students who made her feel comfortable, safe, and supported. She was “immediately introduced into their small world at this big university.” She did not dwell outside of this community but spent most of the time within this group where she could be comfortable and herself.

Mary stated that she felt like a phony at her institution, and this made it hard for her to stay motivated. She had to find her place and she found her place in organizations for African American students. Mary joined two organizations that focused on the African American experience and these organizations helped her to persist.

Kim attended classes online and felt that student support was timely and helpful. Barbara felt that her university was diverse, and she never felt out of place. Barbara expressed that there was a “good variety of all different races” so she “never really felt out of place” or that her race was underrepresented. The participant responses support growing literature that indicates that students from underrepresented racial-ethnic minorities such as Black students report lower belonging and uncertainty about their belonging (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Freeman et al. (2007) suggest that students’ sense of social acceptance by other students and university personnel is an important variable in relation to sense of belonging.

## *Theme 2: Support System*

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a support system as “a network of people who provide an individual with practical or emotional support.” Each woman in this study discussed someone who was instrumental in motivating and providing her encouragement. All the women referenced familial support in her educational journey. In addition to their family, Kathy, Laura, Alice, and Kim all spoke fondly of an advisor at the campus who provided them reassurance and support. Ironically, no one talked about an instructor who provided her with motivation or encouragement.

Kathy spoke about an advisor who she talked to daily and whom she had built a relationship with. This advisor encouraged her to go “go to this event” or “go out and be social.” Like Kathy, Laura also found a mentor who she became close to and would talk to every day. Alice met an advisor that motivated and “spoke life into” her and wanted her to succeed:

My advisor personally was a Black woman. And every time I would see her or would conversate with her, it was always motivational and just wanting, she just wanted the best for me, she wanted to see me succeed. And I think being able to come back, like every semester or once a month, and just being able to talk to her, really spoke life into me and kind of kept me focused on my goal, which was graduating.

Kim mentions an advisor who was very inspiring and always willing to help, who would always figure out what needed to be done. Although Mary did not discuss an advisor, she explained how she felt supported by friends in the organizations that she joined. As the literature suggests, family and institutional support is critical to student success (Sledge, 2012). Previous research also found that in Black families, education is seen as a path to liberation and success in society and family support and interaction has been found to significantly correlate with institutional attachment (Barnett, 2004). Chambers (2011) maintains that success in

academia depends not only on what you know but who you know for support, guidance, and advocacy. African American women need this support, so they do not feel lost, isolated, or even marginalized.

### *Theme 3: Goal-Oriented*

A goal-oriented person sets goals for himself or herself and dedicates time and energy to meeting these goals. This person is driven and motivated by a sense of purpose and works hard to achieve a certain outcome. The six women in this research study each had a goal that provided them the inspiration to persist.

Kathy talked about pushing herself to finish her degree in three years by taking 18 and 19 credits a semester: “I guess it was just me wanting to not necessarily get out early. But I was just trying, I want, I wanted to graduate in three years. And I just kept pushing myself. Like I can do this.”

Laura spoke about being proud of her work ethic. She knew she wanted to be in the military and be an architect, so she set personal goals for herself and worked hard to reach them. Alice had a personal desire to succeed and set goals for herself to graduate in four years or less. Mary mentioned being pleased with herself for persisting after failing a class her first year. She was proud that she “was able to rebound from that” and continue her journey the next three years even through the pandemic. Kim discussed setting a goal for herself and staying motivated to be an example for her kids:

...being motivated and determined to finish so that my kids could see me succeed. I wanted them to understand that, you know, even though you get older, and you may take a break from something, you can always go back and complete it. Never give up. It took a couple of years, maybe a little bit longer, but I was just proud of myself for doing it. Just showing my kids that, you know, I could succeed and complete goals as well.

Barbara's goal was to have a good career so that she could support herself and her family when she decided to have one. This is consistent with the literature that supports the idea that goal setting is linked to task performance. Locke and Latham (2002) believe that goals affect performance through four mechanisms: goals direct attention and effort toward goal-relevant activities, goals have an energizing function, goals affect persistence, and goals affect action indirectly by leading to the use of task-relevant knowledge and strategies.

