

MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS IMPACTING THE SUCCESS OF BLACK FEMALE  
STUDENTS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

by

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## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological research study aimed to examine the internal and external motivational factors that correlate with the success of Black female students attending community colleges. Black students are among the lowest achieving groups in educational attainment, so it is necessary to understand what factors encourage students to succeed. Additionally, black females exceed Black males in college enrollment, persistence, and retention, so gaining a better understanding of what motivates females to press forward is necessary.

This qualitative study examined the shared stories of six Black female students who have completed at least one year at a community college. The participants shared their internal and external motivational experiences and explained how the factors have or have not contributed to their ability to persist and retain. Five common themes emerged from the interviews: (1) internal motivators: my drive, (2) external motivators: the people, (3) purpose: my why, (4) perseverance, and (5) institutional motivators: the College. The study revealed that Black females lean heavily on their external support systems, possess the internal drive to be successful, and have strong self-motivation that aids in their ability to succeed. The findings in this study will help to fill gaps in the literature about the correlation between success and motivation for underrepresented populations, specifically Black females. It will also provide insight for community college leaders, highlighting the support students need that will aid in persistence and retention. Recommendations for applying these themes to promote student success are included.

**KEY TERMS:** Black females, motivation, persistence, retention

## DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this dissertation to my boys, Jaiden and Jaxon. They are my heartbeats and the reason I work so hard. I must pave the way and show them the value of hard work and perseverance. Mommie loves you both so very much. To my parents, Rubin and Doris Briggs, you have served as my rock throughout my life, and none of this would have been possible without your assistance and support. Thank you for instilling the value of education and pushing me to be my best. To my siblings, Latasha and Rubin, my nieces and nephews, thank you for your support, encouragement, and understanding during my many years of education and for supporting me every step of the way. To Ayanna, my best friend, may you rest in heaven but know that I am here because it was a promise we made to one another years ago. You are forever in my heart. Jeremy, thank you for pushing, encouraging, and motivating me to pursue my dreams. You were an intricate part of this journey, and I thank you. Lastly, without God, none of this would be possible. God is the strength of my life and the light to my path.

*Philippians 4:13 says, I can do ALL things through Christ which strengthens me*

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction**

In 1901, the first community college, Joliet Junior College, was established at Joliet High School in Chicago. At that time, the College serviced six students: “As our country was becoming industrialized in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the need for education and training was becoming apparent. The young nation was engaged in civil war when President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act of 1862, creating Land Grant colleges and universities, improving access to education beyond high school” (Galizio & Boggs, 2022, p. 1). By 1890, another Morrill Act was enacted to expand education access to Black citizens.

While most would agree that education, and especially higher education, was designed to be a mechanism to minimize discrimination across all races and socio-economic statuses, even today, data continues to show that Black students struggle to meet the point of equalization when compared to their peers (Anthony et al., 2021). Often, Black families are at a disadvantage because they lack access to high-quality K-12 education, underfunded school systems, counselors and teachers who are experienced, and limited access to gifted, talented, and advanced placement programs: “Black students get the illusion of education without the critical components of a quality education” (Anthony et al., 2021, p. 1). The impression that Black students have been denied a quality education has yielded inequities in high school and college graduation rates, college enrollment, and overall persistence (Anthony et al., 2021).

At the beginning of the Obama administration, an education initiative was implemented to increase college attainment among 25-to-34-year-old citizens: “President Obama challenged

every American to commit to at least one year of higher education or post-secondary training” (*Higher Education*, n.d., p. 1). The initiative was also intended to have America “once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. The White House and U.S. Department of Education indicated that the president’s goal would be met if 60% of 25- to 34-year-olds had completed at least an associate’s degree by 2020” (Fry, 2017, p. 1). In 2009, 41% of adults 25 to 34 years old had an associate’s degree, and by 2016 that percentage increased to 48% (Fry, 2017). However, if we disaggregate the data, in 2009, 30% of Black people received at least an associate degree, compared to 49% for their White counterparts. By 2016, 35% of Black people had an associate degree, compared to 55% of White people. When examining the data based on gender, in 2009, 46% of women held at least an associate degree compared to 36% of men. By 2016, 52% of women held an associate degree compared to 43% of men. Clearly, based on this data, the United States made progress towards the Obama administration’s attainment goal but still remained 12 percentage points short of the overall goal in 2016 (Fry, 2017).

Research continues to indicate that, while college attainment and enrollment rates have increased over the last two decades, Black students continue to face ongoing barriers. From 2000 to 2018, the overall college enrollment rates for young adults 18- to 24-year-old students also increased. The percentage of young adults who enrolled in college increased from 35% (2000) to 41% (2018). The enrollment rate for Black students in 2018 was 37% compared to 42% for White and 59% for Asian students. From 2000 to 2018, the enrollment rate statistically has also been higher for females than males (“College Enrollment Rates,” 2020). Unfortunately, there was no measurable difference for Black females from 2000 to 2018 compared to the 3% increased enrollment rate for White female students (“College Enrollment Rates,” 2020).

The effects of COVID-19 have continued to impact the number of students enrolling in higher education institutions. An enrollment decline of 3.5% occurred from Spring 2021 to Spring 2020, and community colleges were among the hardest hit: “Traditional college-age students, age 18 to 24, saw the largest decline across all age groups (-5% or 524,000 fewer students), largely attributable to their steep losses at community colleges (-13.2% or 365,000 fewer students) (*Overview: Spring 2021 Enrollment Estimates*, n.d.). Table 1 illustrates the enrollment changes for higher education institutions from 2019 to 2021.

Table 1: Estimated National Enrollment by Institutional Sector and Enrollment Intensity: 2019 to 2021

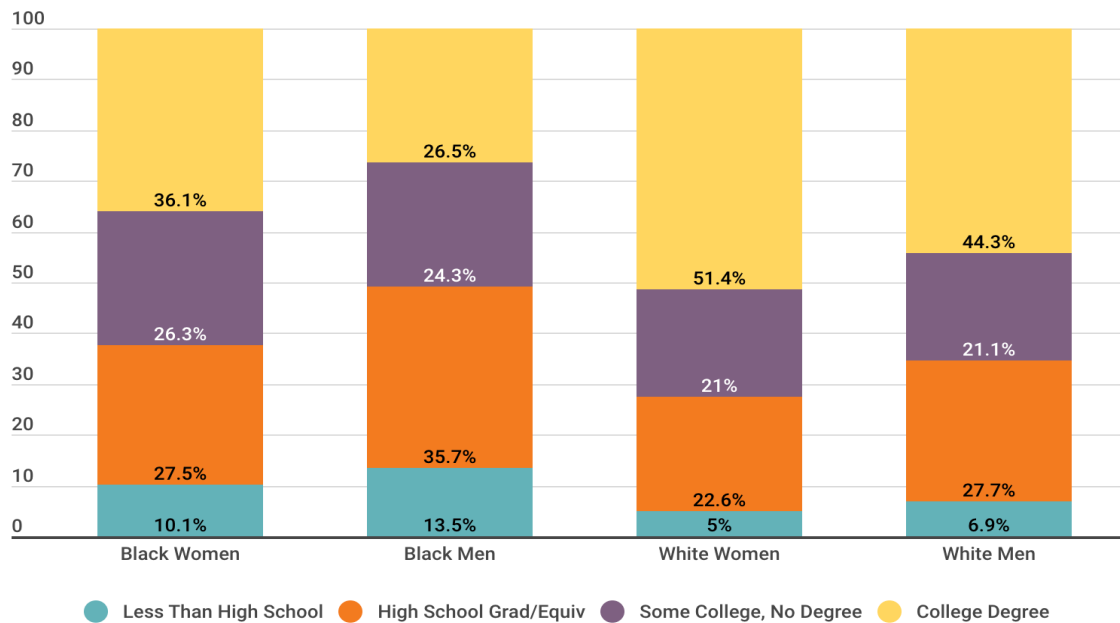
SECTOR	ENROLLMENT INTENSITY	SPRING 2021		SPRING 2020		SPRING 2019	
		ENROLLMENT	% CHANGE FROM PREVIOUS YEAR	ENROLLMENT	% CHANGE FROM PREVIOUS YEAR	ENROLLMENT	% CHANGE FROM PREVIOUS YEAR
All Sectors	Full-Time	10,586,032	-3.5	10,969,338	0.4	10,929,767	-1.0
	Part-Time	6,269,269	-3.4	6,488,968	-1.9	6,612,342	-2.7
Public 4-year	Full-Time	5,368,762	-2.2	5,490,661	-0.1	5,496,209	-0.7
	Part-Time	2,137,088	3.7	2,060,583	-2.0	2,102,028	-1.3
Private non-profit 4-year	Full-Time	2,891,253	-1.8	2,942,777	-0.2	2,947,262	4.1
	Part-Time	856,667	2.8	833,685	-2.6	856,314	0.1
Private for-profit 4-year	Full-Time	438,843	-1.5	445,751	-2.6	457,549	-21.8
	Part-Time	279,714	-1.4	283,612	-0.8	285,987	-16.0
Public 2-year	Full-Time	1,575,887	-11.4	1,779,427	-1.8	1,812,815	-4.7
	Part-Time	2,945,159	-8.5	3,217,616	-2.5	3,301,198	-2.6

(Source: *Overview: Fall 2021 Enrollment Estimates, 2021*)

As enrollment rates continue to be evaluated, the Education Trust’s 2021 Report explains that most public higher education institutions are currently enrolling a smaller percentage of Black students than twenty years ago (*Overview: Fall 2021 Enrollment Estimates, 2021*, p. 202).

In fact, while Black enrollment declined 7.5% from the fall 2019 semester for all higher education institutions, in community colleges the enrollment rate dropped 13% in just one year (Anthony et al., 2021). Educational attainment among Black women and men in the United States also reveals disparities: 36.1% of Black women have a college degree compared to 51.4% of White women, and 26% of Black men hold a college degree compared to 44.3% of White men. Data shows that Black women earn more degrees than Black men, but the attainment rate is still below their White counterparts (Anthony et al., 2021). Black women and men are overrepresented in the category of “some college,” but the category “no degree” indicates that Black students are going to college but are falling short somewhere between starting classes and degree completion.

Figure 1: Educational Attainment Among Black Women and Men & White Women and Men (2018)



Source: Ed Trust analysis of the United States Census Bureau's 2018 American Community Survey (all 50 states and DC included).



Research also indicates that Black students are achieving less than other racial and ethnic groups; however, when comparing Black women against Black men, Black women earn degrees at a higher percentage (Fry, 2017). In 2018, 62% of Black students (men and women) completed their college degrees, while 95.76% of the White students completed their degrees. A closer look at the Black student completion rate indicates that 36.1% of the Black women completed their degrees while only 26.5% of the Black men completed their degrees (*The NCES Fast Facts Tool Provides Quick Answers to Many Education Questions (National Center for Education Statistics)*, n.d.). Cruz' 2013 research found that education is desired among Black women because of their desire to rise above challenges and accomplish goals. Education is believed to be the catalyst for change and self-improvement, so degree attainment helps to cultivate that change and break down barriers (Cruz, 2013). During 2018-19, over one million associate degrees were awarded, with women (of all races) earning 60% and white males 30%. When examined in more detail, the data indicate that Black women earned degrees at a rate of 13.6% of the total associate degrees awarded compared to White women at 51% (NCES, *Fast Facts*, n.d.)

### **The Beginning**

According to Cruz (2013), "Education is a strong attribute among many African American women due to their ability to rise above challenges and master goals. The road to establishing change is based upon breaking barriers and on building bridges to success" (p. 1). In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson became the first woman to graduate with a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College. Not only was Mary Jane the first Black woman to graduate from college with a bachelor's degree, but she later went on to become the first Black principal at a preparatory high school for African American youth in Washington, D.C. Mary Jane, along with a few other women, overcame barriers in terms of their education and did so during a time when American

society was unsure if women had the right to become citizens. Women have paved the way since the late 1800s regarding degree attainment, and since then, there have been strides made toward equality in education, but Black students continue to fall short (Blakemore, 2017).

Historically Black students had achieved at lower rates than their counterparts, dating back to the beginning when many Blacks were prohibited from reading and/or learning to write (Fourtané, 2021a). The issues causing Black students to complete degrees far less often than their counterparts date back to the late 1800s. Catherine Brewer, a White woman, was awarded the first college degree in 1840. However, it was not until 1862 that a Black woman graduated from college.

Many researchers conclude that Black students are at an educational disadvantage from the time they begin K-12. These disadvantages are often because of poor access to quality education, ineffective K-12 systems, socio-economic barriers, limited access to qualified teachers, and an overall lack of preparedness (Anthony et al., 2021). These inequalities directly impact the students' ability to succeed. In the 1920s, one in 1,000 Black people were college educated. By 1990 that number reached 11.3%, and by 1996, that number jumped to 13.8%. In 2008, 19.6% of Black students over the age of 25 held a college degree (*More Than 4.5 Million African Americans Now Hold a Four-Year College Degree*, 2009). The data, in fact, emphasize this point, resulting in our current situation with Black students among the lowest-achieving groups in educational attainment.

U.S. history has many stories of Black females who have been strong and resilient in spite of culturally based disparities. Despite the racial and gender barriers, Black females have prevailed in education and found a way when it all seemed impossible. In 1864, Rebecca Lee was the first Black female to graduate from medical school. By 1879, there were 22 historically

Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) enrolling students in college. Mary Ann Shadd was the first Black female to be enrolled in Howard University's Law Department. By 1900, there were 78 HBCUs, and over 2,000 Black students had earned degrees. As a reaction to these significant strides, in 1904, the Day Law was passed, prohibiting interracial education in Kentucky (Fourtané, 2021a).

While the Day Law was a step backward for Black students, Black men and women kept fighting for equality. In 1941, the Missouri State Supreme Court ruled in the favor of Lucille Bluford, ordering the College to admit her into the journalism program if she was not admitted into the historically Black Lincoln University. In 1948, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of Sipuel in the Sipuel vs. University of Oklahoma case, ordering that Ada Sipuel, a Black female, be admitted to the School of Law at the University of Oklahoma: "That ruling states that Blacks have the right to a legal education of the same quality as Whites" (Fourtané, 2021a, p. 1). In 1954, the Supreme Court ordered that the University of Florida must admit Black students, stating that racial segregation is unconstitutional via the Brown vs. Board of Education (Fourtané, 2021a). The Supreme Court ruled in the favor of Black females, finally affording them the opportunity to be admitted into college and earn degrees (Fourtané, 2021a).

### **Root Causes of the Achievement Gaps**

Racial gaps in educational attainment result from many factors: economic, social, and educational barriers (Anthony et al., 2021). These factors systemically disadvantage and suppress the growth of Black people: "We know that our education system, on average, sends Black students to schools with less funding and resources, fewer experienced teachers, less rigorous curricular options, and fewer school counselors" (Nichols & Schak, 2017, p. 7). Those factors affect the lives of Black students throughout America daily (Nichols & Schak, 2017).

Achievement gaps are directly correlated to socioeconomic disparities between races, and they help to explain why Black students are achieving less than their counterparts:

One potential explanation for racial achievement gaps is that they are largely due to socioeconomic disparities between white, Black, and Hispanic families. Black and Hispanic children's parents have lower incomes and lower levels of educational attainment than white children's parents. Because higher-income and more-educated families typically can provide more educational opportunities for their children, family socioeconomic resources are strongly related to educational outcomes. (*Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gaps*, n.d.)

Black students also often attend schools that are underfunded and have less access to experienced teachers and counselors: "In fact, educational attainment for Black adults in this country today is the same rate it was for White adults in 1990" (Anthony et al., 2021, p. 1).

According to Bowman et al. (2018), "Past and present economic social conditions are at the root of the achievement gap. Societal efforts to overcome the ill effects of prejudice and discrimination for African Americans have not been effective enough; there continues to be inequities in almost every aspect of life, including education" (p. 1). Some Black children do not have a suitable learning environment in the home, one that leads to exposure of knowledge, school-related language, and progressive skills. Their everyday circumstances may also make their household stressful. Additionally, Black children are uncertain if obtaining a degree is beneficial so they struggle with adapting to the rigor that is education (Bowman et al., 2018).

Other factors that impact achievement gaps for Black students include poverty, limited internet and technology access, poverty-stricken school systems, and limited access to Black teachers: "In 2018, nearly one third of Black students lived in poverty (32%), compared to 10% of white students in families living in poverty. The percentage of Black students who lived in households where the highest level of education attained by either parent was a bachelor's or

higher degree was 27%, compared with 69% of Asian students, and 53% of white students” (Cai, 2020, p. 1).

The lack of internet access has also become a major obstacle for Black students to learn in the household, with 90% of Black students having internet access in the home compared to 98% of Asian families and 96% of White families: 39% of Black families said that the internet cost was too expensive and they could not afford it (Cai, 2020). Also reported in Cai’s (2020) research, “In 2017-18, only 7% of public-school teachers and 11% of public-school principals were Black. Yet, more than 15% of Black students attended public schools” (p. 2).

Economic conditions are another reason that Black students are achieving less than their counterparts, and lower socio-economic status has a long-lasting effect on unemployment rates for this population (Cai, 2020). The National Center for Education Statistics in 2021 determined that there is a direct correlation between degree attainment and the unemployment rate.

According to U.S. Unemployment (2022), in 2021 the national unemployment rate was 5.3%.

The unemployment rate for the Black population was 8.6%, while the rate for the White population was 4.7%. Black students are twice as likely to be unemployed after graduation as their White peers; 62% of White graduates are employed full time, whereas Black graduates are employed at 53% (*U.S. Unemployment - Statistics & Facts*, 2022). In Michigan specifically, there is a clear indication that the higher degree a person has, the lower the possibilities are that one could be unemployed and the opportunities to make more money (Glazer, 2017). Across the United States, among Black students in higher education in 2017, females earned 64.1% of bachelor’s degrees, 71.5% of master’s degrees, and 65.9% of doctoral, medical, and dental degrees (*Fast Facts*, n.d.). This is an indication that Black females are working hard to change the narrative that Black students are underachieving compared to their counterparts.

## **Success of Black Females**

While significant gaps remain in the completion and success rates for Black students as a whole, Black women are finding ways to overcome and obtain degrees (Anthony et al., 2021). While the degree attainment rate is significantly less than that of their White and Asian counterparts, Black women are working hard to persist, retain, and graduate (Anthony et al., 2021). What are the motivating factors that push Black women to get degrees? What increases their drive and aids in their success when obtaining degrees? Gaining a better understanding of the motivational factors for Black students may provide important information institutions can use to increase persistence and overall degree completion.

According to Fourtané (2021b), “Black women’s strength through adversity is driven by the resilience that has manifested as motivation factors such as family and relationships, mentorship and sponsorship, as well as the support of cultural identity and diversity” (p. 1). Black women also use adversity as fuel, which translates into strength and resilience (Fourtané, 2021b). The success of Black female students can also be attributed to the cultural traditions rooted in valuing the opinion of elders, experiencing strong support systems through family and community, and possessing life skills that help navigate systems of oppression. Fourtané also noted: “Black women in America commonly value their trusted elders and hold them in high regard because of their wisdom and historical knowledge” (2021b, p. 1). Conversations regarding future, college, and career goals aid in the success of Black women because there is a high level of importance placed on connections and shared opportunities (Byrd & Porter, 2021). As Byrd and Porter (2021) stressed, “Black women experience relationships with people who become navigators inside and outside of school who helps them feel more confident about their abilities and college” (p. 1). Navigators can include family members, mentors, teachers,

community members, college administrators and others that supports students with preparation for college.

Having strong family and community connections have also aided in the success of Black female students while in college. Students who have strong family ties and people to motivate them during difficult times are more successful than those that do not (Byrd & Porter, 2021). Additionally, Black women have gained the necessary life skills to cope with the idea of being the only Black person in the classroom, and being ignored by peers and professors:

Schools must do a better job of ensuring that all students, and young Black girls in particular, see themselves represented in and throughout the school and curriculum and that students have an opportunity to critically question systemic oppression and the varying forms in which it manifests to help grow their critical consciousness. (Byrd & Porter, 2021, p. 2)

We know that, today, Black women earn degrees faster than Black males, but women of all ages face burdensome challenges trying to find their place in academia. Racial discrimination, gender bias, and microaggressions continue to put a strain on academic growth for Black women (Woldai, 2021). However, these women are also resilient; many will continue to push through the inequalities because of their drive and ambition to obtain their degree, while others will run into barriers and not find their way through. Much research has been devoted to the matriculation rate of Black students, but there has not been a strong focus placed on the progression of Black women and the factors driving them forward (Byrd & Porter, 2021).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Because Black men have collectively experienced enrollment declines much more significant than Black women, researchers have noted that “Higher education leaders are investing in a spate of initiatives to enroll and retain Black male students who continue to stop out at high rates” (Weissman, 2021, p. 1). Black males underwent a 14.3% enrollment decline in

2021 compared to 2020. Comparatively, the enrollment rate for Black women dropped by 6.9% during that same period. Research shows that community colleges experienced the sharpest decline in Black male enrollment, totaling 21.5% from 2021 to 2020: “Obviously, when we look at the data, we know we are losing our Black males at an alarming rate” (Weissman, 2021, p. 1). Because of the alarming decline in Black male enrollment, many higher education leaders have focused on the causes, the barriers, and the initiatives that have impacted enrollment of this group of students. Because the goal is for all students to be successful, leaders are focusing their attention on this weakest demographic, hoping to encourage Black males to enroll in college and succeed (Weissman, 2021).

Many different factors impact the success rate of Black women versus Black males, but a lack of emphasis has been placed on the factors that aid in Black female student success in current research. To understand why Black females are excelling past their Black male counterparts, researchers should also focus on the factors aiding and supporting their success.

### **Overview to the Study**

This study was constructed using a phenomenological qualitative approach. Specifically, the study uses a narrative analysis allowing the researcher to analyze the stories people tell to understand the meaning of the phenomena: “Phenomenologists are not interested in modern science’s efforts to categorize, simplify, and reduce phenomena to abstract laws. Rather, phenomenologists are interested in our ‘lived experience’” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26). Phenomenology is the study of real-life experiences that include everyday life and social actions. Phenomenology, better put is the way that people experience their day-to-day existence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).



Building on the strength and value of this research approach, this study examined the lived experiences of Black women through interviews and testimonies. Focusing on individual's perceptions of their college experiences and motivational drivers can provide a rich understanding of the lives of Black female students. The benefit of this research method is that it opens the door for a deeper level of understanding and provided a unique perspective regarding a single phenomenon that has impacted the participants' lives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 113). This research design also best fit the researcher's objective to better understand the motivational factors that drive Black females to persist and retain at community colleges. A phenomenological research approach provides a powerful method for understanding people through open-ended questions. This form of interviewing also allows the participants to become more comfortable talking through their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In a qualitative study, the researcher focuses on the participants and eliminates all preconceived notions about the matter to ensure that correct information is being collected. Epochè is a Greek word meaning to remove judgement: "In the Epochè, the everyday understandings, judgements, and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena are 'revisited.' These prejudices and assumptions are then bracketed or temporarily set aside so that we can examine consciousness itself" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). Additionally, it is also the researcher's responsibility to make sure the participants are comfortable and can have meaningful conversations regarding their experiences. Phenomenological research aims to gather necessary information from participants and use that information to promote change and reform.

### ***Purpose of the Research Study***

The purpose of this research study is to determine what motivational factors, whether internal, external, or the combination of both, have a direct impact on the success of Black female community college students.

The issues related to the persistence of Black students is far-reaching and complex. Many researchers have examined Black males and college success, but as we dive deeper into the success of Black females, it is important to develop the why behind success:

One important question we must answer is whether the pressure of being Black and being female prevent or promote the development of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. It's reasonable to assume that everyone has a natural inclination to explore self-originated interest as described by being intrinsically motivated; however, does everyone have the autonomy, capital, and agency to explore personal interest at the expense of external needs? (Moore, 2018, p. 1)

While many researchers would confirm that internal (intrinsic) motivational factors have a higher impact on students ability to succeed academically (Moore, 2018), the combination of both internal and external motivational factors can play a key role in the success of Black females due to their drive, determination, and external influences.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The key theoretical framework that serves as a foundation for this study is the work of Vincent Tinto. According to Barbaro (2021), "The 'Tinto Model of Retention' posits that all students come to college and university with a lifetime of prior experiences" (p. 1). Tinto also believes that successful students that have created a sense of belonging, have an increased commitment to the college, and that commitment is what drives their motivation to graduate. When students are integrated into the college-going community, both academic and social communities, they gain abilities to aspire toward their educational goals. Tinto details that students must progress through three stages, separation from communities of the past, the

transition between communities, and the incorporation into the college communities that eventually leads to graduation (Seidman, 2012).

In addition to Tinto's theory of retention, the research related to the effect of motivation on success is also foundational to this study. Motivation is the desire or willingness to get something done and it also encourages people to set goals and work towards accomplishing said goals. Motivation also impacts the behaviors and choices that people make in regards to education and learning (Cox, 2022). Researchers have determined that there are two different sub categories that fall under motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, and each potentially effect students differently when it comes to student success (Robinson, 2016). Intrinsic motivation is the desire to learn, explore, or seek challenges based on internal interest for the activity or task at hand: "They are not concerned with external rewards or recognition, but rather, the drive is based upon enjoying the activity itself, and having a match between interest, perceived skill or capability, and the demand of the task at hand" (Bontempi, 2019, p. 1). This form of motivation deals more with a growth mindset and enhances the excitement surrounding learning. Extrinsic motivation is the desire to accomplish a task based on receiving something in return, for example, recognition, money, new job title, fame, popularity (Bontempi, 2019).

As Moore (2018) stressed, "Today, research on the intersection of race and gender offers researchers a unique lens into the social-cultural experiences of Black women that help to illuminate this phenomenon" (Moore, 2018, p. 1) —the phenomenon being that of elevated academic motivation. Double jeopardy refers to the idea that systematic discrimination and marginalization of Black females does exist and has an impact on education attainment.

Researchers are using double jeopardy as a mechanism to determine if intrinsic and extrinsic

motivational factors alone or combined are enough to motivate Black females to be successful in their pursuit in higher education (Moore, 2018).

Intrinsic motivation is self-motivation that Black females depend upon to motivate themselves, while extrinsic motivation examines external influences that students use to become motivated. Intrinsic motivation can include self-efficacy thoughts, grit, tenacity, etc., while extrinsic motivation factors include support systems, groups, access to resources, etc. (Moore, 2018).

### ***Significance of the Study***

Focusing on the motivational factors for successful Black female students is essential because the knowledge gained will help other community college leaders develop and implement programs, services, and initiatives that will increase the overall success rate of Black students. The information gained from the qualitative research study will guide college administrators in understanding the motivational factors that Black female students depend on when it comes to college completion.

### ***Study Participants and Selection Criteria***

The participants included in this study were six Black females who had completed a minimum of one year of community college education. The participants were identified by recommendations that came from staff as well as prior personal interactions with the researcher. Purposive sampling was used as the mechanism to select participants as their experiences would bring valuable insight to this study. Eight potential participants were emailed information about the study and asked to participate. Of those students, six met the study criteria and became a part of this research study.

## **Research Questions**

To uncover some of the motivational factors that help Black female students persist and complete in community colleges, this researcher interviewed Black females, focusing on their experiences, especially those influential in their college experience. The research focused on identifying what motivation means to Black female students. The research questions that were this study sought to address were these three:

1. What internal and external motivational factors have played a role in the academic success of Black female students who currently attend community college?
  - What are the key internal drivers and motivators?
  - What are the key external supports and motivators, including those from the college?
2. How would the absence of these motivating factors have affected their success?
  - Which factors were the most (and least) significant to their success?
  - If those motivational factors were not present, would they likely have changed the direction of their educational journey?
3. Which internal and external barriers or challenges do Black female students identify as having the most effect on their college studies?
  - What internal challenges affected their persistence the most?
  - What external barriers, such as those from the college, affected their persistence the most?

## ***Setting for the Study***

The participants in this study are current students at Muskegon Community College in Muskegon, Michigan. Muskegon Community College was founded in 1926 and currently offers over 80 different programs and certifications. For 2022, the total student count was 3,406, including both on campus and online students. The student racial demographics are as follows: 81.2% White, 9.7% Black, with 2.4% Hispanic, Indian, and Asian students. The gender demographics are 61.9% female, 37% male, and 1.2% unreported. The two largest age

demographics are those under the age of 19 (34%) and those 19-24 years old (37%) (*Fall 2022 Enrollment Data, 2022*).

## Definition of Terms

For clarity purposes, the definitions of the terms commonly found in this study are below:

**Black:** is defined as any human group having dark-colored skin, especially of African ancestry. For this dissertation the term Black will be used instead of related terms such as African American.

**Epochè:** is defined as the act of removing judgement.

**External motivation Factors:** Anything outside of the individual's personal life or home environment that have aided in a student's success. For example, college programs, support systems, outside resources, etc.

**Grit:** a characteristic that drives perseverance and dedication to achieve a goal. It is a combination of passion, learning, and purposeful thinking that leads to accomplishing a goal.

**Internal motivation factors:** Factors that are personal and individual that drive a person to succeed. These may include family, faith, personal belief system, tenacity, friends, or colleagues.

**Persistence:** student persistence is defined as having successive enrollment for one semester to the following semester, such as fall-to-winter semesters (*Muskegon Community College: Achieving the Dream Student Success Report, 2017*).

**Retention:** student retention measures students who continue to enroll in at the same college from one year to another, for example, fall-to-fall or winter-to-winter (*Institutional Retention, Graduation/Completion and Transfer-Out Rates, 2021*).

**Student Success:** The measurement of how well students are prepared to accomplish their academic goals. Success outcomes can include retention, persistence, educational attainment, academic achievement, advancement, and graduation. Tinto defines student success as the degree to which students feel a sense of belonging and support within the college environment, their willingness to attend college, and their ability to graduate.

**Success:** As used in this dissertation specifically, success refers to persistence and retention.

## **Conclusion**

The success rates of Black students in higher education have been a focus of concern for many years, and significant efforts have been placed on increasing these rates by addressing systemic barriers and challenges. Black females have persisted and completed educational degrees and certificates at higher rates than their male counterparts for years. Examining their success through addressing many of the same barriers and challenges may provide insight that can help higher education institutions, specifically community colleges, as they seek to increase the persistence and completion rates of all Black students. This study also adds to the limited research surrounding Black females and motivation. The next chapter in this study will discuss the literature that pertains to the presence of motivational factors and how their presence helps Black females succeed in higher education.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction**

Several factors relate to the success or lack thereof of Black female students attending community colleges. Some of the disadvantages began at the K-12 level for these students. A lack of access to quality education, underfunded school systems, and inexperienced counselors and teachers have all caused inequalities from the onset of their education journeys. Gaps in educational attainment can result from economic, social, and educational barriers. These disadvantages affect the lives of Black students and have a direct impact on their likelihood of success. A review of the literature was conducted to gain a further understanding surrounding the factors that impact success for Black female students enrolled in community colleges. The literature was also used to understand how motivational factors directly impact persistence and retention for Black female college students.

### **Retention and Completion**

One of the most prominent studies surrounding retention was conducted by Vincent Tinto. His framework of retention has persevered for more than 50 years. His work describes how students come to college with many different experiences, and how educational institutions, by creating a sense of belonging, help students increase their commitment and motivation to complete. Many studies have built on the work of Tinto, and since then, many researchers have developed retention and completion theory and practice into what we know today. For example, De Larrosa (2000) researched Arthur Chickering's Seven Vectors of Student Development and found that a student's development process in college could affect their emotional, social,



physical, or intellectual being. Chickering's theory was first developed in 1969 and revised alongside Linda Reisser in 1993. Higbee (2002) expanded on the research completed by De Larrosa surrounding Chickering's vectors and explained that the vectors include developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. De Larrosa (2000) also concluded that female college students differ from male college students regarding development, and Black females differ from Black males. Black females focus on developing mature interpersonal relationships, autonomy, and defining their purpose in life.

Tinto's later research (2010) demonstrated that students come to college with many different life experiences. For students to attain success, they must transition from a community state of mind to one of a college-going culture. Tinto (2010) also found that student retention and completion are conditioned by clear expectations around what students should do to be successful in college. While clear expectations are necessary, so is the presence of support. Providing a level of support that allows students to reach college expectations is necessary. With support, students will be able to meet institutional expectations. In his 2012 work, *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action*, Tinto explained that institutions must commit to four conditions to promote retention and graduation. Those conditions include expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement. Support is a significant component of student success because it enhances students' ability to create a sense of belonging, directly impacting retention and graduation rates. Seidman (2012) built on Tinto's research and found that the transition to the college-going community aids in retention, persistence, and graduation for all students. Once students have created a sense of belonging, they have a higher commitment level

that enhances their desire to graduate college. According to Seidman (2012), separation from communities of the past is necessary because those that do not entirely separate themselves from unsupportive family and friends will have a more challenging time integrating with the college culture. This can lead to students having a lower chance of persisting. Transiting between communities includes students mentally and physically making that transition, and lastly, the incorporation stage. During this stage, students find a way to embrace new norms, including social and academic interaction.

Long (2012) expanded the research on retention and completion by explaining different theories of student development that help to describe student behaviors and unique experiences. The theories include psychosocial, cognitive-structural, person-environment interactive, and humanistic-existential theories. Long (2012) concluded that theories provide institutional leaders with questions to ask, things to explore, and hypotheses to test.

Over the last few decades, different models and retention studies have been analyzed and evaluated to gain a better understanding of completion and graduation for college students. Aljohani (2016) wrote a comprehensive review of the major models and studies about retention in higher education institutions. He took a deep dive into low student retention rates and stressed the importance of dealing with the issues strategically. To combat the issues, educators must have a strong background in the student retention phenomenon.

Nicole Barbaro (2021) set out to gain more insight into what higher education institutions could do to increase student retention by speaking with Dr. Vincent Tinto. The interview shed light on student experiences, their sense of belonging and commitment, and how institutions should support students. Tinto shared that creating a sense of belonging starts in the classroom, and faculty members are the front line for retention efforts. Barbaro's (2021) research shared that

three different strategies aid in fostering student motivation to persist, making the first day of the class count, creating an environment to support faculty teaching, and not blaming the student.

### **The Effect of Grit on Retention and Completion**

Another component of retention and completion is the idea of grit. Duckworth et al. (2007) described grit as the passion and perseverance that someone possesses to achieve long-term goals. The researchers conducted five studies that tested the importance of grit with adults, Ivy League undergraduates, two classes in the United States Military Academy, West Point cadets, and competitors in the Scripps National Spelling Bee. The studies concluded that grit did not directly relate to IQ but was highly correlated with Big Five Conscientiousness. The studies produced the following results: People with more grit have higher levels of education than those with less grit of the same age. In addition, those with higher levels of grit have higher GPAs than their peers, grit was a predictor of summer retention at West Point, and the competitors in the spelling bee with higher grit levels outranked those with less grit.

Singh & Jha (2008) conducted a study on the positive and negative effects of grit as predictors of happiness and satisfaction. The purpose was to understand how to make life better for students, so they surveyed 254 undergraduates majoring in technology, ages 17 to 27. The students were measured on the following scales: satisfaction with life, general happiness, and grit. The first and second analysis of the data showed that happiness was a dependent variable for grit, and positive and negative affect were the predictors. Happiness, positive affect, life satisfaction, and grit were all positively correlated for the 254 students that were surveyed.

Duckworth & Gross (2014) conducted a study examining self-control and grit as they pertain to success to understand better how people with happier lives can be more successful than others.

Researchers concluded that self-control and grit are determinants of success and are

highly correlated. This research was built on Duckworth's (2007) study on perseverance and passion for long-term goals. The results showed that much of human behavior is based on goals, and both self-control and grit are related but inherently different.

Miller (2017) again defines grit the same as Duckworth et al. (2007) and explains in her book, *Getting Grit*, that grit is one of the critical indicators for success and life satisfaction. Her grit guide provides self-assessment tools, daily exercises, and life tips to help improve grit within oneself. Miller also notes that life brings many different distractions, and it is necessary to have grit to persevere. Her guide also expands on the need to develop qualities to overcome obstacles by exerting toughness, passion, humility, patience, and kindness.

Duckworth & Gross (2014) looked at self-control as it relates to grit, and Kannangara et al. (2018) lengthened that study by looking at the importance of grit with college students using a mixed-method approach. The first study included 440 students who were given the Grit, Perceived Stress, Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being, and Self-Control Scales. The second study looked at 340 students, reviewing grit, self-control, mental well-being, resilience, and mindsets. Finally, the third study examined ten successful first-class honor graduates who scored high on the grit scale to review success and their attributes. Across all three studies, students with more grit tend to have increased self-control, mental well-being, life satisfaction, feelings of worth, resilience, and a growth mindset. The results also showed that adult students tend to self-report higher grit levels. In addition, more successful students have learned to overcome obstacles and challenges, have identified long-term goals, strive towards achievement, and have a positive outlook on life and learning.

## **Persistence of Black Students in Higher Education**

Several studies have shown that Black students are among the lowest achieving groups compared to their peers, but Black females far exceed Black males. Therefore, it is essential to understand Black females' impact on American culture. Cruz (2013) wrote an article that examined the contributions Black females have had in education and leadership over the years. One finding was that Black females are vital to education because they desire to rise above challenges and obtain goals. It was also noted that in 2009 Black women earned more degrees than Black males. This article also provided information on the first few Black females who had significant accomplishments in education and leadership, dating back to 1850, in order to understand the journey Black females have had in education. Winkle-Wagner (2015) reviewed student and institutional-level factors that explored relationships, characteristics, backgrounds, and institutional support structures that pertained to Black females. An interactive approach was conducted using literature across different methodologies and academic disciplines. She found that far too much literature had narrowed down the lives of Black female students and lost focus on the value of relationships and higher education institutions finding ways to foster educational success.

In 2013, Cruz examined the educational timeline for Black females starting in the 1850s; Blakemore (2017) took a deep dive into history, describing how in 1862, the first Black female completed a bachelor's degree when Black students were only allowed to complete a two-year degree. This article depicted the life of Mary Jane Patterson and highlighted her education and career accomplishments. Mary Jane was an early example of perseverance and educational attainment. Fournier (2021b) expanded on this research, writing an article about navigating cultural adversity throughout the centuries. She concluded that regardless of the challenge facing Black women, they have proven to be resilient and robust. She described how Black women

have served as examples to other women in higher education today. In 2021, Woldai reflected on her experiences attending a Primarily White Institution (PWI) and the number of challenges she had to face. She described the importance of examining the factors that contribute to inequities for Black women in education. Negative stereotypes, classroom microaggressions, and the Eurocentric design of education were a few inequities that she mentioned. She concluded that Black females need safe spaces, mental health resources, access to Black women counselors, and mentorship programs to foster equality in academia truly.