#### *Theme 4: Overcoming Barriers and Challenges*

According to the literature and the research presented in this study, Black women are graduating from college at lower rates than other women. Although these six women faced barriers and challenges on their journeys to obtaining their bachelor's degrees, they persisted. This section discusses the barriers and challenges these women faced while pursuing their degree.

The first challenge was being a woman of color at a PWI and among White peers. Alice felt that it was challenging being a student of color at a PWI because her world was different than most of her peers. Mary shared the same sentiment and stated that she suffered from imposter syndrome and felt that she did not belong at her institution. Kathy discussed being aware of her race and whether she was being heard in class because of her race: "I would still speak; I would still put my opinions out there. And then hopefully, someday, you know, they would listen."

Laura described the difficulty she faced being in two professions that were dominated by White males:

It was probably like two or three, but there really wasn't a lot of us. It was really majority, either White males, White females, and like a few other Black or Asian, or Hispanic males.

Although faced with the challenge of being a minority by race and also by gender, these women overcame this challenge and were successful. Alice proclaimed that she would just be open to the idea that the people around her did not understand her world. Mary coped by getting off campus and socializing with people of color. Kathy vowed that she would never stop talking, and Laura declared that she would finish what she started. These women embraced their challenges and discovered what worked for them and were triumphant.

The second challenge the women faced was life's obligations such as family, children, and working a full-time job. Kim shared that she had to balance being a single mother to three children, going to school full time, and working full time. Like Kim, Barbara described how she had to balance being a full-time student and working full-time by using good time management. Riggert et al. (2006) reviewed the literature on employment and higher education outcomes and found that although 80% of college students are employed, there are no theoretical models to explain the relationship between employment and student outcomes.

The third challenge was academic performance. Kathy stated that she had to put more time into her assignments than her fellow classmates; nevertheless, she was determined to complete her four-year degree in three years. Alice also pushed herself academically and stated that she was determined to finish her degree in four years or less. Mary recalled struggling academically and failing a class her first year and this posed a challenge for her, but she stuck through it: "I had pretty low GPA starting out, and so I had to take some courses to get my GPA and my credit hours back up so that I could keep my scholarships."

These women all faced challenges while working towards their degree. Consistent with the literature, Black women have faced challenges with racism, sexism, and marginalization in higher education (Coker, 2003). Coker found that Black women must develop coping strategies to deal with the challenges they face in higher educations.

### **SUMMARY OF KEY RESEARCH THEMES**

Based on the lived experiences of these six Black female college students, sense of belonging, support system, being goal oriented and overcoming barriers and challenges were all common themes in their journeys to earning their bachelor's degree. Although these were women at various institutions across the US, these four themes were common in their paths to success. These women identified needing to feel a sense of belonging and having a support system as factors that led to their success. Although they faced barriers and challenges, they each had a goal that they were striving to achieve, and they did. Hausmann et al. (2009) found that sense of belonging positively impacts college retention and this research affirms their research.

### **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter began with sharing the participants' responses as they related to the research questions. Four research questions guided this study to better understand the factors that fostered the retention and persistence of the participants in college. This chapter shed light on how the women described the factors that led to their retention and persistence, how institutional efforts impacted their ability to persist, and how institutions can be transformed to enhance the academic success of Black women persisting and obtaining their bachelor's degree. The chapter concluded by identifying four themes that resonated amongst all the

research participants on their journeys to getting their bachelor's degree: feeling a sense of belonging, having a support system, being goal oriented, and overcoming barriers and challenges.

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSION

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore factors that led to the persistence of African American female college students obtaining their bachelor's degree. Historically, Black women have had the lowest retention and graduation rates for females. It is important to examine factors that hinder and factors that contribute to the success of Black women. Six Black women who graduated and completed their bachelor's degree in the spring and summer of 2022 agreed to participate in this study. These women provided valuable insights into the factors that led to their persistence. This chapter presents the summary, recommendations, and conclusion for this study. Their experiences contribute to the body of knowledge on student persistence. Data was gathered through interviews conducted via Zoom. The data was coded for its major categories of information and then segmented into codes and themes. The data was analyzed via open coding. The major themes which shed light on how the women described their experiences and that led to their retention and persistence were: a sense of belonging, a support system, being goal oriented, and overcoming barriers and challenges.