Merit-based education has been the premise of higher education institutions for an extended period. The idea that ability, talent, and effort determine how successful a person will be implies that all people have equal opportunities related to success. Steele (2017) reviewed literature surrounding the effects of meritocracy and success regarding retaining Black female college students. She concluded that meritocracy in education promotes injustices and inequalities for marginalized students, especially Black females. Also, the idea of merit, as it relates to the failures of those who are not successful, negatively affects one's self-concept. The data drives home the importance for higher education institutions to find new and creative ways to support Black female students.

Fong et al. (2017) examined the relationship between psychosocial factors and community college persistence. The study researched several factors including motivation, self-perceptions, attributions, self-regulation, and anxiety with persistence. Their data indicated that psychosocial factors had minor relationships with persistence and achievement, but motivation and self-perceptions were directly related to student engagement and success. In addition, data has shown that Black students earn college degrees at a smaller percentage than their peers, and Tate (2017) gained more insight by focusing on graduation rates and race. Tate's work

concluded that college completion rates vary with different racial and ethnic groups, but Black and Hispanic students are much lower than White and Asian students. In 2009, President Obama saw the inequities in education for marginalized groups and charged community colleges to boost overall enrollment by five million. However, Marcus (2019) reported that after ten years of budget cuts, tuition increases, and skepticism regarding the value of education, President Obama's goal needed to be revised because it was behind schedule. Marcus predicted that it would take more than 30 additional years to meet the goal.

Many articles have been written to review college enrollment, retention, and student persistence rates. NCES (2020) assessed college enrollment rates for 18–24-year-olds from 2000 to 2018. The data showed that since 2000 all ethnic groups had seen an increase in college enrollment rates, but the Black student population is one of the lowest. Hanson (2022) and Fast Facts (n.d.) illustrated the enrollment gap and the rates for different student demographics. Their research looked at enrollment statistics, enrollment by degree, institution type, race, ethnicity, and gender. They found that since 2010 college enrollment has declined, and Black and Hispanic students enroll more at community colleges but have the lowest persistence and retention rates. This data also enforced that Black females are more likely than males to earn a college credential.

### **Institutional Approaches for Retaining Black Students**

Semmer (2008) introduced strategies for recruiting and retaining students and the idea of mentoring alongside recruitment and retention efforts. Mentoring is the act of committed and supportive individuals assisting others in their personal, academic, or professional growth. Mentoring can also involve role models and positive experiences. The benefits of mentoring are improved academic performance, adaptation to the college culture, recruitment, persistence,

graduation, and skill development. Gibson (2014) wrote about the impact of mentoring programs on Black males enrolled in community colleges. She highlighted that Black males are enrolling in college at a steady rate, but their persistence and retention rates are the lowest among their peers. She explained that community colleges serve as a gateway to higher education and career readiness, but there is a significant discrepancy in the number of Black males that persists. Her suggestion is to implement mentoring programs for Black males, which will help increase persistence and retention. Harris III et al. (2017) built on the research by Gibson by analyzing equity plans across California to present college leaders with ideas on how to help male students of color. The summary reviewed the trends facing 18–24-year-old male college students and analyzed 42 community colleges in California and equity-minded practices to help this demographic of students. Harris determined that the following practices would help Black male college students: implementation of an early alert system, professional development for faculty and staff, examination of the ratio of full-time and part-time faculty members who teach developmental courses, enhanced support for part-time faculty, integration of equity goals into the institution’s strategic plan, and a requirement for faculty to demonstrate a commitment to working with underserved students.

Black male college students’ enrollment numbers have been a hot ticket item for a long time because Black males are underachieving compared to their peers, including Black females. Harper (2012) created a report reviewing trends and issues affecting Black male college students. The report also touched on current initiatives that try to address problematic conditions for Black males and give policymakers information on how to improve Black male educational outcomes. The article listed the following recommendations to combat Black males in college: the educational challenge is far-reaching. It will take policymakers and other educational leaders to



join the initiative to remove barriers that undermine the enrollment of low college retention and persistence rates. Research has proven that support programs improve persistence and graduation rates for Black male students. Landis (2019) suggested that Black males will perform better in college with access to peer-support programs. Weissman (2021) shared the same sentiment as Landis (2019) and mentioned that because Black males are enrolled in smaller numbers after the pandemic, it is necessary to provide resources to help Black males persist. Providing wrap-around services, college programs, and initiatives will be able to get the students through to graduation.

Anthony (2021) conducted a study examining the job attainment rate for students across 38 states. The study included data from three years and included adult students ages 25 to 64. Because many jobs will require a postsecondary credential, this article homed in on the fact that programs like TRIO help first-generation, low-income, and students with disabilities and give them the opportunity to be successful. The Center for Poverty and Inequality (2015) published an article that compared education and poverty and found that people without a high school diploma make up the largest group of those in poverty. However, as the level of education increases, the rate of poverty decreases. Years later, Morrison (2020) described that Black graduates are twice as likely to be unemployed or working part-time. Anthony (2021) further explained that programs like CUNY ASAP help to close completion gaps for students of color. The study emphasized that it is also necessary for institutions to change recruitment methods and hire more faculty and staff of color so that students of color have a better opportunity to create a sense of belonging.

## **Causes of the Achievement Gaps for Black Students**

Achievement gaps in education systemically disadvantage Black students and have lasting effects on their lives. Anthony (2021) stated that several different factors lead to the achievement gap: economic, social, and educational barriers. The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2009) published a report that discussed the number of Black students who have a college degree compared to their peers and found that Black women have a considerable lead over Black males in relation to an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degrees. Black men have a lead over women for terminal (professional) degrees.

Nichols & Schak (2017) compiled a study that examined national and state trends for degree attainment among Black students in 41 states. The research explored Black adults ages 25 to 64. The study found that degree attainment for Black students trails behind that of White students. Black students have increased degree attainment numbers over the two decades, but the gains have not been enough to close the gap with their peers. Connecticut, Minnesota, and Massachusetts have the most significant gaps for Black students. As states continue to push education and close achievement gaps, they must enact policies, interventions, and initiatives that allow more Black students to navigate the education pipeline and become completers. Bowman et al. (2018) discussed achievement gaps and how they are a problem for Black students and their families and communities. Societal efforts to overcome prejudice and discrimination against Black people have not been practical as there continue to be inequalities in most aspects of life, including education. They also found that it is crucial to understand the factors that lead to inequalities so that teachers and leaders can implement new strategies that move failures to success.

Cai (2020) wrote an article that focused on the conditions of education for Black students in 2020. This article covered poverty rates, lack of resources for Black students, high-poverty

schools, disabilities, a limited number of Black Teachers, and achievement gaps. Cai (2020) agrees that the gap between Black and White students is narrowing but still exists. In Michigan, the governor realized there was a gap in the number of people who held a college credential, and because of that the 60 by 30 goal was established. The goal was to increase the number of working adults with a college credential by 2030. Michigan's goal (2021) vowed to address the achievement gaps in Michigan by closing the skills gap, increasing opportunities, and becoming more competitive. Multiple programs have been implemented to help close the achievement gap and provide credentials to more people.

Fourtane (2021b) believes Black women in higher education must navigate adverse challenges. Research proves that Black women use adversity as fuel to keep pressing forward and prepares them to be world leaders. One explanation for achievement gaps is the socioeconomic disparities between races. The Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project (n.d.) discussed that Black and Hispanic families typically have lower incomes and education levels than White families. Because White families often come from higher-income and higher-education backgrounds, they typically can provide better resources for their children. Therefore, racial, and socioeconomic disparities are good predictors of racial achievement gaps. However, this article suggests that socioeconomic differences are not the sole cause, and other factors like quality of K-12 education, residential and school segregation, state education, and social policies are also key players.

A study by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) evaluated the data for the number of degrees conferred by race/ethnicity and sex. This is important because as achievement gaps are discussed, and their reasons are presented, it is necessary to understand how they affect different races, especially Black students. The data proves that for all levels of education, Black

students are near the bottom, but when looking at females, they are getting more degrees than males but fewer than their White peers.

## **Motivational Theories**

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation work together to showcase the factors that encourage a person to complete a task, but how do they differ? Guiffrida (2006) reviewed the cultural advancement of Tinto's theory and provided information on how the theory could be problematic for students of color. The article described the Self-Determination Theory and listed intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors as two components. Intrinsic motivation has these components: autonomy, competence, the need to interact effectively with the environment, and relatedness, or the need to establish close relationships with others. Extrinsic motivation has these components: external regulation, introjected regulation, and identified regulation. Although Guiffrida's article pointed out that external and introjected regulation negatively impacts learning, having an identified regulation can have a positive impact.

Blake (2023) took a closer look at intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors related to cultivating motivation and determined that, for students to develop intrinsic motivation, they must first experience extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation deals with the factors that are outside of oneself. For example, the desire to learn is not motivated because of personal interest or growth but because there is some form of reward at the end. The reward can be positive or negative, but it is the driving force behind doing well. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation is the desire to do well because of a deep interest in learning and expanding knowledge. The article summarized that people get the best outcome when they combine intrinsic and extrinsic motivation because they are competitive and desire to learn.

Maslow's Motivational Hierarchy is another theory that adds value to this research study. Taormina and Gao (2013) studied the five needs in the hierarchy. The needs include physiological, safety-security, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. This study created new measures that were used to assess the satisfaction of each need, assess how they are correlated with each of the other needs, and test the ability of each need to satisfy the next higher-level need. In the study, 386 people were given questionnaires to measure the five needs. The data showed a positive correlation among the scales, and family support, traditional values, and life satisfaction were correlated with all five needs.

Conversely, anxiety and worry had negative correlations with all the needs. Kurt (2021) built from Maslow's Motivational Hierarchy and formulated a theory based on McClelland's Three Needs Theory. McClelland spent more than 30 years researching motivation to understand human nature better and develop tools to measure personal choices. He described that every person is motivated by power, affliction, or achievement.

But what is motivation, and why is it important? Souders (2019b) explains motivation from a psychologist's perspective. Motivation is wanting. It is the idea that if a person wants something to change, they must want it and then pursue it. The article explains the motivation, the model, and the motivational cycle. The article concluded that motivation is higher when the goal is soon and within reach. Sounders (2019a) also reviewed the 20 most popular theories of motivation in psychology. He determined that no single motivation theory explains all aspects of human behavior. However, the models serve as an explanation for approaches and techniques that could be used to understand how motivation could be increased.

## **Motivation to Succeed in Education**

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors are two components that can aid in success when completing a task. This topic will be discussed below in more detail about how these, along with others, aid in students' success in more of a practical sense. Thomas et al. (2009) conducted a study that examined the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and academic adjustment for 111 Black females attending historically Black colleges and universities and White institutions. The results from the study revealed that self-efficacy beliefs are a predictor of motivation to know. Motivation to know forms the relationship between self-efficacy and academic adjustment. Extrinsic motivation did not help form the relationship between self-efficacy and academic adjustment. Intrinsic motivation cannot be observed as an internal drive but can be seen through behaviors displayed when a person is working towards a goal. The study also discussed that intrinsically motivated people have better outcomes, achieve higher academically, attempt complex tasks, and retain more information. Lastly, the study also focused on the microaggressions that Black female students encounter in college.

### ***Developing a Motivation to Learn***

In 2012, Wiesman examined motivation from the K-12 perspective based on teachers' beliefs. In this article, he focused on the fact that many students come to school unmotivated to learn. He set out to determine if educators are instilling the most effective motivational strategies for their students. He found that students are more likely to have intrinsic motivational factors that lead to the desire to learn or accomplish a goal. Teachers believe that students tend to be more motivated based on the teachers' actions. Teachers may struggle to find which motivational constructs are the most effective for their students. For teachers to encourage their students to be

successful, it is necessary for them first to understand how to motivate their students successfully.

Augustyniak et al. (2016) also looked at intrinsic motivation and how it serves as a component of student success. They described intrinsic motivation as the motivation to learn triggered by engagement in different learning opportunities because they are enjoyable, interesting, or relevant to a person's psychological needs. Because intrinsic motivation is closely related to school performance, they administered the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) survey to 133 medical students. The survey measured levels of intrinsic motivation. The researchers found that less than a quarter of the participants scored low on the interest and enjoyment scale, showing low intrinsic motivation. It was concluded that motivating students is critical to their overall success, and students must develop an interest in and enjoyment of what they are learning. Also, intrinsically motivated students embrace learning and perform better because they have a heightened level of joy and excitement surrounding the task they are completing.

Bontempi (2019) explains that understanding intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, human needs, goals, attitude, performance, and psychological well-being are all forms of motivation. This article explains the definition of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and how to apply it to academia and the workplace practically. Motivating others is essential to increasing performance, participation, and well-being. Therefore, it is necessary to create a supportive and friendly environment that provides information and encouraging feedback. Bontempi (2019) illustrates that there are several ways to increase motivation, and if the interest in an activity is low, then it is essential to focus on extrinsic motivation. Nevertheless, it is vital to focus on intrinsic motivation because the outcome is lasting and more impactful.

### ***Motivation for Black Women***

To better understand how motivation directly impacts Black females, Moore (2018) discussed internal desires and external pressures for Black females as they relate to how these women stay motivated despite the challenges they face. Being Black and female brings unique challenges, and it is crucial to understand if it promotes or prevents intrinsic and extrinsic motivation development. She concluded that it is essential for Black females to consider how their identities shape their experiences and not be reduced for the unconventional reasons that push Black females forward. A few years prior, Robinson (2016) reviewed successful Black women and their thoughts on motivation and contextual influences for 121 Black women holding a bachelor's degree. They were asked about their contextual components and how they affected their academic success. Her results indicated that Black females with high levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors were more successful than those without. She also found that as a group, they were more extrinsically motivated, and school and community greatly impacted their success.

As Black females enter postsecondary education institutions, it is essential to understand that these women have the strength and resiliency to accomplish goals. Harris et al. (2020) integrated two models that may effectively promote college and career exploration. She found that Black women are often subjected to an insufficient view of their potential and future. This demographic of students must have access to career readiness groups that support gains in non-cognitive factors that aid in success. Understanding that Black females need support, Byrd and Porter (2021) focused on what prepares Black women for college. In their study, they interviewed 13 Black undergraduate women and discussed the idea of Black Girl Magic regarding college preparation. They found that Black women must be phenomenal to be seen,



and they will be overlooked if they are not extraordinary. Matthews et al., (2021) also wrote on Black Girl Magic and highlighted the experiences of Black females in college and the need for support from practitioners. They found that imposter syndrome, tokenism, discrimination and stereotyping, and mental health issues all plague Black women and could be detrimental to their progression without the proper support. The article mentioned that institutions must advocate, support, and acknowledge Black female students and the obstacles they must accomplish to enroll, persist, and retain in college.

### ***Motivation Tied to a Sense of Belonging***

One factor highlighted in many research articles and studies is the art of belonging and how creating a sense of belonging fosters student success. Zumbrunn et al. (2014) conducted a mixed-method study reviewing support, belonging, motivation, and engagement in the college classroom. The study took place at a large, midwestern university. The results of this study suggest that college educators should consider student perceptions of academic and social support, especially the student's sense of belonging. They also concluded that a feeling of belonging affects motivation, engagement, and achievement. Museus et al. (2018) completed research on how culturally relevant and responsive campus environments aid or hinder belonging. They surveyed 870 students attending an urban public research university to gauge the relationship between culturally engaging campus environments and a sense of belonging for students of color. The results concluded that culturally engaging environments significantly vary in belonging for students of color and White students. They also found that institutions must shift their focus to transforming campus environments that serve all students regardless of their racial backgrounds.

Museus et al. (2018) stressed the importance of campus connectedness and engagement, and Reener (2018) built on that research. She found that cultivating a sense of belonging and university connectedness directly correlates to student retention and persistence. The feeling of connectedness brings about feeling cared for, accepted, respected, and valued. Students feel they belong when they know they are more than a number and when they feel that their presence matters. Supiano (2018) added value to the conversation regarding creating a sense of belonging by stating that colleges should not take students' sense of belonging for granted and that there should be a system that effectively communicates that students matter. Lastly, Supiano (2018) stated that it is essential for colleges to provide many opportunities that allow students to connect to other students and the ability to find places where they fit in.

As a foundation to this research, Tinto's 2016 work shared three significant experiences shaping student motivation to stay in college and graduate. In this article, he talked about the fact that students desire to persist and not retain. The interest of the institution and the students sometimes conflict with one another. However, it is essential to understand that students want to complete a degree and, most times, are not picky about the college in which it happens. The three components that aid in increased motivation are self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and a perceived curriculum value. Hawthorne (2021) agreed with Tinto (2016) that motivated students are more likely to succeed. Motivation contributes to a greater sense of well-being and leads to positive behavior. The key to college leadership motivating students is to have a growth mindset, adopt a holistic approach, improve universal provision, praise, prioritize accessibility, empower students with the knowledge, and make learning relatable. She also summarizes that students with a higher level of intrinsic motivation tend to be more productive, has a higher ability to perform, and possess the mentality to persist in learning. Cox (2022) contributes to the literature

on motivation and believes that motivation and student engagement go hand in hand. Motivated students are also more willing to accept new challenges and have an innate interest in learning.

## **Summary**

This chapter has presented a comprehensive review of the literature on motivation, persistence, retention, achievement gaps, and the history of Black female students in education. The literature supports that students come to college with different life experiences. Higher education institutions must provide spaces where students feel they belong and understand that they matter. Whether internal, external, or both, motivation is essential to student success. The literature supports that intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors impact students in such a way that they persist or do not. As this literature review revealed, there are many gaps in why Black students are underachieving compared to their peers. With the proper resources from colleges, these students have a more significant opportunity to succeed. Purpose for Students (2022) believes that as educators, you are in a great position to help students develop their purpose.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

Research evidence supports our understanding that Black students are often at a disadvantage and struggle to meet the point of equalization compared to their White peers in their educational pursuits (Anthony et al., 2021). This disadvantage has yielded inequalities in terms of college enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates (Anthony et al., 2021). To further understand how motivation impacts these inequalities among Black female students, this study has taken a deep dive into the correlation between motivational factors and college success.

This study examined the lived experiences of Black female community college students to better understand the motivational factors that directly impact community college persistence for this population of students. By investigating how internal and external motivational factors influence college persistence and retention, the study provides a greater understanding of the driving force behind Black female success in college. The research results may also help college administrators understand what necessary resources and support system should be provided to Black students, and which mechanisms are needed to close achievement gaps and improve opportunities for Black students.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study was designed using principles of effective qualitative research. Qualitative research aims to collect and analyze non-numerical data to understand better experiences, opinions, thoughts, and concepts (Bhandari, 2020). Qualitative research can also be used to gather insight into a specific problem or used to create solutions for a particular phenomenon.

This form of research is typically found in anthropology, sociology, education, health sciences, and history (Bhandari, 2020). Bhandari further describes qualitative research as a mechanism “used to understand how people experience the world. While there are many approaches to qualitative research, they tend to be flexible and focus on retaining rich meaning when interpreting data” (2020, p. 2). Qualitative research often applies five commonly used approaches: grounded theory, ethnography, action research, phenomenological research, and narrative research. This research study, examining the presence and effect of motivational factors, will apply the principles and practices of phenomenological research, allowing the investigator to research a phenomenon by interviewing participants and listening to their lived experiences (Bhandari, 2020).

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “From the philosophy of phenomenology comes a focus on the experience itself and how undergoing something is transformed into consciousness” (p. 26). Phenomenologists are interested in lived experiences that require the researcher to go to the source, the participants. The researcher depicts the experience through interviews and uses that information to understand the phenomena.

Research in its basic form is looking into or investigating something systematically.

Research helps to inform our decisions when it comes to a particular thing or phenomenon:

Research is typically divided into the categories of basic and applied. Basic research is motivated by an intellectual interest in a phenomenon and has the extension of knowledge as its goal. Applied research is undertaken to improve the quality of the practice of a particular discipline. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 3)

This study, then, was based on a primary qualitative research method focused on understanding how Black female students interpret their educational experiences, construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their success. There are distinct characteristics of qualitative research, the first being that the researcher is used as the primary data collection and

analysis tool. This study allows the researcher to expand her understanding through nonverbal and verbal communication. This is necessary to ensure the accuracy of interpretations of the interview. Another characteristic is the inductive process, meaning the researcher gathers data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories. Lastly, the outcomes of a qualitative research study are richly descriptive. The words spoken during the interviews are used to convey what the researcher learned about the phenomenon through the descriptive words of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Tinto's Model of Retention***

Tinto Model of Retention suggests that students come to college with a lifetime of prior experiences (Barbaro, 2021, p. 1). Tinto also believes that students that have created a sense of belonging and have a higher commitment level that helps to drive their dedication to graduate. Tinto explains that students must transition from their personal communities and incorporate into the college-going community. This transition aids in overall college retention, persistence, and graduation for students (Seidman, 2012). The transition stages that students must go through to succeed in college include separation from communities of the past, transition between communities, and incorporation into the new college community.

The first stage in Tinto's Model of Retention is separation from communities of the past. During this phase, students need to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from different memberships in the communities in which they were raised. For college students who live at home, separation does not consist of physically separating from their family, but rather consists of a mental separation. In Tinto's Model, students who do not entirely separate from family or

peers — especially those who do not value education — will have a more challenging time integrating with the college culture and be less likely to persist (Seidman, 2012).

The second stage deals with the transition between communities. This stage is when students transition from the communities in which they were raised to the more defined college communities (Seidman, 2012). This phase does not begin until the student has already started the process of disassociating from their old community but are still figuring out how to integrate seamlessly into the new college community. The transition period includes mental and physical transitions (Aljohani, 2016). Students who find the transition period difficult tend to have a more challenging time persisting because they have yet to move fully from one community to another.

The incorporation stage of Tinto's Model of Retention is the third and final stage. During this stage, the student is finding ways to embrace the new college community fully. They are moving away from their old communal norms and adopting newfound college customs. The new norms consist of social and academic interactions. Academic incorporation examines the student's grades and intellectual development. Social incorporation looks at how well students fit in with their peers and faculty: "The student's pre-entry attributes, which include the student's family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling, shape these initial goals and commitments" (Aljohani, 2016, p. 6). The students' overall college experience will at times weaken or strengthen depended on the student's goals and commitments.

Students enter college with different life experiences, and Tinto explained that, for students to be successful in college, they must travel through various stages that will ultimately lead to incorporation into the college environment. When students enter the incorporation phase, they are more likely to embrace the college community and have strengthened their ability to accomplish their goals. Vincent Tinto also suggests that there are six conditions institutions must

implement to commit to student success. Those conditions include commitment, expectations, support, feedback, involvement, and learning (Tinto, 2010).

Institutions must be committed to student success for students to achieve it. Commitment can look differently for different institutions, but the commonality is that colleges must be willing to invest in the necessary resources that will incentivize and reward initiatives that support student success. Setting high expectations is the next condition. Students are more likely to succeed when a high expectation level is required. Conversely, when the bar is set low, students will do the bare minimum to accomplish the task (Tinto, 2010).

Academic, social, and financial support collectively promote student success. Many first-year students enter college unprepared, so it is the college's responsibility to provide the necessary academic support to help enhance the student's skills. This can include tutoring, study groups, counseling, developmental courses, first-year seminar courses, and writing center assistance, to name a few (Tinto, 2010). In addition, social support is a crucial component of student success because, as research has indicated, students have a defined sense of belonging and tend to have a higher retention and graduation rate. Social support comes from counseling, mentoring, diversity centers, etc. Lastly, financial support is critical as tuition costs continue to rise and more responsibility is placed on students to fund their education.

Being immersed in the campus community is a crucial indicator of success for college students. Students need to be involved both academically and socially. This is especially true during a student's first year because they are working through the separation and transition phase of Tinto's Retention Model (Tinto, 2010). Being involved helps to build a foundation for retention and persistence.



The work of Vincent Tinto has shaped this study in many ways, but the most important is the idea that students travel through different phases when it comes to embracing the world of being a successful college student. Tinto also explains that student success deals with the ability to transition from an old way of thinking to a new way of thinking. However, colleges must be committed to providing a space where students can succeed. The likelihood that students will retain and graduate when the two are merged is much higher.

### ***Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation***

Intrinsic motivation is based on one's internal interest in the activity or task. It is also constructed on the desire to be challenged or to learn new things (Bontempi, 2019). According to Augustyniak et al., (2016), "Intrinsic motivation to learn involves engaging in learning opportunities because they are seen as enjoyable, interesting, or relevant to meeting one's core psychological needs" (Augustyniak et al., 2016, p. 465). Being intrinsically motivated allows students to focus on the task and not be motivated by sanctions or rewards for doing well (Hawthorne, 2021). This form of motivation begins with a learning mindset and is followed up with joy and excitement surrounding the task (Bontempi, 2019). Students with a heightened motivation level also possess a powerful ability to perform, persistence to learn, and are more productive in higher education (Bontempi, 2019). Researchers conclude that intrinsically motivated students learn better and are one of the predictors of student success (Hawthorne, 2021).

Extrinsic motivation is the desire to accomplish a task, not because it is enjoyable but because it is based on receiving something in return, for example, recognition, money, a new job title, fame, popularity, etc. (Bontempi, 2019). There is a certain level of competition that comes along with extrinsic motivation because it is focused on the need to get rewarded for completion:

“Extrinsic motivation is characterized by factors that are external to the self. The student is motivated to learn or achieve not by personal interest or desire for growth, but by a desire to please others” (Blake, 2023, p. 1). The desire to learn is not the top priority or the motivating factor. Instead, it is the form of motivation that is focused on incentives or the fear of failure (Blake, 2023).

Extrinsic motivation can be compelling when encouraging students to be successful because it focuses on promised rewards and competition. Still, once the reward is removed, it could cause a decline in overall motivation. Blake (2023) noted, “Providing students with extrinsic motivation can be problematic because the reward is the sole reason for participation. Once the reward is removed, interest diminishes entirely” (Blake, 2023, p. 1). Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is described as a deep interest in a topic or task. There is a natural desire to learn, and it is not focused solely on earning a reward but because they want to expand their knowledge. Research found optimal outcomes in student success when there is a healthy balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: “Ultimately, fostering both types of motivation helps students develop good study habits and an investment in learning” (Blake, 2023, p. 2).

## **Research Methodology**

### ***The Value of Phenomenological Research***

Qualitative research is valuable because it focuses on the experiences of individuals to gain a better understanding surrounding a certain area of interest. According to Merriam & Tisdell (2016), “We believe that research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people’s lives” (p. 1). A phenomenological study seeks to understand the reason behind why

something happened, a phenomenon. Phenomenology is the study of real-life experiences that include everyday life and social actions. Phenomenology, better put is the way people experience their day to day existence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Phenomenologists are interested in learning more about lived experiences, and to accomplish this, it is necessary to go to the source themselves (the people): “Such a focus requires us to go directly to the things themselves... to turn toward phenomena which had been blocked from sight by the theoretical patters in front of them” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26). Narrative inquiry is used to gain a better understanding because it seeks to make sense of our lived experiences. This approach is significant to qualitative research because it allows the researcher to use stories as data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Merriam & Tisdell (2016) explain, rather than simply being about life, narrative is about how life interacts with it.

This phenomenological study aims to evaluate how internal and external motivational factors aid in persistence and graduation rates for Black female students at community colleges. Notably, this study shared the lived experiences of six Black female students who have completed at least one year of coursework at Muskegon Community College. This phenomenological qualitative approach examined the lived experiences by focusing on academic aspirations, college resources, support systems, barriers, and other support mechanisms that have aided in the participants' college success. The phenomenological approach was examined through the lens of a narrative analysis because it analyzed the participants' stories to understand the phenomena better.

### ***Value of Narratives / Lived Experiences***

The benefit of a phenomenological research method is that the data can open the door for a deeper understanding and perspective on how this phenomenon has directly impacted the

participants' lives: “Stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34). The lived experience from each participant is used as data in this study and it accounts for first-person interactions from the beginning, middle, and end of their educational journeys to data.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions used as the groundwork for this study were the following:

1. What internal and external motivational factors have played a role in the academic success of Black female students who currently attend community college?
  - What are the key internal drivers and motivators?
  - What are the key external supports and motivators, including those from the college?
2. How would the absence of these motivating factors have affected their success?
  - Which factors were the most (and least) significant to their success?
  - If those motivational factors were not present, would they likely have changed the direction of their educational journey?
3. Which internal and external barriers or challenges do Black female students identify as having the most effect on their college studies?
  - What internal challenges affected their persistence the most?
  - What external barriers, such as those from the college, affected their persistence the most?

## **Setting for the Study**

At the time of the study, all the study participants were students at Muskegon Community College (MCC), located in Muskegon, Michigan. The school was founded in 1926, is the fourth oldest community college in the State and holds a Higher Learning Commission accreditation. The College currently has six different locations in the Muskegon and surrounding areas.

Students can select from over 80 different programs and certifications and have access to many different resources and services that are encased around student success. Muskegon Community College has the designation of being a Leader College for Achieving the Dream. This designation is important to note because it showcases that the College is focused on the success of the student population (*Quick Facts | Muskegon Community College, 2023*).

In 2020, the fall-to-winter persistence rates for all students at Muskegon Community College was 75% for females and 72% for males. Looking at the data more closely, Black females have persisted at 61% compared to 55% for Black males. Over her years of experience with the college, the researcher has seen Black females succeed higher than Black males enrolled at Muskegon Community College. The researcher has also witnessed how students are more likely to persist and graduate when they have created a sense of belonging, embraced the college-going culture, have established motivating factors, and have support systems surrounding them. When students feel supported inside and outside of Muskegon Community College, they tend to retain at higher rates.

The demographics of the student population at MCC generally reflects the demographics of the surrounding area that supplies many of the students. Table 2 below provides the student demographics from fall 2022.

Table 2: MCC Student Population, Demographic Details, Fall 2022

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTIC	FULL-TIME STUDENTS		PART-TIME STUDENTS	
	#	%	#	%
Race				
White	677	19%	1987	56%
Black	35	<1%	233	7%
Hispanic	592	17%	228	<1%
Other	82	<1%	253	<1%
Age				
Under 19	219	<1%	908	26%

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTIC	FULL-TIME STUDENTS		PART-TIME STUDENTS	
	#	%	#	%
19-24	539	15%	922	26%
25+	82	<1%	856	24%
Gender				
Female	475	13%	1608	46%
Male	353	10%	1049	30%
Not reported	13	<1%	27	<1%

The total student count for Muskegon Community College, for the Fall 2022 semester was 3530. That number is inclusive of both on campus and online students. The data shows that the College has more part-time White students than any other race. Females are more prominent at 46%, while males make up 30% of the overall student population. According to the U.S. Census data, the White race makes up 73.9% of the population for the State of Michigan, while the Black population accounts for 13.7% (*Michigan: 2020 Census, 2021*). This is comparable to the student breakdown for both full- and part-time students: 75% are White students and less than 8% of the student population is Black.

Examining the total count of students in comparison to Michigan’s population provides an insight for the overall population at Muskegon Community College, but it is also imperative to understand persistence and retention trends for the past three academic years. Table 3 below provides a detailed overview of persistence and retention rates by race and gender for 2019-2022.

Table 3: MCC Student Persistence and Retention Rates by Race and Gender, 2019-2022

	ACADEMIC YEAR 19-20				ACADEMIC YEAR 20-21				ACADEMIC YEAR 21-22			
	PERSISTENCE (FALL-TO- WINTER)		RETENTION (FALL-TO- FALL)		PERSISTENCE (FALL-TO- WINTER)		RETENTION (FALL-TO- FALL)		PERSISTENCE (FALL-TO- WINTER)		RETENTION (FALL-TO- FALL)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Black Female	129	61%	64	30%	104	65%	55	34%	142	69%	97	47%
Black Male	71	63%	29	26%	55	63%	29	33%	58	57%	33	33%
White Female	1414	78%	856	47%	1269	77%	802	48%	1451	79%	869	47%
White Male	1017	76%	554	41%	805	74%	471	44%	859	75%	502	44%
Hispanic Female	128	77%	82	49%	147	76%	89	46%	144	73%	99	50%
Hispanic Male	97	66%	43	29%	75	75%	38	38%	76	66%	46	40%
Other: Female	162	70%	104	45%	162	74%	93	42%	146	77%	85	45%
Other: Male	117	72%	63	39%	82	66%	45	36%	99	75%	50	38%

Since 2019, the fall-to-winter persistence rates have remained high, meaning that for all ethnic and gender groups, students have persisted at 61% or higher. However, black students persisted at 61% for females and 63% for males in 2019-2020, showing that they have the lowest return rate for the fall to winter semester compared to their counterparts. The same trend is valid for 2020-2021, but in 2021-2022, the return rate increased by 3% over Hispanic males making Black students second to last in persistence.

Overall, retention rates are significantly lower than persistence rates for each academic year across all races and genders. The trend explains that students enroll in concurrent semesters at or about 60% but from year to year, students stop attending, and retention rates drop significantly for each group. The retention rates for Black females increased from 2019 to 2022 but are lower than that of White females. Black females have an average retention rate of 37% from 2019 to 2022, compared to 47% for White females. While Black females retain more than Black males, they are still 10% lower than White females.

## Participant Selection and Demographics

### *Sampling Method*

Purposeful sampling is the best method used to determine the unit of analysis because this sample selection assumes that the researcher wants to gain insight into the motivational factors that Black female students use to succeed. To gather that information, it is necessary to interview participants who will provide information surrounding that topic area (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that there is no exact number of subjects to interview when conducting a qualitative study. Instead, focus on the questions, the data gathered, the analysis and the resources needed to support the research questions. This will help determine the number of subjects to interview. By interviewing six subjects, the researcher obtained the necessary information to conclude motivational factors for Black female students.

### *Participant Demographics*

As noted, the participants for this study included six Black females. At the time of the study, each participant was a current student at Muskegon Community College. The participants ranged from ages 19 to 24 and had completed at least one full academic year at MCC. Three participants were pursuing their Associate of Applied Science in Nursing degree, two were completing the Associate in Science and Arts degree, and the last participant was working toward the Game Design Certification. Table 4 below provides demographic information of the participants.

Table 4: Demographics of Study Participants

PARTICIPANT	AGE	# OF YEARS OF COLLEGE COMPLETED	PROGRAM OF STUDY
1	23	3	Nursing
2	19	1.5	ASA
3	23	1.5	Nursing/RT



PARTICIPANT	AGE	# OF YEARS OF COLLEGE COMPLETED	PROGRAM OF STUDY
4	21	3	ASA
5	23	3	Nursing
6	24	3	Graphic Design

P#1 is a first-generation college student who attended community college after a semester at a 4-year institution. She works a full-time job and aspires to become a nurse. She is fully invested in her education journey and wants to be an example for her family. P#2 is a first-generation college student who decided on community college right after high school. She was allowed to work or go to college; she chose the latter. She was unsure of her career path but decided to work on her general education course. P#3 is a single mom and a community college returner. She attended community college right after high school but lacked focus and motivation. She now wants to become a nurse practitioner and provide a better life for her child, so she returned to college and is waiting to enter the nursing program. P#4 was a prior Early College student who returned to college to finish her degree after not completing the Early College program. P#5 is a transfer student determined to become a nurse like her mom. Her college journey has been difficult, but she is motivated to accomplish her goals. P#6 has a full-time job and has attempted college multiple times but is now more focused than ever. She understands that obtaining a certificate will help her in her career path, so the drive to graduate is strong.

### ***Participant Identification and Selection***

The researcher began by eliciting names of students who would be good candidates for this study from four colleagues at the college. These colleagues have daily interactions with students and were able to provide names for those who met the criteria for this study. Once

names were received, the researcher sent invitation emails to eight potential students, informing them of the process used to identify them, information about the study, and inquiring about their willingness to participate in the study. Students were asked to respond to the email if they were interested in participating, and from that email, six students indicated their willingness to participate.

## **Study Design and Data Collection**

### ***Interview Process***

Once participants agreed to take part in the study, they were sent an email that established the date and time of the interview. Interviews were intended to last between 45 to 60 minutes and take place at Muskegon Community College in the researcher's office. This location was desirable because it did not require the participants to travel to an area off campus and was easily accessible. In addition, interviews were conducted face to face, and participants understood that they could contact the researcher with any questions or concerns.

During the research study, each participant was interviewed to gain insight into the motivational factors that aided their success at Muskegon Community College. First, participants were asked basic characteristic demographic questions, including age, ethnicity, and number of college years completed at MCC, before specific questions about the study were introduced. After the demographic questions were answered, the researcher moved to their definition of motivation, including the importance of motivational factors in terms of their persistence and retention. Finally, the researcher asked questions about when the participants felt the most motivated in college, internal and external motivational factors, the role these motivational factors have played in their success in college, the impact the motivational factors have on degree attainment, and barriers they may have had to overcome to succeed in college thus far.

The interview questions were open-ended and allowed each participant the opportunity to answer from their vantage point. The interview questions were used as a guide to understand better how motivation impacts persistence and retention rates for Black female students. There was not a formal structure to the interviews, but more of a provided safe space and comfortable setting for the participants to discuss their motivating factors.

### ***Interview Protocol***

The in-person interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The participants included in the study indicated their willingness to participate by signing the informed consent document that provided critical information about the study. The informed consent also explained that participation was voluntary, and that they could opt out at any time during the interview. By signing the informed consent document, the participants agreed to share their personal stories and understand that their names or any identifying information would not be used in the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is described as “the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 195). Data analysis should not only be done at the end of the series of interviews. Data analysis should start to take place after each interview. Merriam and Tisdell suggest that after the first interview the researcher should review the purpose of the study, read, and reread the data collected, make notes in the margins, comment on the data, capture any reflections, start creating themes, and note anything that needs to be altered for the next interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data analysis in a qualitative research study should be done simultaneously with data collection. If

not, the data can be unfocused, repetitive, and overwhelming due to the volume of interview material.

The researcher used a phenomenological analysis to depict the data in this study. The first step was to review the interview transcriptions and describe their personal experiences through textual descriptions: “The aim of phenomenology, then, is to produce a description of a phenomenon of everyday experiences, in order to understand its essential structure” (Priest, 2002, p. 55). From the textual descriptions, the researcher can then draw structural descriptions based on comprehending the participant's experiences surrounding the phenomenon. Next, the researcher grouped the participant's responses by themes to identify significant thoughts surrounding the phenomenon (Priest, 2002). This stage allows for the written description to be produced. Using both the textural and structural descriptions, the researcher could draw conclusions based on the different experiences of each participant.

### **Validity and Reliability**

The researcher developed textural and structural descriptions of each participant's experiences to ensure this study was valid and reliable. Those experiences were then grouped to depict the importance of motivation regarding college persistence and retention: “Because human beings are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and interviews” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 244). With the participants being the source of the collected data, the researcher is “closer” to reality than a data collection tool because the researcher could record their personal experiences.