This qualitative phenomenological study was completed by conducting interviews with women who persisted and obtained their bachelor's degree. I posted an invitation flyer on social media requesting volunteers to participate in a research study. Informed consents were obtained and submitted by each participant for the study. The six participants were audio-



recorded through Zoom and the interview was later transcribed. I coded the responses for common themes and patterns. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants. A discussion of research findings, benefits of the research, the study's delimitations and limitations, recommendations for future research, and conclusion are provided in this chapter.

## **DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Four research questions guided this study to better understand factors that foster the persistence of African American women in college to earn their degree. Research Question 1 revealed institutional factors that initially attracted the research participants to the institution. Research Question 2 revealed institutional and personal factors that positively impacted the participants' persistence. Research Question 3 three revealed the institutional and personal factors that negatively impacted persistence. In Research Question 4, the results revealed ways in which institutions can better support African American female students to graduation.

### *Research Question 1*

What are the factors that African American students consider in their college selection?

Gilbreath et al. (2011) assert that a good fit between a student and university makes college less stressful and reduces the chances of dropping out or transferring. A good fit promotes well-being and contributes to feeling of mastery, self-confidence, and satisfaction. A poor student-university fit is likely to result in decreased satisfaction, well-being, and performance. The findings revealed that there was a variety of personal reasons why students selected their institution that met the unique needs of each research participant. The reasons ranged from one participant stating that she felt the institution had a nice atmosphere to several of the participants receiving scholarships that narrowed down their choice of college.

Several of the participants chose their institution based on a recommendation from family and friends and the proximity of the institution to their hometown. One participant chose her institution because of its specific degree offering. The women all had specific reasons for selecting their institution based on whether they felt it was a good fit for them and met their needs.

### *Research Question 2*

What are the institutional and personal factors that positively impact African American student persistence?

One of the institutional factors that resounded with the participants was having clubs and organizations for Black students. Getting involved in clubs and organizations enabled the participants to have a place to feel comfortable and safe. Guiffrida (2003) found that organizations for students of color provided a safe outlet in which African American students could stay connected to their culture and socially integrate into the institution. Involvement in these organizations could provide students with the opportunity to interact with other Black students and connect with Black faculty outside of the classroom. Guiffrida also found that African American students participating in African American student organizations were provided the opportunity to give back to the Black community.

Another institutional factor that stood out as having a positive impact for these women was having an advisor of color who the students felt that they could talk to and relate to. New (2016) asserts that minority students prefer seeing someone of their race in student services. Protests over racial inequality continue to take place on college campuses across the country, and students of color are demanding that institutions hire more people of color in student services (New, 2016). New believes that Black students on PWI campuses struggle with

underrepresentation, social isolation, and racial stereotyping, so having a more racially diverse setting will help combat these issues.

The personal factors that resonated among the participants that positively impacted the participants persistence were family support and personal aspirations. All six of the participants discussed their family and their personal goals. Family support is one of the most important support systems in deciding to enroll and persist in college and is beneficial in terms of psychological well-being, student engagement, and academic outcomes (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). Goal setting has been shown to affect thought and action, and when goals are meaningful, they are more effective (Dobronyi et al., 2019). Obtaining her bachelor's degree was a conscious and meaningful objective that each participant pursued.

### *Research Question 3*

What are the institutional and personal factors that negatively impact African American student persistence?

The findings showed that the women who attended PWIs needed to find their place, and this was accomplished by finding a community of Black students who looked and talked like them and who they could relate to. One participant felt that she was not heard in class a lot of times due to being a person of color in a PWI. These findings are consistent with previous research that concludes that sense of belonging is positively associated with improvements in persistence. Tinto (2012) describes sense of belonging as a sense of membership. Several of the participants did not feel like they belonged on their respective campuses during their first year until they joined student organizations. Student organizations sponsored by the college and universities gave the respondents a sense of belonging. This positive factor can be strengthened

on other campuses and at other institutions. Students need to feel accepted, included by, and connected to their institution.