Member checks were used to ensure validity and reliability in this study. Member checks are the process of returning the preliminary analysis to some of the participants and confirming

that the researcher's interpretation of the data was correct. In addition, the researcher spoke with two participants to ensure that the information collected accurately depicted their thoughts. After six interviews, adequate engagement was reached, meaning the participants' thoughts started to feel saturated with minimal new information being introduced. Saturation means that the same information was being mentioned by the participants repeatedly (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Researcher Bias and Assumptions**

The biases and assumptions within this study stem from the researcher's work as a student services professional for the past fourteen years. In this capacity, the researcher has observed and has had many conversations with Black female students surrounding the motivational factors that have aided in their success while in college. The researcher's experiences and professional work has also revealed that many students of color enrolled at the college often do not persist or continue because of external or internal barriers affecting their ability to persist. Many factors may contribute to the underachievement of Black students, including economic, social, individual, and K-12 preparedness and systematic educational barriers. These factors affect the lives of Black students throughout America daily (Nichols & Schak, 2017).

The researcher's experiences motivated this study because of an interest in the relationship between Black female students' persistence and retention and the effect of motivational specific motivational factors, both internal and external. This study was designed to explore the relationship further by examining the lived experiences of successful Black female students, and then using these experiences to recommend directions for new programs or services — or revisions to existing programs — that will help students persist, retain, and graduate at higher percentages.

### ***Delimitations of the Study***

The six participants in this study were all Black females ranging in ages from 18 to 24, had all completed at least one year of classes at Muskegon Community College, and had different lived experiences. Qualitative research is time-consuming, and personal experiences influence conclusions and observations, so it is important not to expect to generalize the findings. In addition, the results of a qualitative research study cannot be verified like other forms of research because participants have control of the data (interviews). This research is also labor intensive because the researcher must translate the data, categorize it to identify themes, check for validity, and record the results of the phenomena. These factors account for some of the disadvantages and limitations of a qualitative research study.

### **Summary**

This chapter describes the methodology used to interview six Black females enrolled at Muskegon Community College. Each participant has experienced success at the College, meaning they have completed at least one year of coursework and are moving towards graduation. In addition, these participants have experienced the effects of both internal and external motivational factors, all contributing to their college success. Chapter Four provides the participants' narratives from the interviews, and Chapter Five discusses the key themes and implications of the study and offers suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS

### **Introduction**

This qualitative phenomenological study surrounding motivational factors for Black female students at Muskegon Community College was designed to increase our understanding of the thoughts, ideas, and practices that this demographic of students has needed to be successful in college. Historically, Black students have often been in disadvantaged positions and have struggled to meet the point of equalization compared to their peers. This demographic category also has lower overall college enrollment rates, graduation, and persistence (Anthony et al., 2021). However, research has also shown that, when Black student college success rates are disaggregated, Black female's graduation rate exceeds that of Black males by nearly 10%.

What are the motivating factors that have increased the success rates for these Black women? Tinto's Model of Retention found that students come to college with many life experiences, and for them to be successful, it is essential for students to create a sense of belonging and transition from the personal community mindset to a mindset that is focused on the college-going culture. The transition aids in students being more successful in college. In addition, Tinto believes that once students commit to a college, it helps to drive their motivation to graduate (Barbaro, 2021). This study includes the experiences of six current MCC students who have persisted and have goals to obtain their degrees. These experiences were captured by interviews that asked about their motivating factors.

## **Participant Overview**

The participants for this study included six Black female students aged 19-24. All participants were currently enrolled full or part time at Muskegon Community College and had completed at least one full academic year (see Table 4 for participant demographics).

For this study, each participant was interviewed and asked a series of questions as it relates to their motivation (internal and external), support systems, and barriers. Their personal stories were analyzed and reviewed and will be told throughout this chapter.

### **Participant #1: Breaking Generational Curses**

P#1 is a 23-year-old Black Female student pursuing the nursing program at Muskegon Community College. She participated in one year of dual enrollment at MCC during high school and then went straight to a four-year institution after graduation. However, she decided to transfer back to Muskegon Community College after spending some time at a university because she needed support, motivation, and encouragement from her family. She has completed two years of coursework since transferring and decided that nursing is the career path she will embark on. Participant #1 is not only a full-time student, but she also holds a full-time job and is recognized for her work in the community.

Born and raised in Muskegon County, P#1 always saw Muskegon Community College as an option, but she wanted to gain the “real-life” college experience after high school. Learning to juggle school, finances, college life, and work was not an easy battle, so eventually, she made the decision to come back home and refocus. When asked why she is getting a degree, she said, “to create generational wealth and to break generational curses.” She is the first in her family to attend college, so for her, graduating is necessary. She wants to be an example to her family members and show them that they can do it as well. She also mentioned that getting a degree is important because she wants to prove to those who doubted her that she did it: “I want to stunt



on everyone that doubted me; I like nice things, and getting a degree is something that no one can ever take from me.”

P#1 explained that her motivation is defined by her morals, values, and, ultimately, the reason she gets up every day:

I want more for myself and understanding that, as a Black female, they do not expect much from us...it is not about get back, but it is about proving that I can do it, and I can do it better.

She explained that overcoming the negative persona that others have about Black women and achieving everything she wants out of life is her definition of motivation. Finding motivation is not only necessary, but it is required as a Black student attending MCC:

I have had several encounters where my professors did not believe in me or think I was smart enough, so the idea of being supported by those individuals was short-lived. I learned it is necessary to find motivation from within, family, or other trusted sources. College is not easy, so it is important to ensure you are prepared to start and finish.

P#1 stated that her motivation levels were the highest at the beginning of the semester: “I know I can do this.” This describes her mentality at the beginning of each semester. However, during the semester, she described that her motivation for success decreased because reality sat that things were not as easy as she once thought:

During college breaks, I can mentally prepare myself for what is to come in the current or next semester. This recharges me, and I am ready to tackle what is ahead of me.

She also explained that if you were successful in your classes the semester before, it is easier to keep pushing because you have confidence that you have done this before and can do it again.

After starting at Muskegon Community College, she explained that she did not receive anything from the College that helped her feel motivated. She had to draw motivation from herself and her support systems. She further explained that the College does much work to get

students accepted and enrolled, but there is little that happens to keep you as a student. There are a lot of different hurdles that students must jump through regarding getting into programs, completing pre-requisites, and getting assistance in different courses. When asked what the College could provide that would be beneficial to her as a student, she stated:

Being a transfer student, the steps should have not been this difficult. I believe having active counselors who have more availability to assist would make a huge difference. When you are in the middle of the semester and things begin to get challenging, it is necessary to have support from the College. That support could include supportive faculty, tutoring, and counselors who actual care. Not having this support has been a huge downfall towards my success at MCC.

She also mentioned that there had been different occasions where she attempted to seek out a counselor for advice or support when she was having some challenges in classes and walked away feeling the same way she did before the meeting:

I soon realized that the counselors at the College do not understand me, maybe because I am a Black woman, a first-generation college student, or just because we do not come from the same struggles. This has had a huge impact on my success. I just need support and people who can give me encouraging words.

In describing what external motivational factors have aided her success as a student, P#1 described family, friends, and co-workers. She described the time when she had to take a math course to enter the nursing program. Her inner confidence was high, and she believed this course would be easy. However, as the class progressed, she began doubting herself and her ability to pass. Finally, she went to work and was venting about the course and how stressed it was making her, and her supervisor stepped in to assist:

My supervisor really helped me. We pulled up study guides, we worked through problems together, and she provided me with the words of encouragement I needed to regain my confidence.

Because of that one-on-one assistance, P#1 passed the course successfully. Her internal drive and grit did not let her give up at the first sign of struggle.

P#1 explained that since being in college her motivation and determination have increased, and she has the drive to be successful no matter what. With the absence of motivation and encouragement from the College, she has learned to self-motivate and now believes that she can accomplish anything she puts her mind to:

My self-motivation allows me to succeed because I am single, have no children, and stay home with my mom. So, where others may have outside barriers that affect their ability to be successful in college, I do not have those right now.

She explained that, currently, she does not have too many outside distractions so that she can motivate herself. If that was not the case and she did have other distractions, things may be different, and her focus could not be as strong: “If I were not living at home or had to pay rent, that could shift my focus, and school would not be a priority.”

When asked about the barriers she has had to overcome to stay in school and be successful, she alluded to the fact that her outside distractions are minimal. However, she does have a medical condition that can hinder her ability to be successful at times:

I have had to deal with being sick and dealing with things like my car not working at times, working two jobs, and being stressed. Illness and life can make things difficult, and if it is not one thing, it is another. But I understand that I have to do what I have to do to accomplish my goals.

Student loans are also a barrier and a motivator because she understands that, in order to pay off her student loans, she has to get a good job. So, while taking out more debt is a barrier, it drives her to accomplish her goals. In addition, she is a role model to her family; they look up to her, so her internal drive to keep pushing is very high.

In closing, P#1 has the drive and dedication to be successful. She has established the grit to push through no matter what and knows that she will become a nurse, continue to be a role model for her family, and will continue to break generational curses in her family. In addition, she has developed self-motivation regarding being a successful student because of the absence of

motivation or support from the College. The motivation received from her family, friends, and co-workers continues to aid in her college success. She believes the College should be doing more to ensure students are successful and eliminate barriers, but overall, she is a self-starter and will accomplish her goal of becoming a nurse.

### **Participant #2: Cultivating Functional Relationships**

P#2 is a 19-year-old, Black female student currently pursuing an associate degree in psychology at Muskegon Community College. She attended MCC right after graduating high school and is still unfamiliar of her ultimate career path, but she is interested in learning more about people. She is currently gaining work experience by working as a student worker. Her plans include transferring to a larger institution after her time at MCC.

After high school graduation she was given the option to, “go to college and live at home for free or get a job and pay half of the bills.” She was not sure what she wanted to do career wise, but she knew going to college was going to be the best decision for her. When asked the question as to why she is getting a degree she responded, “no one in my family has been to college, so I want to prove to myself that I can do it and be successful.” She added that a close family member went to MCC for a short period after high school but dropped out because they did not know what they wanted to do. P#2 wants to prove that she can be successful in college but also serve as the motivation her family members need to return to college.

P#2 defined motivation as, “her reason to do something and the determination to make it happen.” She further explained that if you want to get something done, you must be motivated; otherwise, it may not happen. When it comes to being a college student she stated, “sometimes you are not motivated to do the work, come to school, participate, or do homework but you still have to get up and do it. When you are motivated, you can get more things done and ultimately

be more productive.” Motivation is necessary because “it allows you to get things done. You will not always be motivated but the more motivation you have the more you can accomplish.” She summarized why she felt it was necessary to be motivated by saying, “the money has already been spent and because I do not want to waste it; I have to finish.”

P#2 stated that her motivation levels were at the highest at the beginning of each semester. That is when she feels the most prepared and ready to go. As the semester continues her motivation levels start to decrease, and she must really focus on what it takes to be a successful college student:

I lose motivation towards the middle of the semester, but I tell myself that I have to do it; there is no backing out. I have already started so I need to finish, and I need to do so with good grades.

These self-motivation pep talks help her to get through each semester successfully. P#2’s drive and dedication continue to push her forward towards success. This is a true testament of grit — having the ability to persevere and the ability to achieve goals.

When asked about what Muskegon Community College has done to help P#2 be successful while in college, she stated:

I do not use anything the college has to offer, but if I do have a question or concern, I will ask one of the counselors. They help me with selecting my courses for the next semester and have helped me with handling stress. Basically, the counselors really help me with scheduling classes.

She has cultivated good relationships with the counseling staff since her time at MCC and has figured out which counselor can help her in different situations. For example, when her stress levels were high, she met with one of the counselors and was encouraged to meditate. She went on to describe some areas of the College that she does appreciate that the College offers students. The library is one of those. She said, “I go to the library often to use the study rooms, and I plan to set up a library session to help with one of my projects in the future.” She also enjoys Jayhawk

Frenzy, which happens at the beginning of the academic year, because it helps students learn about the school.

In describing what external motivational factors have aided her success as a student, P#2 described her mom, family, and friends. She has a friend circle that influences her success as a student. One of her friends attends MCC, and the other attends college out of state. Because they all are attending college simultaneously, they tend to lean on one another to get through the hard times, motivate one another, and help each other with different classes: “We all go to college and have the same stressors, so we work together to keep each other going.”

When asked to describe how her mom has played a role in her success as a student, she said, “my mom helps me a lot.” She goes on to describe that her mom helps her financially, provides a place for her to stay, and if she is ever lacking, her mom will ensure she can get what she needs: “I am very grateful for her, and she has supported me greatly. She motivates me to go to school.”

The researcher asked P#2 if she believed her success would be the same if she did not have the presence of internal and external motivational factors. She stated, “I would have to figure things out alone. It would take more effort, but I would still be successful.” P#2 also stated that

if those motivating factors were not present, I would find things that motivate me or find students that are going through the same things at the College. I would prove to myself that I could do it.

Pursuing a degree is vital to her, so she is willing to do what it takes to ensure she can accomplish her goal of getting a degree with or without the presence of support groups.

When asked about the barriers she has had to overcome to stay in school and be successful, she alluded that procrastination has played a role. One of her goals is to submit all

work on time. This is something she is working on and will aid in her ability to be successful. Being a college student has helped to increase the motivation that P#2 has towards being successful as a college student. She has learned what services and resources she needs to utilize to ensure she is doing well.

### **Participant #3: Tenacity**

P#3 is a 23-year-old Black female currently taking classes at Muskegon Community College. She is a returning student, deciding between nursing and respiratory therapy as her program of interest. She is still determining what program she will pursue, so she is taking classes in both areas until she makes a concrete decision. She was born and raised in Muskegon County, and after high school, she attended MCC for a short period but did not finish. A few years later, she decided to return to school. She is now a full-time student and a parent and holds a full-time job.

Deciding to return to Muskegon Community College for P#3 did not come easy, but it was made from necessity. She wanted a new way of living and wanted to provide a better life for her child, so going back to school to get her degree was crucial. When asked why she came to MCC after high school, she mentioned that going to college in the Black community is a big deal, so she felt like it was something that she had to do:

I realized that some of those same people pushing me to go to college were not there to support me when times became tough, emotionally, or even with homework.

After her first attempt at college, she decided to stop attending and focus on working.

Fast forward to now; returning to school was a personal choice. I knew it was something I needed to do. I also am not satisfied in my current job as a medical assistant, so I have to do something to change that. I have to get my degree.

She also mentioned, “working in the medical field, I do not see many Black professionals, so it is my driving force, and I also want to be somebody’s boss.” She also described that working under doctors and nurse practitioners, she can get a glimpse of their lives, including lifestyles, cars, perks from the job, and how they can provide for their children. Her determination brought her back to MCC, and her motivation and grit will ensure she finishes.

P#3 describes motivation as “the thing that drives you to succeed.” Since her first college experience, she has realized that motivation is internal:

I want more for my life. I am my biggest motivation because I want to look in the mirror and be proud of whom I see and who I am.

She further explained that her motivation is equated to success: “If motivation is present, then the likelihood that you will finish is higher.” She mentioned several times that it is essential to know why and what you are going to school for. If you know those things, you can accomplish your goal more efficiently: “If you know what you are doing and why you are doing it, then you are likely to finish.”

The researcher asked P#3 if she thought motivation was necessary to be a successful student and she responded this way:

Yes. I do not think you can be a successful student without the presence of motivation or underlying reasons behind the reason you are doing it for. If you are going to school just to be going, then you probably are not going to finish. It is important to see the brighter side of the hard work you are doing, and that will encourage you to keep going.

She explained that she felt the most motivated as a student when she came back to college after having her daughter. Being a mom has increased her motivation and has raised her awareness of how important getting a college degree is. She further explained that,

When I first came to MCC I did not finish my classes because I was very unmotivated because I did not know what I was going to do. At that point, I was just going to school for the simple fact of going. I knew I wanted to do something in the medical field, but no



one ever sat me down and asked what I wanted to do. For a while I was just taking classes and not being successful at them. I did not get serious until I had my daughter.

She reflected on the fact that her grades were not high when she first came to MCC, but after becoming a mom, her grades have been the highest that they have been in her life. She has a defined purpose and “why” behind going to school, which has helped her motivation. Also, working in the medical field as a medical assistant has opened her eyes to the lives of nurses, doctors, and nurse practitioners. Along with having her daughter, these things have heightened her motivational levels.

Supplemental instruction is an academic assistance program that aids in students understanding and retention surrounding a particular subject area. Muskegon Community College offers this opportunity for students that are taking biology courses. This MCC service has had the most significant impact on P#3’s success:

Being told about SI was my first experience of an instructor at MCC telling me that if I need additional assistance, then I can go to SI for help. [...] Muskegon Community College also offers students the opportunity to get tutoring in many different areas, which has aided in my success as a student. [...] Knowing I can get assistance when I need it is very important.

P#3 has a great family and friend support system that has also assisted in her success:

My family is my lifeline. My grandparents, siblings, and aunt help me a lot with my daughter, and without them, I would not be able to focus on school like I can now.

P#3 talked about her upbringing and realization that in order to provide her daughter with a good life, she must do things differently from how she was raised:

I want to make sure I am doing everything in my power to give her a good life, and that starts with me getting a degree. I never want my child to grow up the way that I did, so I work extremely hard, so she does not have to struggle.

Having a daughter pushes me more because I never want her to go through what I went through and work as hard as I have to. I do not want her to struggle. The fear of struggling is my driving force.

Having a supportive family helps to make this all possible. Her support system has played many different roles when it comes to her being successful, but the most significant role is supporting her and her daughter while she obtains her degree. Her grandparents, aunt, and siblings have played the role of counselor, friend, sounding board, and listening ear. She expanded on how grateful she is for them and their continued support: “I have learned that it takes a village, and I am very grateful for the village I have.”

When asked if she believed her success would be the same without the presence of her support system, she stated no:

If I did not have my family, I would not have the time to devote to being a student. I would also not be able to work and go to school. They step in so my load is lessened, and I can focus on creating a better life for myself and my daughter.

She expressed that, without self-motivation and her support systems, she would have to decide on what she would focus on because doing it all would not be an option. The researcher asked if her internal and external supports were removed would she still pursue a degree? P#3 responded no. While her degree is for her, it ultimately gives her daughter a better life and makes her family proud.

When asked about the barriers that have gotten in the way of her being successful, she mentioned being a full-time mom, student, and employee is difficult, but because she is motivated and has the drive to make a better life for herself and her family, she pushes through and will graduate. She mentioned that going to MCC can be challenging because not many people look like her:

MCC needs more people who remind me of myself, who look like me and can understand the struggles that I have. I would like to walk into the counseling office or a classroom and see staff members who look like me. It would help to build a better culture and would help me to have a sense of belonging.

She stressed the importance of belonging and how students would stay at MCC longer if they could better relate to staff and faculty. While a few Black men and women work at the College, an increased number would help Black students feel more comfortable. She also mentioned that another area that would benefit students is to have the College make students aware of the different services offered from the beginning:

When students start classes, it would be good for the College to make students aware of the different services but also to show students where they are located, so there is less confusion.

#### **Participant #4: Support is Essential**

P#4 is a 21-year-old, Black female student attending Muskegon Community College pursuing her associates of Science and Arts degree. She is a Muskegon native and attended a Muskegon public high school. She also participated in two years of Early College at that time, but then elected to leave the program and graduate high school. After she completed high school, she returned to Muskegon Community College as a returning student. She wants to be a teacher but is still determining the level she wants to teach, so she is focusing on general education classes until she can make a formal decision. She has completed one year of coursework since returning to MCC and looking forward to degree completion. When asked why she is obtaining her degree, she said she has a passion for helping others. Being a teacher and being in the classroom is something that she enjoys:

I really want to help people by teaching. Teaching is something that I love, and I will do well at.