The participants experienced challenges and barriers along their educational journey, but they maintained the course. The women discussed several personal factors that were challenging to them such as working full-time, being a single parent, and seeing minimal students of color. Although faced with these obstacles, they found ways to persevere and persist in higher education. One participant discussed experiencing imposter syndrome. Many successful matriculating Black students feel that others have overestimated their intelligence and they experience a sense of intellectual phoniness (Peteet et al., 2015). Peteet et al. assert that maintaining a positive academic self-concept will help guard against experiencing imposter syndrome. Alice spoke about having instructors who can be supportive in all aspects of life and want to see students be the best academically, personally, and emotionally. Having instructors who “speak life” into all students will help students feel confident about themselves which will facilitate academic persistence and achievement.

#### *Research Question 4*

How can institutions better support African American students to graduation?

When asked if the university could have supported them better, the participants stated that they were mostly satisfied with their postsecondary experience. The participants expressed two areas that they felt institutions could focus on to better support them: having a more diverse staff and providing better advertisement of groups and clubs for Black students. Students of color who create affirming spaces for themselves and challenge exclusionary cultures by forming student groups have many positive outcomes (Schachle & Coley, 2022).

There are gaps in Black student access to student groups on US college and university campuses, and efforts must be made to prevent moves to underfund or defund academic programs and student support services that cater to students of color on college campuses (Schachle & Coley, 2022). The women in this study thrived when they found a place to belong on their respective campus, and it is clear that connecting to an organization(s) for Black students was a positive contributor to their success. Due to a history of exclusion and discrimination in education, it is important that Black students feel welcomed, valued, and that they truly belong. A university campus has a responsibility to provide its students of color with programs and services to help them feel valued, connected, and able to be their authentic self.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This research study examined Black women's experiences as they traversed through higher education and obtained their bachelor's degree. The study identified factors that affected the persistence of these African American women in college and contributes to the scholarly research and literature on factors that contribute to the commitment of Black women in college. Data was collected and analyzed from a small group of six participants. It would be beneficial for future research to replicate this study to see if there are similar findings. Based on the emerging themes from the data analysis, sense of belonging, a support system both on and off campus, goals, and overcoming barriers and challenges were key factors in each participant's experience.

#### ***Sense of Belonging***

The study participants provided in-depth narratives about needing to fit in. They discussed the importance of finding a community where they felt comfortable and safe. This

study could assist in the field of higher education by providing research on the benefits of organizations for students of color. Future research can be conducted on the number of clubs and organizations that exist for students of color and which groups provide students with the greatest sense of community. Future studies can also be done on the avenues that these clubs and organizations are using to promote themselves. Finally, other studies might further examine the prevalence of different types of organizations for students of color and evaluate whether various forms of organizations for minority students are more common at certain types of institutions.

Another avenue that can be explored is how instructors can cultivate a sense of belonging in the classroom. It is imperative that college instructors create an inviting and safe space within the classroom to increase student success and educational outcomes. Students who feel a sense of belonging will spend more time on task and choose to persist in the college environment. Future research could examine whether students feel like they belong at their school so that institutions can evaluate their current practices and implement new practices if needed. Institutions will also be able to evaluate whether there is a discrepancy in the data with belonging among the various racial and ethnic groups at the institution. A deeper look into the ways professors and instructors can foster feelings of belonging will help increase the persistence of students in higher education.

### *Institutional Support System*

The women in this study described key institutional staff who played an important role in their retention and persistence. It is important to have faculty and staff who “speak life” into students. However, no one talked about an instructor or faculty member who was instrumental

in their success, which is alarming considering that the respondents spent three or four years at their institution. Author Ken Bain (2004) asserts that the best teaching is found in the attitudes of teachers. The best teachers show that they care about their students as people and as learners. These teachers take their students seriously as human beings and treat them as they would treat any colleague, with fairness, compassion, and concern.

This study can be extended to analyzing the ratio of Black faculty and staff to the number of Black students served at various institutions across the US. Further research might also explore the percentage of applicants who are applying for faculty positions by race and the percentage who are getting interviews and hired by race. In the meantime, additional research could explore the professional development that is provided to faculty and staff on a consistent basis. Equipping faculty and staff with effective and equity-promoting training is essential to helping students be successful. Classrooms have become increasingly diverse and training specifically on recognizing and being aware of hidden biases and microaggressions is crucial. Racial microaggressions create hostile learning environments that affect student performance, so it is important to recognize them and mitigate their impact. Future research studies can be conducted on microaggressions committed by faculty, administrators, and staff and steps that can be taken to respond and address them.