Her decision to return to MCC was driven by the goal of someday becoming a teacher and changing the lives of others. She also wants to make herself proud:

I want to make my mom proud as well because she never gave up, and I want to prove to myself that I can do it, too. I remind myself of this whenever I feel like I cannot do something.

She describes motivation as being encouraged to do things and having the necessary support systems in place to assist in those areas. She also believes it is vital to be motivated to obtain your degree: “Without motivation, you may become discouraged, especially because college is not easy to accomplish.” Being motivated helps her to stay focused. Regarding attending Muskegon Community College, she felt her motivation was at its highest at the beginning of each semester:

I was the most motivated at the beginning because everyone encouraged me. However, as time went on, that level of support decreased.

She explained that when she took summer classes, she remembered it was not a great experience:

I was not very successful because my classes were all online, and I was having a challenging time. It was the first time I realized I was all on my own.

P#4 was a part of the Early College program at Muskegon Community College. While in that program, students receive a lot of assistance to ensure they retain and graduate. This support directly reflected her success while in the early college program:

Being a former Early College student, the mentors were my biggest support. The mentors held monthly meetings to discuss progress, transferring plans, FAFSA, transcripts, etc. They held me accountable, and it was one of the ways I stayed motivated.

Having that hands-on approach was beneficial to P#4 and aided in her overall success. She also mentioned that when she was having a difficult time, the mentors would be there to get her back on track:

When they saw me slipping, I would get a phone call, and together we would discuss what was happening and what steps I would need to take to get back on the right path. They were my biggest help.

When asked to think of the resources or people outside of MCC that have served as her external motivational factors, she mentioned that her family and friends have been her biggest supporters:

My stepmom is there for whatever I need, whether it be helping with my homework, stress, life issues, or anything in general. She has been there and pushes me forward.

She also mentioned that her friends have been great at supporting and motivating her as well:

My best friend and other friends have study dates, and we constantly check to ensure we are getting everything done.

P#4 stressed the importance of her support system outside of MCC and feels like being a successful college student would not be possible without their support, motivation, and encouragement:

I need motivation from start to finish because going to college is hard and feeling alone is not great. I don't do as well when I do not have support and motivation from others.

P#4 feels it is not possible for her to be successful as a student without support systems:

I need a lot of motivation to get things done, and this past summer, when I took those summer classes, I did not have the motivation or support that I needed, so I did not do well in those classes.

Coming from an Early College program to being on her own in college was challenging, and that is when she realized that having people in her corner is vital to her success. She also mentioned that having friends going through the same courses is beneficial because you have someone to talk things through with:

Having the same classes, we get the opportunity to talk about what is discussed in class, and we make sure we all understand the content being taught.

The researcher asked P#4 if she needed to have the presence of internal and external motivational factors, and if so, would she still pursue a degree and/or be successful? She stated, probably not:

I feel like this would be hard without help. I am supposed to be transferring to a 4-year institution in January, and I believe it will be hard to transition to a larger place. MCC has been my crutch for the last few years, so moving on is scary.

However, she mentioned that if her support systems stay the same and she has the same level of support from her university, things would be manageable. Ultimately the transition phase would not be as terrifying.

When asked about the barriers she has had to overcome while being a student, she mentioned adjusting, interacting with instructors, overcoming fear, and navigating college, not as an early college student:

Starting college as a high school student and having both high school and college courses at the same time was not easy, and a lot of adjustments had to happen.

She noticed that MCC did not have many professors or staff of color, which was alarming to her. Another barrier that P#4 had to overcome was her ability to interact effectively with instructors:

One of my professors always had an issue with me, so it caused friction, and I felt that one of my other instructors was discriminatory towards me, so learning how to deal with those things was difficult, especially as a seventeen-year-old student.

She had to find a way to overcome the different barriers that she was experiencing to find her footing as a college student.

P#4 has experienced college at many different stages throughout her life and has realized that it takes a village to be successful. She has had internal support from the MCC Early College program, which helped to lay a solid foundation, and she also has family and friends supporting her. Navigating college is complex, and she depends on her support systems to motivate and encourage her throughout her journey. Moving on to a 4-year institution is frightening, but she understands that she will be able to figure it out with the right services, support systems, resources, and motivation.

## **Participant #5: Persistence**

P#5 is a 23-year-old, Black female student pursuing her nursing degree at Muskegon Community College. She was born and raised in Muskegon County and attended a Muskegon County high school. Right after high school, she attended MCC for two years, took a year off during COVID, and returned to finish her nursing degree. She is a full-time college student and holds a full-time job and is financially responsible for herself. Her plate is full, but her motivation to complete her degree is high. Throughout the interview, the researcher and participant discussed her high and low points while being a student at MCC and what keeps her going. The interview began with the researcher asking P#5 the “why” behind getting a degree:

I want to provide a great life for myself, make more money, and I have realized that there is not much you can do without a degree.

She also explained that her parents have not given her the option not to get a degree so, “I kind of have to do it.” She has always wanted to be a nurse to follow in her mother’s footsteps. It has provided a level of motivation that continues to push her through.

P#5 describes motivation as “something that makes you want to get up and do something.” She explained that as a Black female student, it is necessary to be motivated while being a college student because we are already fighting back from a deficit:

As a Black female, you must be more motivated because you have to do more to show that you are capable. You have things against you, one being Black. So, it is important to be more motivated than your counterparts.

When asked questions about the time she was the most motivated as a student, she mentioned it was at the very beginning.

I was super motivated, and then life happened. I started experiencing different stressors, issues with my instructors, feeling isolated, and trying to figure out how to progress. After taking a year off from college, deciding to come back was not easy but I had to find my internal motivation to push forward and work towards my goal.

Grit has been one of her most significant motivational factors because getting her degree is essential, and motivation is required to be a successful college student. P#5 recalls her highest level of motivation was when she first began taking classes at Muskegon Community College:

I was super excited to start going here. My motivation was high for a while, but then life started happening, and it became too much to handle.

She went on to describe that when you are first beginning college, you have many people supporting you and pushing you to succeed, and as time goes on, some of those people tend to disappear:

Things got to the point that I had to take a year off from college, but I decided to return because I wanted to finish. Not everyone has that level of self-motivation, but I knew I wanted to finish and realized it was time for me to return.

She describes that to be prepared to succeed; she had to change gears from work and survival mode back to school mode. When asked what resources MCC provided that have aided in her success, she stated that there had yet to be any:

More than anything, I have felt isolated as a student. As a Black student, I stick out like a sore thumb. When I have issues with professors or try to get help, no one looks like me, so they are not able to understand and help me.

The researcher asked P#5 to expand on how important it was to see someone that resembles her on campus. She stated,

it gives me a breath of fresh air. I do not have to pretend to be something that I am not. It also reminds me that I can do this and am not alone. When you see someone who looks like you, they have an easier time understanding the struggles, trials, and issues that I am going through because they probably did as well.

She also mentioned how the situation changed during her second time at MCC,

if I would have had some support from MCC from the beginning I probably would have stayed. But I felt like no one understood, and I had issues, so I had to drop out.



P#5 offered some suggestions for the College in terms of how it could better support students and increase Black students' success:

1. Have a diverse pool of faculty members so that students have people to relate to.
2. Practice grace: extending grace and understanding goes a long way.
3. Learn to ask more questions and not assume that students just are not showing up or participating.
4. Employ faculty members that understand that students have a lot of outside influences that can affect how students perform in the classroom.

She explained that she has noticed that faculty members seem to be concerned only with things inside of the classroom and often forget that students deal with a lot of other things as well. She summed up her thoughts by saying,

having fair instructors would aid in my overall success because when I see that other people are getting different treatment it reminds that everyone else matters but me.

Creating a sense of belonging is important to P#5 and that starts with having faculty, staff, and students on campus who resemble her: Black. Female. College student. When asked to describe her external motivational factors she described her friends and family but more specifically, her mom:

I have a great mom, my entire family is great, but my mom is a nurse. She is the reason why I want to be a nurse. She has a double master's degree, is a mom of five, and works full time. Simply put, my mom is my motivation and support system. Seeing everything that she has been through and that she never gave up gives me the motivation I need to continue to obtain my degree.

She has a friend who is also a current student at Muskegon Community College, and she said that having her close friend in college at the same time has helped a lot in terms of being successful because they can lean on one another:

My best friend helps a lot because she is a student here, and we try to take classes together to support one another through them. I feel more comfortable with her in classes because we understand what each another is going through.

P#5 was asked about the presence of her external motivational factors regarding being successful as a student. She noted that her success would be different if her mom and her family had not supported her throughout her journey:

When you have people who care about you and your future, it helps push you forward. Having outside people encouraging you, having the right people around you and having people that are embarking on similar journeys as you are is imperative to succeed in college.

She went on to describe that “you are going to do what you are around and what you see, your environment,” so it is necessary to surround yourself with positive people that want you to be successful:

I know many people who did not go to college because they did not have someone in their corner supporting them.

P#5 went into different challenges that students face, including herself:

If you do not have a car, who can help get you back and forth to class? If you have to work, who will be there to motivate you to do your homework after a long day?

These are obstacles that students have to overcome, which are complicated when a support system is not in place. She explained that she lives alone and is responsible for herself and her bills, so working is something that she has to do. These are all barriers that she has had to learn to deal with while understanding that, as a Black woman, she does not come from a family that allows her to focus on just one area in her life but instills in her that she must learn to juggle it all:

I have a very supportive family that can help me whenever I need anything. I am grateful for my support system.

Being a student who has attended Muskegon Community College two different times gives P#5 a different viewpoint than other students. She returned to college because her goal was to become a nurse like her mother. Having an external support system has helped her in her

educational journey and continues to push her forward. Without external motivational factors, she may not be working towards her goal of becoming a nurse.

### **Participant #6: Resilience**

P#6 is a student with resilience and dedication. She is a 24-year-old, Black female working towards her Graphic Design Certification at Muskegon Community College. She is a Muskegon native and attended a Muskegon County high school. After graduation, she attended MCC because she believed that was the next step in her life journey. First, she was interested in Business, then changed her program to computer networking, then to game design, and now she is obtaining her graphic design certification. Unfortunately, she found herself in the same boat as many other students, unaware of what she truly wanted to do but was obtaining a degree because that is what she thought she had to do. She has attended Muskegon Community College three separate times in a span of six years, but she is determined to finish this time around.

When asked why she is getting a degree, she mentioned that right after high school college was something she thought she was supposed to do. Her friends were going to college, and her mom and brother both have degrees, so naturally, it was her next stage in life:

I had no idea what I wanted to do or if I would be a good college student. I just thought it was something I had to do. I felt rushed to pick a degree program and did not have time to process what was happening.

In discussing the present and her current work at MCC, she noted that she is getting her degree because she wants to create video games and learning how to incorporate game design and graphic design is a winning combination:

Designing video games is my end goal, but I know a lot goes into that, so getting this certification is just the beginning but will help me accomplish my goals.

She further explained,

I have had time to reflect on my life and what I want to accomplish, so when I decided to come back to MCC this time, it was a personal choice that I was prepared to make.

Motivation is finding the will to do something even when you do not feel like doing it.

This is how P#6 defines motivation:

To be motivated to do something, I have to see myself doing it. I have to see myself at the finish line, and at that point, my motivation is high, and I am ready to complete the task.

She mentioned that her motivation was the highest at the beginning of the fall semester because it was a personal decision to come back to school, and she was 100% confident of her reasons for doing so. P#6 was asked about her internal motivational factors, the ones that MCC provided her with, and she said that her motivation came from a few people on the admissions team at the college:

When I was in high school, I met a recruiter, and she was patient, kind, and took the time to learn who I was. Then, when I officially became a student at the College, I became close to two of the other recruiters, and that is where our bond began to grow. Whenever I needed anything, there were three people I could always count on.

She explained that they checked in with her, motivated her to keep going, allowed her to do homework in their offices, and served as an actual support system:

During my second semester, I became a work-study and grew even closer to the admissions team. They were on me to do my best in school, and I knew genuinely that they wanted me to succeed.

Having their support meant the world to me, and I felt like when I decided to stop going to college, I was not only letting myself down but also letting them down.

Having that internal support from the admissions staff at the College was a game changer for P#6. Because of the bonds built, she could share her thoughts regarding her education:

They supported me in taking time away from school, but every time I saw one of them, they would ask me when I was coming back. They made sure I knew they were in my corner and that they were there to help if I needed anything.

This is the kind of motivation that will forever impact the lives of students. When asked about her external motivation, she mentioned that her mom, brother, and best friend have played a significant role in her continuous pursuit of a degree:

My momma was a teacher for many years, so she values education more than most people I know, so she is always in my corner pushing me to be my best personal self.

She stated that her mom was not excited when she took time off from school but told her that she had to get a job if she was going to take a break from school. In addition, her brother has been there for her and provides motivation to accomplish her goals and go after her dreams:

My brother is a driving force in my life, and whenever I have any issues with life, school, work, or the combination of all things, he is right there to help me along.

Her brother graduated with his bachelor's degree a few years ago, and he continues to support her along her journey to complete her certification. In addition, her best friend provides essential support and motivation:

My best friend reminds me daily that just because I took the unconventional path does not mean it counts any less. We both attended MCC together, and she went on to a 4-year institution after graduating from MCC, and she reminds me that I am capable and that I can do it.

One thing that stood out to the researcher when interviewing P#6 was that she portrayed passion behind getting her degree. Defeat was not an option and even though she started and stopped attending a few times, she found her way back and now she is ready to complete:

I had to see myself getting this certificate and understand that this gets me one step closer to accomplishing my goals.

Self-motivation and grit have aided her success in college, and she is determined to graduate. Both internal and external motivational factors played a significant role in her dedication and success toward getting her degree. The Admissions Team at the College served as key components within the institution's walls for P#6; her family and friends also made valuable

contributions. Together these contributors encouraged this participant to get back enrolled in college and provided the necessary support that she will need to graduate. As a result, her success in college might be different because of the combination of her internal and external driving forces:

College has not always come easy to me, which is why I have started and stopped a few different times. From not being certain about what I wanted to major into failing classes to regaining the confidence I needed to re-enroll, it has all been a journey, but it has not come without barriers.

She questioned why she was not being successful in classes or why things were not coming together like she imagined they were supposed to. Discovering that she had a learning disability was a game changer:

Realizing that I have a learning disability was crucial because I had to learn to operate within my disability. Now that I am aware and have more information regarding my disability, I know what I have to do to be successful.

P#6 showcases resilience and perseverance and should be a role model to students. She has been through many different trials and tribulations. Still, once she could envision herself graduating and being a game designer, she was able to enroll back at MCC and work on finishing her certification. She said that her motivation is pulled from those close to her at MCC, her family, and her friends. They have provided continued support, and because of them, she has what she needs to graduate.

## **Summary**

The stories and experiences of the six Black female students attending Muskegon Community College described how motivation directly correlates to persistence, retention, and graduation. The participants in this study ranged in age from 19 to 24 years old, and four out of the six students indicated that they were first-generation college students. All the students

initially attended MCC during or directly after high school graduation. Four students took some time off, worked full-time, or attended another institution, but all eventually returned to MCC. Each student shared their experiences regarding how the College has helped motivate them or the lack thereof during their time at MCC. One recurrent point that arose during the interviews was that, while the College does offer resources, these participants are not using them but instead rely on family and friends. Through their stories, each participant described how having a robust external support system has kept them afloat and has been their backbone for being successful students. With grit, self-motivation, and a robust external support system, these Black female students are finding a way to persist.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

### **Introduction**

This qualitative, phenomenological research study examined the motivational factors that directly impact college persistence and retention for Black female students. The research study included interviews with six Black female students who completed at least one year of coursework at Muskegon Community College. Additionally, this study aimed to determine how the presence of motivational factors, whether internal, external, or a combination of both, directly correlates to college success.

The researcher met face-to-face with each participant for 45 to 60 minutes at Muskegon Community College. After the interviews concluded, the researcher used a phenomenological approach to analyze and examine the data. This research model was appropriate because the study explored the phenomena of motivation. In addition, this research design served as a dynamic way to gain an understanding surrounding motivation by asking open-ended questions that created a safe space and comfortable setting for the participants to answer freely.

Specifically, the research data were examined using narrative analysis. A narrative analysis reviews the stories people tell to understand the meaning of the phenomena better, in this case, the value motivational factors have on college success for Black female students.

The study's results revealed that internal and external motivational factors, and/or the combination of both, were deeply connected with the success of Black female students attending Muskegon Community College. Additionally, the results indicated that the likelihood of persistence and retention is minimal without any motivational factors. In reviewing the data, the



researcher discovered relevant themes related to motivation that was consistent among the six participants: (1) Internal Motivators: My Drive, (2) External Motivators: The People, (3) Purpose: My Why, (4) Perseverance, (5) and Institutional Motivators: The College. The results of this study were derived from the findings from the following research questions:

1. What internal and external motivational factors have played a role in the academic success of Black female students who currently attend community college?
2. How would the absence of these motivating factors have affected their success?
3. Which internal and external barriers or challenges do Black female students identify as having the most effect on their college studies?

Each theme is discussed and analyzed in this chapter using direct quotations and summaries from the participant's interviews.

## **Theme #1. Internal Motivators: My Drive**

### ***Theme #1: Data Results***

The most critical aspect of success is understanding what motivates you to get things done. Each participant described their definition of motivation and how it has directly impacted their ability to be successful as a college student. Understanding what drives them has played a significant role in their success and also serves as the factor continuing to push them forward. Motivation leads to success, and success leads to persistence and retention. As a result, the participants expressed their understanding of motivation and why it is valuable to them. Theme number one supports research question number one because it discusses the participant's vital internal drivers and motivation related to their success in college thus far.

#### **P#1**

- “Motivation is the reason I get up every day. It relates back to the morals and values in my life.”
- “Overcoming barriers and still being able to achieve the goals I set for myself is true motivation.”

- “I want more for myself and understanding that as a Black female people do not expect much from me, so being successful is not a get back but it is proving that I can do it as well, and matter of fact, I can do it better.”

**P#2**

- “The reason that I want to do something and the determination to make it happen.”
- “There are times when I am not very motivated, but I still get up and get the job done because I understand that when I am motivated, I can get more things done.”
- “I want to be productive.”

**P#3**

- “Motivation is the thing that drives me to succeed.”
- “It is important to know the reason why you are going to school and what you are doing it for. If not, then you are going to college with no purpose and may find it hard to find the motivation needed to finish.”
- “Motivation helps you to see the brighter side of what you are doing.”
- “When I first came to MCC, I did not finish my classes because I was very unmotivated. I did not know my reasons for going to college nor did I know what I wanted to major in. Then things got hard, and I stopped attending. It was not until I had my daughter that I realized what pushes me to be successful.”
- “Working in the medical field, I see firsthand the benefit of getting an education and how far having a degree can take you. This motivated me to go back to MCC and I knew that I have to finish this time.”

**P#4**

- “Motivation is being encouraged to do things and having a good support system around me to help accomplish my goals.”
- “Without motivation you can get discouraged and with college not being an easy thing, I need motivation to be successful.”

**P#5**

- “Motivation is something that makes you want to get up and do something.”
- “You have to be motivated because being a Black female is already a strike against you so it is really important to have a higher level of motivation than White people.”

**P#6**

- “With my disability, I get easily distracted, so I have to see myself doing something in order to actually get it done. Motivation is my ability to picture myself at the finish line.”

### ***Theme #1: Analysis***

Each participant in this study shared what motivation means to them and how it plays a role in their pursuit of degree attainment: "Motivation is an internal process. Whether we define it as a drive or a need, motivation is a condition inside us that desires a change, either in the self or the environment" (Souders, 2019b, p. 1). The participants described motivation as the reason I get up, the reason I want to do something, my drive and dedication, the things I need to envision the finish line, and the ability to overcome barriers.