### *Goal Setting*

Each participant discussed having a goal that they wanted to accomplish, and they were successful despite barriers and challenges. Future research studies may evaluate the impact that goal setting has on college persistence. Does having goals help students overcome obstacles faced or are there other factors that create resilience? Should college personnel

prioritize goal setting as part of student advising and registration? I believe that college personnel should focus on goal setting and showing students the personal, educational, and financial benefits of staying and persisting in college. Locke and Latham (2013) assert that the establishment of specific, challenging goals clearly stimulates goal-directed behavior and boosts motivation.

Should high school counselors require students to set short- and long-term SMART goals? Further research can explore whether high schools that have counselors that conduct goal setting exit plans have more students that choose either academia or trade programs. Also, whether students that write down their goals with clear action steps are more likely to achieve them. These are several questions that can be researched in the future to better understand the impact of goal setting. What should a goal setting plan look like for a high school student? How should the plan evolve once a student has started college? Are there current high schools and colleges that are collaborating with each other on setting goals for students? If not, what steps can be taken between high schools and institutions of higher education to work together to develop effective goal setting plans?

### *Overcoming Barriers and Challenges*

The women in this study overcame barriers and challenges and persisted and earned their bachelor's degree. Although they described barriers and challenges, they were still resilient and did not let themselves be negatively impacted by them. What factor(s) contributed to their resilience? Was it a combination of sense of belonging, a support system on and off campus and having goals that led to their perseverance? Or was it another factor, such as a personality trait. Future studies could explore personality traits to find out if there is a common



link between the women that resulted in their achievement. Future research studies could also examine women's backgrounds and look at factors such as the parents educational background, socioeconomic status and marital status to see if there is a common factor.

It is possible that successful Black students have similar experiences that affect their persistence and additional research could reveal whether the factors in this study appear in other studies. If this is the case, then institutions should strive to connect students to organizations to create a sense of belonging, provide effective training to faculty and staff on supporting students and make goal setting part of the enrollment process. Future researchers should continue to conduct qualitative inquiry and solicit insight from Black female college students about their experiences so that policies, procedures, and services can be put in place to better serve them and help them be successful.

#### **DELIMITATIONS AND LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY**

There were limitations and delimitations that existed in this study. One limitation is the interpretation of the data. Interpretations, while not right or wrong, are often swayed or driven by the researcher's bias. In phenomenological research, this could create a problem for the researcher to keep the data authentic but can be corrected through the presentation of the data. Another limitation is the generalization of the responses because the subjects were from different states and institutions with unique situations and experiences. Ensuring that the responses are not specific to the institutions in the study should be closely analyzed and vetted. Making sure that participants give truthful or honest answers can be seen as a limitation. Interviewees may answer differently based on the social status or ethnicity of the interviewer.

An African American interviewee may give a certain response to an African American interviewer, whether good or bad.

The sample size of the representation population was a delimitation in the study. Finding a sufficient and representative sample size is a critical part of any reliable study. While a small sample size can be a delimitation, it can also provide data which can drive a discussion. The quality of the research will often negate the small sample side. The sampling of six students across public and private universities may provide an opportunity for the information collected to be an adequate sample size of the population.

### **BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH**

This research is beneficial because it provides implications for practice, policy, and research. Postsecondary education is important and academic success lies not only on the shoulders of students but also on faculty and administrators who have a responsibility to ensure that the learning environment is conducive to the success of all students. Institutional leaders should be cognizant of behaviors, policies, and practices that affect student persistence, especially for African American women. This research also serves as confirmation of practices that are currently working that aid in the persistence of African American women in college. Colleges and universities could benefit from this research and future research regarding factors that affect persistence.