P#3 stated that "motivation is equated to success. Therefore, if motivation is present, then the likelihood that you will graduate is higher." Several participants noted similar sentiments regarding motivation and described that, without motivation, they could quickly become discouraged, distracted, and fail to accomplish the goals they have set forth for themselves. Therefore, being motivated and fully understanding why you are pursuing a degree seem to be paramount in degree completion and overall success.

According to Barbaro (2021), Tinto believes that a student's commitment to the college-going culture increases their motivation to persist. This theme rang true throughout this study as many participants mentioned that success was no longer optional once they committed to enrolling in college, whether it be the first or second time. Instead, being successful is mandatory because they know the why behind obtaining a degree, and their motivation for achievement is heightened.

Research also suggests confidence encourages intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for Black female students: "Confidence is related to an individual's belief in their ability to carry out a task, or their self-efficacy beliefs. Therefore, self-efficacy beliefs refer to individuals' belief in their capabilities to organize and carry out courses of action required to produce specific

attainments” (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 161). This research helps to demonstrate how motivation, self-efficacy, and degree attainment factor together to produce success for Black female students in higher education.

The Black females interviewed for this study share similar motivational sentiments in that motivation is their driving force toward success, and without it, their progress changes may be limited. For example, P#4 summed up what motivation meant to her: “motivation is an internal thing. I want more for my life. I am my biggest motivation because I want to look in the mirror and be proud of who I see and who I have become.”

## **Theme #2. External Motivators: The People**

### ***Theme #2: Data Results***

Support is an accurate indicator of success. A robust support system is the most critical factor in whether Black females succeed in higher education. Cambridge Dictionary describes support as “agreeing with and encouraging someone or something because you want him, her, or it to succeed” (*Support*, 2023). Each participant described the makeup of their support systems and defined the role that they have played in their journeys toward degree or certificate completion.

From supportive parents to friends, each participant shared how having a solid support system has aided in their ability to be successful. Theme number #2, external motivators: the people, aligns with research question number one because it details how external support systems and motivators help to encourage, inspire, and support the participants during their higher education journeys.

#### **P#1**

- “I would have given up the first time when things got hard, if I did not have my support system.”

- “My friends, family, and my coworkers are all very supportive.”
- “I was in a required math course for the nursing program, and I found myself struggling and stressed out. I went to work, venting about the class and my supervisor helped me. She pulled up study guides and taught me how to do the math problems. We studied together for a week, and because of her help I was able to pass the class.”

**P#2**

- “My mom, family, and friends are my support system.”
- “My mom helps me financially, if I do not have enough money, and because of her I am able to stay in school. My mom really helps me a lot.”
- “My mom helps me pay for school, and I am very grateful for that. She has been a big support for me and motivates me to go stay in college.”
- “Two of my good friends are in college as well, one at MCC and another out of state. We have the same stressors, so we depend on one another to keep us all motivated.”

**P#3**

- “It is because of my grandparents, aunt and siblings that I am able to focus on school because they help me with my daughter.”
- “My upbringing was not the best, so now having a child I want to make sure I am doing everything in my power to give her a good life. That starts with me getting a degree and I could not do that without my village helping take care of her while I am at school.”
- “The fear of struggle is my greatest motivation.”
- “My support systems have played the role of counselor, friend, and listening ear. They are there to listen to me vent, and I am grateful because I know many people do not have that kind of support and motivation.”
- “I have learned that it takes a village, and while my village does not consist of my parents, its people that love me and I love my village.”

**P#4**

- “My family has been a big support. They help me with homework, if I do not understand something or with anything else that I need.”
- “My friends and I have study dates together, we do weekly check-ins, and we hold one another accountable to ensure we are able to get everything done.”
- “My step-mom helps me and pushes me to be successful.”

**P#5**

- “My mom is my role model and my biggest fan.”
- “My mom is a nurse, and she is the reason why I want to become a nurse as well. She has five children and has never given up. She inspires me to keep going.”
- “My best friend helps me a lot because she is also a student here and we try to take classes together so that we can support one another.”
- “I feel more confident having her in class with me because I know we are in the same boat, we understand one another, and we have the same ambition to finish college.”

**P#6**

- “Ms. Ashley and Stephanie at MCC are my biggest supporters. They both push me to be my best self and have never given up on me.”
- “My mom was an educator for many years, and while she supported me taking a break from college, she never allowed me to quit. She encouraged me to get back enrolled.”
- “My best friend attends a 4-year institution now, and she constantly reminds me that even though my path was different than hers that I am still capable and that I can do it. She is a one of my biggest supporters.”

***Theme #2: Analysis***

Strong support systems are necessary for the academic success of Black female students. When support systems are in place, the participants are more likely to excel in college because of motivation, encouragement, and elimination of barriers offered by those within the support systems. The participants also mentioned that with solid support systems comes accountability, partnerships, and a mindset that goal achievement is no longer optional but much required. For example, P #4 stated, “my friends and I have study dates together, we do weekly check-ins, and we hold one another accountable to ensure we can get everything done.” This is an example of how support systems provide accountability and push Black females towards their overall goal.

Strong support systems’ impact on Black female students is rooted in Tinto's (2010) Model of Retention Theory. This theory highlights the need for students to engage in the college-going culture by creating long-lasting relationships inside and outside of the classroom because it

helps to cultivate a space where students can be successful. The participants mentioned that their support systems include those around them that help to encourage them to succeed. Those include family members, friends, co-workers, and staff within the college. Tinto (2010) also mentioned that students must transition from their prior communities and become more engaged in the college-going community. This mindset aids in retention, persistence, and increased graduation rates for Black female students (Tinto, 2010). The members of the participants' external support systems have all served in this capacity.

Social support is a crucial component of student success because, as research has indicated, students with a defined sense of belonging tend to have higher persistence and graduation rates (Tinto, 2010). In addition, students are more likely to succeed when they have strong support systems and are in an environment where those around them push them to succeed. P#4 summarized the importance of support systems by stating, "I would have given up the first time when things got hard if I did not have my support system."

### **Theme #3. Purpose: My Why**

#### ***Theme #3: Data Results***

If positive support systems are the glue to helping Black females succeed in college, then having a clear understanding of one's purpose is the drive that pushes students to persist and retain. In addition, a well-defined purpose helps to explain the why behind the decision to enroll in college, succeed in college, and ultimately, graduate.

Understanding purpose also helps to drive students forward during their educational journeys. Once "the why" is solidified, the progression toward graduation becomes more seamless. Each of the six participants noted their reasons for obtaining their degree and indicated it is because they want to make a better life for themselves and/or their family members. The

purpose is tied to drive, and drive is tied to success. When both things are put together, the likelihood of Black female students graduating, and persisting is increased. Theme #3 supports research question number two as it discusses the factors most significant to the participants' success.

**P#1**

- “I want to create generational wealth so that when I have children, I can send them to college and help pay for at least two years of their education.”
- “Breaking generational curses within my family is important to me.”
- “I am a first-generation college student, so yes I will graduate.”
- “I want to stunt on everyone that has ever doubted me. I like nicer things in life so getting a degree is something that I have to do, and it is something that can never be taken away from me.”

**P#2**

- “No one in my family has been to college, so I want to prove to myself that I can do it and I will be successful at it.”
- “Unsure about life after high school, I figured college would be the next step. My mom said that I go to college and live at home for free or go out and get a job and help with half of the bills. I decided college was the route I was taking.”
- “I am setting an example for my sister. She attended MCC in the past but dropped out. She is thinking about coming back to school and I believe I am her motivation.”

**P#3**

- “Black families make going to college a non-negotiable, so I felt it was necessary to go to college after high school.”
- “Coming back to school the second time was a personal choice. I knew it was something I needed to do, and I also am not satisfied in my current job, so in order to change that, I have to get my degree.”
- “Working in my field, I do not see many Black professionals, so it is my driving force to accomplish my goal of getting my degree and being someone's boss.”

**P#4**

- “Becoming a teach will allow me the opportunity to help others. Being in the classroom is something that I am passionate about.”



**P#5**

- “I will be successful in life, and I know that I can make more money with a degree. There is not much I can do in life without getting a degree.”
- “My family did not give me an option to go to college, getting a degree is something that I have to do.”

**P#6**

- “Getting a degree is something that I must do. It’s a goal and I will accomplish it.”
- “I want to make video games as a career, and this certificate will help me do that.”
- “I made the decision to come back to MCC because I have learned more about my learning disability and I know how to maintain it, which allows me to be successful this time around.”

***Theme #3: Analysis***

The participants in this study shared their experiences as to why they decided to pursue a degree. While each reason varied from the other, the consensus was the desire to have a prosperous life. A well-defined purpose gives meaning and direction to a decision, and in this study, the focus is degree/certificate attainment. Tinto suggests that once students have committed to education, it helps their overall desire to complete the degree (Tinto, 2010). P#3 shared that coming back to college the second time around was a personal decision, and one that was made because of her desire to have more in her career, and the only way to change that is to get a degree.

Being an example for others was a common theme throughout this study: “Researchers define purpose in life as a stable sense of commitment to accomplish something that not only is meaningful to you personally, but that also makes a difference in the world beyond yourself”

(“Purpose for Students,” 2022, p. 1). Participants mentioned that their purpose included:

- Breaking generational curses.
- Motivating family members to return to college.
- Better job opportunities.

- Career advancement.
- Helping others.
- Overall better life.

It has been determined that students with a defined purpose do better in college because they can relate their drive and ambition to their future aspirations (“Purpose for Students,” 2022). P#4 summarized her purpose: “I want to stunt on everyone that doubted me, and I like nicer things in life. Getting a degree is something no one can ever take from me.” Purpose and degree attainment go hand in hand because they support keeping students focused and steadfast toward achieving their goals. Each participant in this study has shown a defined purpose, and it supports their desire to persist in college.

#### **Theme #4. Perseverance**

##### ***Theme #4: Data Results***

Having the will and ability to push through when things become challenging is the act of perseverance. Each of the six participants has encountered times when they have or felt like giving up but ultimately made the conscious decision to push forward because of their support systems or their internal drive. Each participant was asked if their internal and external motivational (support systems) factors were absent, would they still be as successful as they currently are. The participants were also asked about the barriers they had to overcome during their journey toward persistence and retention.

Theme #4, perseverance, spans across research questions two and three. Research question number two examines the idea of whether the participants would still be successful with or without the presence of their motivational factors. Perseverance also appeared in research question three because the participants were asked to explain if they encountered any barriers

that could affect their overall persistence. Below are their accounts of how they can motivate themselves and overcome obstacles because of their dedication and desire to succeed.

**P#1**

- “If I did not have the support from my friends and family, I would still be successful because I am single, no kids, and still live with my mom. Where others may have outside barriers that could stop them from attending college, I do not have those right now, so I am going to be successful.”
- “I work two jobs, and juggling school but I understand that I have to do what I have to do to finish my education.”
- “Currently, I know how to motivate myself.”
- “I now have a mentality of success.”
- “If I have to work two jobs, I am going to work. If I have to get up at five o’clock in the morning, I am going to get up. I am going to do whatever I have to do to graduate with my degree.”

**P#2**

- “If my motivational factors were not present, I would have to figure things out on my own. It would take more effort, but I would still be successful.”
- “It would take more learning, but I do think I would still be the same level of successful.”
- “I would still pursue a degree if I did not have support from my village because I would try to find someone at MCC that is able to motivate me.”
- “I would just need to prove to myself that I could do it with or without people.”
- “Procrastination is my biggest barrier. I am working to become better in that area because it is necessary for me to be successful.”

**P#3**

- “Without my support system, I would not be successful, nor would I have the time to get everything done that I need to in order to be a good student.”
- “With everything that I have going on in my life, I would not have enough time in the day to get everything done.”
- “Being a mom is my first priority, and I have a lot on my plate.”
- “My support systems help me with homework, questions, and allow me to vent. They help me a lot and help to lessen my load.”

- “I would not have the time to do what I need to do if I did not have my support systems helping me. But, because I want to be great in life, I would still find a way.”

**P#4**

- “I would not be as successful without my support systems because I need a lot of motivation from others to get things done.”
- “I took summer classes, and I lacked motivation, so I did not do well in those classes. I did not get the help or encouragement that I needed.”
- “I would not be as successful because I like the idea of having others around me to ensure we are keeping each other accountable. When you have the same classes with other people you know, you can work together to ensure you understand what is happening in the class.”
- “Pursuing a degree would be hard without my motivation factors because I need people around to support and push me.”
- “Learning to adjust was a challenge. I had many issues with my instructors and had to find a way to navigate that.”
- “Being the only Black student in the class, I was not seen by my faculty members.”

**P#5**

- “Having people around supporting me both internally and externally makes a big difference. This being my second time at MCC, if I would have had support from MCC from the beginning I probably would have stayed. I was feeling like no one understood me on top of having issues, so I had to drop out.”
- “My mom really motivated me so without her support thing may look different for me.”
- “I have learned to motivate myself over the years and I know that I want to become a nurse, so I have to do whatever I need to with or without my motivating factors. It would be challenging but I am at the point where being successful is number one, and I am going to do it.”
- “I have a lot of different things going on in my life, work and bills, and then adding school on top of it, can be challenging.”
- “Struggling to fit in when I am the only Black student in a class and not feeling understood is hard.”

**P#6**

- “It is because of those motivating me, that I am back in classes now. They pushed and encouraged me to complete my certificate.”

- “My support systems have never given up on me, and without them I may still be just working and not focusing on my degree.”
- “Working through my disability has stopped my college journey before, but now I have a handle on that, and I now know how to focus on school.”

#### ***Theme #4: Data Analysis***

Perseverance is necessary for persistence and graduation for Black female students.

When perseverance is present in the desire to obtain a college credential, students are more apt to push through difficult situations because of their cultivated self-tenacity. Researchers have noted that students with higher levels of self-efficacy can maneuver through complicated situations easier than those with low levels of self-efficacy because they view stressful or trying situations (barriers) as challenges instead of threats (Thomas et al., 2009).

Self-efficacy also helps to explain why Black females can persist in higher education despite challenges because of their willingness and desire to make a better life for themselves, model the way for their friends and family members, have a flourishing life, and increase their innate ability to motivate themselves despite motivational support from internal or external systems. Perseverance is the will to push through regardless of the situation. These participants have all proven that they can prevail, some without solid support systems and others with support systems, but collectively achievement and success is the overarching goal. P#2 stated, “if my motivational factors were not present, I would have to figure things out on my own. It would take more effort, but I would still be successful.” This is the true definition of perseverance.

P#5 explained that she has learned to motivate herself over the years, and because she is confident in her career goals, she will do whatever it takes to be successful. She went on to describe that she will obtain success with or without the presence of motivating factors. This rings true because she now believes that success is her number one priority and will attain it.

Two participants said it is necessary to have support from their external support systems in order

to be successful college students because they help support and push them. Still, they also help to eliminate barriers that could get in their way. These participants understand the value of their support systems and depend on them to motivate and encourage. Because of that encouragement, they can still be at the same level of success.

## **Theme #5. Institutional Motivators: The College**

### ***Theme #5: Data Results***

A theme prevalent throughout the research was the impact or lack thereof for the support received from the college. Meaning the college itself did not directly impact the overall success of some participants, but there were instances where key departmental staff were both encouraging and motivating. The six participants shared their experiences of what the college has or has not contributed to their overall success. This theme aligns with research question three because it discusses the external barriers or challenges the participants encountered that influenced their college studies. Below are the participant's accounts of how institutional motivators, the college, has affected their college studies.

#### **P#1**

- “I have had to find internal (self) motivation because I have not received many things from MCC.”
- “There is a lot that happens to get you to become a student at MCC but there is not much that happens to keep you as a student.”
- “My biggest downfall has been going to my counselor for advice or support and not getting it. That has really killed my dreams.”
- “I thought I could go to my counselor because they would understand me, but I don’t know if it was necessarily that I was a black woman, but I walk away feeling discouraged.”

#### **P#2**

- “I do not use anything that the College has to offer. If I do have a question or concern, I will ask one of the counselors.”

**P#3**

- “My biology teacher told me about the College offering SI opportunities. This was my first time being told that there was a place I could go if I needed extra help.”
- “I work during the time SI is offered so I am unable to utilize this assistance.”

**P#4**

- “The Early College program was beneficial to my success. The mentors were my biggest help. They held monthly meetings with us to talk about academic progress, transferring, FAFSA, and obtaining transcripts. They held me accountable, and it was great to keep me motivated.”
- “The EC Mentors helped to keep me on track and when they saw me falling behind, they would check on me discuss what needs to happen to get back on track.”
- “Without the EC program, I would not have been as successful as I am.”

**P#5**

- “MCC has not done anything to help me be successful as a student.”
- “I have had a lot of issues with instructors and that has caused me to be unmotivated more than anything.”
- “I noticed that when I look around, I am the only Black female in a classroom so when I am trying to get help, it is like no one understands or is willing to help me.”

**P#6**

- “The College has not supported me on my journey to get my certificate. When I stopped attending the first time, I did not feel like the College cared that I dropped out.”
- “There were two people at the College that supported me on my journey to return to College and it is because of them that I am now enrolled.”

***Theme #5: Analysis***

Each of the six participants in this study spoke to the impact or lack thereof of support the college offered in pursuit of their success. The interviews revealed varying levels of support, ranging from limited to no support to influential support from people in some regions of the college. The theme of limited internal support from the college was supported in many ways. Some of those ways include finding other means of support because it was not received from the college, being misunderstood by counselors, awareness of being the only Black student in class,

lack of caring, and different programs within the college providing support that aided in success and forming relationships with staff that supported the return to college. Each of these areas exemplifies the theme of limited support and its impact on the success of Black female students.

Two of the six participants explained that being the only Black female in a class or being misunderstood by faculty or staff has aided in their conclusion that colleges provide limited support in terms of success. Research coins this feeling as tokenism: “Black women may feel tokenized based on being the only Black person, the only woman, or the only Black woman. Tokenism is an implied responsibility of having to represent one’s entire race or gender” (Matthews et al., 2021, p. 1). One participant felt faculty members did not care about her or the outside distractions she dealt with daily. Their understanding created a void that prevented her from being focused and present in class. Research explains that advisors and faculty members must familiarize themselves with the experiences that are causing issues for Black female students and other marginalized groups. This is necessary because a unique approach that communicates understanding is vital for the engagement and awareness of these groups (Matthews et al., 2021).

While this study focused on the factors that have aided in success, it is important to understand the other challenges that could directly impact their success rate. For example, one participant shared a story of a time she felt discriminated against by a faculty member, and it tainted how she thought about the faculty member, the college, and those who failed to help her during the situation. There is a negative connotation that comes along with being a Black female, and students must master the art of fighting back against stereotypes and microaggressions but at the same time staying true to themselves (Matthews et al., 2021). P#1 explained that her issues with particular faculty members left her feeling unmotivated and discouraged: “The angry Black



woman stereotype permits non-Black women to question the validity of an experience and often leads to Black women's silencing" (Matthews et al., 2021, p. 2). Imposter syndrome is another challenge: the fear of not being as competent or knowledgeable as others. P#1 and P#5 shared experiences where they believed they must work harder than their counterparts because they were considered inferior. Imposter syndrome leads to self-doubt and low expectations, which is even more prevalent when Black females cannot build a community within their college walls: "Marginalized students who experience imposter syndrome may experience a lack of engagement in academic pursuits, a negative impact on their mental health, and develop unhealthy expectations of success" (Matthews et al., 2021, p. 2).

This study has shown that these six Black participants are resilient. Still, it is essential to understand how those challenges can be mitigated and aid in Black females feeling supported in college. First, acknowledging that this group of females faces different experiences and needs counselors, advisors, and faculty members aware of the events shaping Black females and their development and understanding that a one size fits all approach will not help push Black females forward. Assistance is necessary for Black females as it aids in students feeling comfortable, safe, and supported. It is also essential to understand that creating a sense of belonging is critical; students need that to adjust. Lastly, Black females need strong people in their corner that is advocating for their success (Matthews et al., 2021). A sense of belonging builds trust and ultimately helps Black females persist and retain.

### **Analysis Summary**

Throughout the interviews, the themes of internal motivators: my drive, external motivators: the people, purpose: "my why," perseverance, and institutional motivators: the college was prevalent. The participants in this study shared their experiences surrounding being a

Black female enrolled at a community college. Each participant talked about their personal support systems' important role in their overall success. They also spoke about how their internal drive has aided in their passage to persistence and retention. Support systems were different across the board regarding who their support systems included. Still, each participant had exceptional support, which helped ensure the participants were motivated and encouraged. When the right support system is in place, Black females are more likely to succeed in a community college setting because of the backing, inspiration, and elimination of barriers that could get in the way of the participants' success in college. In detail, each participant also explained that understanding their reasons for going to college has aided in staying focused and continuing to work hard to complete their college degree or certification. "To make a better life for me" or "to be an example for members of my family" were the main points participants mentioned when discussing their "why" behind getting a college credential; when support systems and a firm "why" are combined, Black female students have a higher probability of enrolling, persisting, and retaining.

Significant evidence existed for each theme throughout the participant's interviews, but their drive and perseverance were prevalent and were strong indicators of their overall success. The participants noted their definition of motivation and how it directly impacts their ability to succeed in college. Many stated that motivation is why they get up and get things done, the drive that pushes them forward, and the thing that encourages them to accomplish their goals. Two participants homed in on the importance of a strong sense of internal drive because being a Black female can be challenging, especially in the college setting. So, having a strong sense of motivation is necessary to show up, be successful, and navigate through the stereotypes that are projected onto Black students. Intrinsic motivation plays a key role in these themes, and as

Souders (2019) states, that motivation is an internal process that could be defined as a drive or a need, but it is the thing within us that desires a change.

Perseverance is the ability to push through challenging situations when things become difficult. Each participant shared that they have been met with barriers at different points throughout their educational journeys and had to find ways to maneuver through them. The backing from their support systems and their intrinsic motivation factors kept them focused on their college studies. Finding the balance between work and school, learning how to cope with difficult instructors, procrastination, being a single parent, and navigating through the thoughts of not being understood because of being a small number, if not the only Black female student in a classroom. Students who learn how to press forward amongst barriers tend to have a higher level of self-efficacy, view barriers as challenges and have a higher chance of success (Thomas et al., 2009).

Each participant was asked about the effect of the institutional motivators in terms of what the college has provided to help the participants succeed in college. Most of the responses were the same; the college has yet to do much. While this is very alarming, the participants shared why this was a true statement for them and how they have learned to lean on themselves and others for the motivation to be successful. Three participants had the same sentiment: they felt they needed to be understood by their instructors, and the college did not care about their success. Two participants felt that specific areas within the college aided their success: staff members and the early college program. The early college program provided check-ins, accountability, and specific staff members who served as resources whenever there was a question or a challenge. Those factors were necessary for the students to feel their level of

success would have been the same. Combining their intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, including institutional motivators, gave them the tenacity to persist and retain.

The data collected from the participants showcase that students pull from different motivational factors when it pertains to their abilities to be successful. Still, the factors are both intrinsic and extrinsic. Each participant relies on their external support systems but also has a strong desire to be successful overall. The participants also mentioned that with solid support systems comes accountability, partnerships, and a mindset that goal achievement is no longer optional but is required. Having a solid sense of self, understanding the why, and leaning on both internal and external support systems have all aided in the six participants being successful college students.

## **Conclusion**

Black females face many challenges that can potentially affect their college journey. From stereotypes, K-12 education preparedness, a lack of belonging in classes, and having the opinion that they must “prove” who they are. However, Black females are resilient; some will continue to push through the inequalities because of their drive and ambition to obtain their degree, while others will get caught in the complications of their lives. Much research has been devoted to the matriculation rate of Black students, but there has not been a strong focus placed on the progression of Black females and the factors driving them forward (Byrd & Porter, 2021). This research study has showcased that Black females attending community colleges lean heavily on their external support systems. Most have developed a strong sense of internal motivation that has helped them progress through the community college sector.

Black females will continue to use their upbringing and experiences to shape their identities, but it is essential to understand that Black females will push the needle toward higher education for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons.

Further, we must not feel diminished for the unconventional reasons that push Black females toward success. Whether it is genuine interest, personal accomplishment, desire for upward mobility, or simply wanting to “prove them wrong,” Black females should feel liberated to use any source of motivation required to advance their personal and intellectual growth (Moore, 2018, p. 1).

This study sought to see if there was a direct correlation between motivational factors and success for Black female students. Each participant confirmed that having strong support systems, internal drive, determination, and understanding of their purpose has aided in their success as college students.

## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

### **Introduction**

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors directly impact the success rate of Black female students at community colleges and serve as important determinants of overall success. Intrinsic motivation factors include internal interest and desire to learn new things. This form of motivation encourages students to persist and retain because the experience is something that they enjoy, and they have a heightened interest level to perform. Extrinsic motivation deals with the desire to accomplish a task because of what will be received, for example, a new job, recognition, or financial reward (Bontempi, 2019). Extrinsic motivation is the form of motivation that is outside of one's external self and can cause interest to diminish once the reward is taken away. Research has found that students have a higher level of success in college when there is a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Blake, 2023).

The issues related to the persistence and retention rates of Black students are complex, but it is crucial to understand why Black females are outnumbering their male counterparts by more than two to one (Harper & Harris, 2012). To gain a better understanding, this study focused on understanding what motivational factors directly impacted the success of Black females at community colleges. This research is necessary because it allows educational leaders to understand this phenomenon and its impact on Black females and implement initiatives, ideas, or programs for Black students.

## **Summary of the Results**

This study has shown that Black females lend heavily to their support systems and internal drive to push them toward success. Despite being among one of the lowest achieving groups of students, Black females are excelling at exceptional rates compared to their male counterparts. However, enrollment and persistence continue to be a significant concern in higher education; in the Fall 2020 semester, Black student enrollment declined by 13% from the previous fall semester at community colleges alone (Anthony et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential to understand how motivation is tied to success to combat this decline. Research has indicated that Black females have found a way to persist and retain in college, demonstrating their resilience. They can also find support from those around them to encourage, motivate, and push them toward success.

This study revealed that the presence of internal or external motivational factors, and/or the combination of both, directly correlates to the likelihood of success at community colleges for Black female students. Five themes were identified from the study data that illustrate some of the reasons why these students are more successful than their college counterparts: (1) internal motivators: my drive, (2) external motivators: the people, (3) purpose, (4) perseverance, and (5) institutional motivators: the college. In the previous chapter, each theme was discussed and analyzed to understand better how and why the impact played a role in their success. It was also determined that without motivation and internal support, this group of students believed they would not be successful and would have to find support from different sources. Therefore, intrinsic motivation and support are a key indicator of success for Black female students.

## **Implications of this Study**

Research has shown that Black women are far exceeding Black men in relation to overall enrollment at four-year and community colleges. In 2018, 62% of Black students completed a

degree compared to 95.76% of White students. Of this 62%, 36.1% represent Black females who completed their degrees while only 26.5% of Black men completed (*The NCES Fast Facts Tool Provides Quick Answers to Many Education Questions (National Center for Education Statistics)*, n.d.). In 2020, Black student enrollment declined by 13% at community colleges and 7.5% overall in higher education (Anthony et al., 2021). These numbers are alarming, but it also shows that Black females have found the tenacity and grit necessary to enroll, persist, and retain over Black males. While Black females are still far behind peers from other races, they are consistently climbing the higher education ladder. This study has shown how impactful support systems and internal and external motivational factors are to Black females enrolled in community colleges. The lack of support systems or the ability to encourage themselves may present a challenge for students trying to succeed.

### ***Impact of Intrinsic Motivators***

Understanding the participants' personal definition of motivation is a crucial indicator of success, as it is the foundation of their internal process that pushes them toward attainment. The participants all concluded that their motivational factors give them the push they need to “get up” and accomplish tasks. These factors also provide their drive and dedication and allow them to press toward their end goal, which is degree or certification completion.

### ***Impact of Personal Support Systems***

The presence of support systems is also vital for success because it brings a level of accountability, partnership, and a mindset shift toward the college-going culture. When students have a robust support system behind them, their drive toward success is increased, and persistence and retention are no longer optional but required. Participant #4 showed the importance of support systems by saying that she would have given up when things became



difficult if it had not been for her support system. Her statement reflected clearly how important the external motivators are for students. Having the drive and perseverance to push through any situation is also a key indicator because understanding why they decided to get a degree and the ability to move through difficult situations when they arise is necessary for success. The participants concluded that the desire to have a better life and serve as examples for family members were their why and another motivating factor that increased their desire to keep going.

### ***Impact of Institutional Supports***

Lastly, institution support from the community college showed up differently for each participant in terms of serving as a motivational factor. Two of the participants found support from specific staff people and programs offered by the College but the remaining participants stated they received minimal support that has aided in their success. The concept of not belonging on campus was brought up multiple times throughout the interviews because participants did not find that there were people on campus who they could relate to and they had difficulties connecting with instructors and counselors. Being from a small group of Black students on campus, they often found themselves being the only Black student in a class and that caused feelings of not feeling supported or understood. Together these challenges combine to make their success in the community college more difficult. Some of the challenges had a greater impact than others, but in all they did not seem to impact the persistence and retention of these Black female students. Only the two who had developed personal one-on-one connections with staff members felt that the College supported their educational journey.

### ***Summary of the Implications***

Motivation is the desire or willingness to accomplish something and encourages people to set goals and work towards accomplishing them. Increased motivation also directly affects the

behavior and choices students make regarding education and success (Cox, 2022). Support systems can be made up of family members, friends, co-workers, classmates, etc. It includes anyone who helps support, motivate, and aid in removing barriers so that students can focus on their college success. There is value in having effective support systems and a personal mindset focused on success and goal attainment. Black females experience many unique challenges that could impact their college journeys, but they are resilient and have a strong will, drive, and ambition to obtain degrees (Anthony et al., 2021). Community colleges should intentionally provide staff and faculty members who can serve as support systems for this demographic of students. This study has also determined that students do not have a sense of belonging in the classroom because they are sometimes the only black student in the room. Therefore, providing a space for Black students that encourages belonging is necessary and could be directly related to overall success at the college. Campus leadership should pay close attention to what works for Black females and use that model for all Black students on campus. Based on the premise of this research, community college leaders should create new programs and initiatives and review current practices to ensure they are helping to push Black students toward success.

## **Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions of this Study**

### ***Limitations***

This study adds value to the subject of motivation and success for Black females at community colleges, but there were limitations to the research. First, during the interview process, there were issues setting up a time to meet with two participants. Communication was slow and narrowing down a date and time to conduct the interview was a challenge. One of the interviews had to be conducted one month after the others; in addition, the interview was held

after business hours because the participant forgot about the initial interview date and time on multiple occasions.

During the interview process, one interview was interrupted because of an admissions emergency, and the researcher had to handle the situation at that very moment. This interruption impacted the quality of responses and could have disrupted the participant's thoughts on the questions or topic currently being discussed.

Lastly, during one of the interviews, the recording device was not recording the conversation, and the first few thoughts from the participant were not captured. The researcher had to re-ask the questions after the recording was resumed. This disruption could have caused the participant not to remember exactly what was stated before the interview was interrupted as well as causing the conversation to flow less smoothly.

### ***Delimitations***

The delimitations for this study surrounded the participants' characteristics and selection for this study. First, the participants represented a small selection of Black female students enrolled at community colleges. Expanding the scope and including participants from other community colleges around Michigan could have enhanced the collected information. Secondly, only six Black females were interviewed for the study. Eight participants were invited to participate, but only six responded to the invitation email. A larger sample pool could result in more accurate data collection, and that could then be used to generalize to the overall population. Lastly, the participants in this study were not selected randomly; instead, they were nominated by several staff members at the College; thus, the purposeful sampling method is a study delimitation. Finally, the participants were selected because they were currently enrolled, had completed a minimum of one year of college courses, were Black females, and had some form of

relationship with the staff member who recommended them for the study. These criteria resulted in a small sample size of participants with limited experience, location, and background.

The two most common assumptions throughout this study were honesty and truthfulness. These assumptions were the foundation of the study, as they involved accepting that the participants' comments were true and a depiction of their experiences and their reality. Also, the belief was that the responses provided by each participant were complete in nature and relative to the topic. Lastly, the researcher being a Black female working in higher education presented personal biases concerning the institution's responsibility to provide appropriate support for student persistence, retention, and success.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on extensive research, Black students have been shown to be among the lowest-achieving groups compared to their peers in terms of college enrollment, persistence, retention, and graduation rates. This has been the case for many years, and while there has been a strong focus placed on increasing persistence and retention rates for Black males, Black females have often been ignored when it comes to specific programs and services targeted towards females. If community colleges are committed to all students' success, then it is necessary for them to identify and implement solutions that directly address the specific needs and challenges of this group and address the attainment gap that still exists between Black females and White students in general. The findings of this study, delimitations, and assumptions help provide several avenues for possible future research that can have a lasting impact on Black females enrolled at community colleges.

## ***1. Institutional Academic Success***

Black females have persisted at almost 10% higher rates than Black males at community colleges. This indicates additional research is needed on Black females' success and the driving forces behind their college achievements. Institutions can begin by studying their own programs to determine what aspects are most successful. By investing in research, colleges can better support initiatives that improve college completion and overall success. By investing in further research, colleges will be able to fill in the gaps as to why Black females and males persist at different rates, the factors that are the most important and have also aided in overall success for this demographic of students. Studies like Anthony (2021) showcases the importance of pointing out achievement gaps and finding ways to close the gaps to aid in student progression.

## ***2. Mentorship***

Many of the participants in this study have found themselves seeking assistance from counselors and faculty members at different points throughout their college experience and found the relationship challenging. Through this study, it has been determined that having a support system is one of the most influential motivational factors for Black female students, so investing time and energy into the implementation of a college mentorship program could help to strengthen the connection students have on campus and could aid in increased persistence and retention rates. Further research surrounding mentorship and its connection with overall success would be beneficial for community colleges to build on studies like Gibson's 2014 work that found that mentoring programs have a direct correlation to persistence and retention. Mentoring efforts also help boost and motivate students while helping to overcome challenges associated with being a college student.

### ***3. Model Early College Programs***

Early college programs have staff members dedicated to their students' success. In these programs, students have regular check-ins with their designated dean or mentor, get assistance with class registration, are assigned a person to help with issues and challenges, and have someone to hold them accountable. This method has been shown to be successful in many ways for the early college students. Institutions should research how these resources have aided in success and find ways to implement them for Black students. One participant in this study shared how her experience with the Early College program was exceptional in terms of support, and if it had not been for their encouragement and assistance, she would not have continued as a college student.

### ***4. Effects of First-Generation Status***

Limited research focuses on the effects of first-generation status as it relates to motivation and persistence. Historically, Black females are members of two marginalized groups, so adding first-generation status could positively or negatively affect students' motivation to persist. Studies have shown that first-generation students account for one-third of college students, so there should be significant importance placed on understanding how being a first-generation college student can directly impact a student's motivation and desire to complete. Callan (2018) completed a study surrounding Black female, first-generation college students as it relates to persistence, and this work is necessary to better understand the motivation of students of color.

### ***5. Effects of Financial Need***

Understanding the correlation between financial need and student persistence will help to broaden the viewpoint of students of color and higher education. Research has shown that

students of color have a higher percentage rate of their socio-economic status being at or near the poverty level than that of their White counterparts. Conducting research that focuses on financial programs that help cover tuition costs will allow more layers to be uncovered as it relates to the impact on motivation and college success for Black female students.

#### ***6. Value of a College Degree***

Throughout this study, the participants answered questions surrounding their reasons for getting a college degree, and many responses led back to desired careers and lifestyles. Future research needs to be conducted to better understand students' perceptions of the value of a college degree and how it correlates to their future career opportunities and overall quality of life. Motivation directly correlates to student success, so one could conclude that if students have a high value on obtaining a college degree, then the likelihood of completion is high.

#### ***7. Increase Sample Size***

Because this study was limited in range because of the participant sample size, additional research could be conducted to expand the research approach to more students at different community colleges throughout Michigan or surrounding areas. Research has proven that the presence of motivational factors aids in college success for Black female students, so it is vital to broaden the scope to ensure that the data can be used to generalize the findings to the entire student population. This would also allow community colleges to use the data to implement programs and initiatives directly impacting Black students.

#### ***8. Increase Faculty/Staff of Color***

A study by Vincent Tinto explained that for students to be successful in college, institutions must create a sense of belonging. The participants in this study shared that they immediately noticed there were not many faculty and staff on campus who looked like them,

thus leaving the students with the feeling that they did not belong, nor were they understood. These findings indicate that the number of Black faculty and staff members is a key factor in this demographic's success. Community colleges should dig deep into the makeup of their faculty and staff and ensure that those numbers mimic that of the student population as well as that of the surrounding community. While this conclusion is not new, we must do more to increase diversity in our staff; creating a sense of belonging for students equates to higher persistence and retention numbers for the college.

### **Researcher's Reflection**

This research was personal because, being a Black female, I have had to overcome many obstacles throughout my degree attainment journey. I could relate to many of the findings discovered throughout this study, and they have directly impacted my many educational experiences. Working in higher education for many years, I have been privy to the challenges and wins that Black females face, and it sparked my interest in helping students of color succeed. The desire to gain a better understanding was personal and necessary because I have a deep passion for increasing the retention and persistence rates of students of color. This process was gratifying in many ways because it validated my personal experiences and allowed me to lay the foundation to help community college leaders successfully help students of color.

### **Summary**

This study explored the lived experiences of six Black female students enrolled in community college institutions and the correlation between motivational factors and success. Specifically, this study examined how their internal and external motivating factors — or combination of both — have impacted their ability to be successful college students. Overwhelmingly, the six participants indicated that their success is directly tied to the presence



of their support systems, their internal drive to obtain a college credential, and their belief that graduating from college will create a better life for themselves.

This study was intended to bring awareness to the success of Black female college students and the driving force behind why they are persisting and retaining at a much higher rate than that of Black males. The hope is that the results of this study can be used to inform community college leaders of the gaps Black students are experiencing and develop appropriate initiatives, programs, and services that will target this demographic of students and lead them toward success rates similar to that of their peers. It is also necessary for college leaders to focus on Black female students' persistence and retention rates as these women, with their male counterparts, are still among the lowest achieving groups of students.

The results of this study support the idea that Black females thrive when they have supportive people around them. Support systems not only encourage, motivate, and push the students towards success, but they also help to remove barriers that could get in the way of these students being successful in college. The participants noted that they have had to overcome a wide range of challenges while in college and any of these could have derailed their college journey without the proper support. Some of those challenges include the feeling of not belonging, struggling to relate to faculty and staff, not seeing others who look like them in and out of the classroom, having family obligations, and lacking support from college faculty and staff in their times of need. These challenges, if not addressed, could have significant impacts on the overall persistence and retention numbers for Black female and male students. There is much work to be done surrounding the success of Black students in higher education, but this study has shown that by focusing on key student support systems, students can have higher success rates

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