### **RESEARCHER'S REFLECTIONS**

As I reflect on this study, I am grateful that I had the opportunity to interview six amazing African American females who persisted and earned their degree and shared their experience with me. I see myself in these women. As a Black woman, the retention and persistence of

African American women in college is near and dear to my heart and will be my life's work. My goal as a servant leader is to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being met and that they are growing and becoming healthier, wiser, and more autonomous. By listening to the experiences of these six women, by giving them a voice, I hope to help other African American women thrive and not simply survive.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This qualitative phenomenological study provided an avenue to examine factors that contributed to the retention and persistence of African American women in college. Although the enrollment of African American female students is increasing, it is important to examine their lived experience to ensure they are persisting. Focusing on the unique needs of Black female students will yield life-changing results in the retention and graduation rates of African American women in higher education. This was the main purpose of this study. The emergent themes from the focus group can help higher education institutions understand factors that help African American women succeed in college.

This chapter summarized the findings to the research focus: identifying factors that foster student success for African American women. The findings from this study can help institutions transform and enrich lives. Based on the participants' responses, establishing a relationship with a faculty member played a key role in their persistence. The women also described their retention in terms of finding a place to belong where they felt accepted and safe. Institutions must be intentional and strategic in marketing services to African American female students and providing diversity within faculty and staff. Diversity within faculty, staff, and administration and mentors who they feel comfortable with can provide motivation for

Black female students. All the women in this study had goals that motivated them to stay on track to graduate. Even though they were faced with barriers and challenges, they overcame them.

It is my goal to contribute to the literature in higher education by adding these findings that emphasize how critical sense of belonging, support systems, and goals are to the persistence and retention of Black women in college. These findings can provide educators and administrators with tactics that support African American women in college. Furthermore, findings from this study can fuel future research questions that could lead to ensuring Black women persist and are successful.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

# FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

1010 Campus Drive FLITE 410 Big Rapids, MI 49307

[www.ferris.edu/irb](http://www.ferris.edu/irb)

Date: June 21, 2022

To: Susan DeCamillis, EdD and Eugenia Antoine

From: David R. White, Ph.D, IRB Chair

Re: IRB Application IRB-FY20-21-216 Retention and Persistence of African American Women

The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed and approved your request for revisions to the study, Retention and Persistence of African American Women (IRB-FY20-21-216). Exempt of this revision follows the status check-in date of your initial application approval. As such, you may collect data according to the procedures outlined in your application until March 16, 2023.

Your project will continue to be subject to the research protocols as mandated by Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46 (45 CFR 46) for using human subjects in research. It is your obligation to inform the IRB of any changes in your research protocol that would substantially alter the methods and procedures reviewed and approved by the IRB in your application. Thank you for your compliance with these guidelines and best wishes for a successful research endeavor. Please let us know if the IRB can be of any future assistance.

Regards,



David R. White, Ph.D, IRB Chair

Ferris State University Institutional Review Board



## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Protocol:  
Identifying factors that foster student success for African American Women

Interview Protocol Script: Welcome and thank you for your participation today. My name is Eugenia Antoine, and I am a doctoral student at Ferris State University. I am conducting a study on factors that affect the retention and persistence of African American women in college. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue, please feel free to let me know. You can also choose not to answer a question. All your responses are confidential, and I will only be using this information to help colleges understand ways that African American women can be successful in college. You have given written consent to participate in this study and be recorded. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place: Zoom

Interviewer: Eugenia Antoine

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee: Student

Description of Project: The goal of this study is to evaluate factors that contribute to the retention and persistence of African American women in college. This information will be shared with institutions so they know the factors that contribute to the success of African American/Black women in college and can put practices in place to help them.

Questions:

1. How did you decide on this college?
2. Tell me about your experience as an African American student at this college.
3. What has kept you here in college and on track to graduate?
4. As an African American female student, what challenges have you faced in pursuing your degree? How have you dealt with these challenges?
5. Have any services provided by the university helped keep you in college? Suggestions if needed: financial aid, university housing, involvement in clubs, organizations or sports, social network, relationships, mentors, advising, tutoring, orientation, and the Student Support Services program.
6. As you consider your college experience to this point, what do you feel have been your biggest successes or what do you feel most proud of?
7. Could the university have better supported you as you worked to complete your degree? (If yes) How?

Script when done: Thank you for participating in this interview. Your responses will be kept anonymous.