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Exploring the Experiences Contributing to the Success of High-Achieving Black Female Undergraduate Students at a Predominantly White Institution

Whitney Watkins
University of Central Florida

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EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES CONTRIBUTING TO THE SUCCESS OF
HIGH-ACHIEVING BLACK FEMALE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

by

WHITNEY WATKINS
B.S., Florida State University, 2009
M.S.Ed., Indiana University, 2011

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Much of the literature regarding Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWI) focuses on these students' academic difficulty, while there is far less attention paid to the performance of higher achieving Black students (Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Therefore, this study explored the lived experiences of high-achieving Black female students, focusing particularly on the experiences which contribute to their success at a PWI. The qualitative phenomenological research design was used to highlight emergent themes revealed during the study. Eight purposely selected students participated in one-on-one semi structured interviews and a Sister Circle group process.

The participants' stories were highlighted both independently and collectively, reflecting a wide range of sentiments. During the data analysis process, there were six themes that emerged from the data which highlighted the experiences which contributed to the students' success at a PWI. Those themes included: 1) Support, 2) Processing Situations, 3) Defining Success, 4) Involvement, 5) Motivation, and 6) Background.

The emergent themes provided strategies and recommendations for Black female students, higher education practitioners, and institutions. These recommendations included areas regarding programming, retention and recruitment strategies, resource creation, and relationship building. Additionally, implications were made for future research initiatives. The data, coupled with the researcher's reflections served as the basis for the implications and recommendations for this study.

Keywords: high-achieving, Black, female, PWI, predominantly White institution, success, achievement, undergraduate, motivation, involvement, support, background, sister circle

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother, Marcelene Goodman, who was unable to see this

day happen but who was here when it all started. Grandma, thank you for being God's fiercest

prayer warrior. This win is for you.

Rest In Paradise (5-25-16)

Thank you. You all will always have my love and I appreciate the place you have in my heart, for it encouraged me many times during this journey.

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Black women in college and encourage them to succeed and shun the stereotypes placed on them by others.

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Last, but not least, I would like to acknowledge my grandmother Marcelene Goodman who passed away before she was able to see me complete my dissertation. My grandmother was a dedicated spiritual warrior who always prayed for her granddaughter. My grandmother was fierce in her walk with God and served as a beautiful example of what it meant to walk with the Lord. I pay homage to her with this dissertation because it is not just mine but hers also.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS (or) ABBREVIATIONS

CD-RISC - Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale

HBCU – Historically Black Colleges and Universities

NCES – National Center for Education Statistics

PWI – Predominantly White Institution

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education in the United States and other nations. The Center is located within the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences. By congressional mandate, the NCES collects, collates, analyzes, and reports complete statistics on the condition of American education. Additionally, the NCES conducts and publishes reports and reviews on education-related activities internationally (NCES, 2014).

In 2014, the NCES reported that undergraduate enrollment for Black students was 14.5% of all student enrollment. Furthermore, of the male enrollment representation, 12.5% were Black and 60% were White. Finally, of the female enrollment, 16% were Black and 56.9% were White (NCES, 2014).

Despite a steady increase in Black college student enrollment from less than ten percent in 1976 to over 14% in 2014, the NCES has documented that Black students consistently lag behind their White counterparts in enrollment (NCES, 2014). This stark difference among enrollment percentages triggers the fundamental question of "why"? Research suggests that one reason for this enrollment gap is due to changes in national financial aid policies. For instance, after the U.S. Department of Education tightened the credit standards for Parent Loans for Undergraduate Students (PLUS), national enrollment for Black students in the 2012-2013 academic year decreased more than any other race (Johnson, Bruch, & Gill, 2015).

Other reasons for differences in enrollment have been identified as well. For instance, Black, Cortes, and Lincove (2015) asserted that the college application, itself, can be a daunting task for first-generation students. Given that ethnic minority students are more likely than other

students to be the first in their family to attend college, it can be difficult to navigate this process without familial assistance (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Moreover, changes in financial policy, as well as, the gravity of the application process are just a few of the many additional reasons related to low enrollment for Black college students in the United States (Black, Cortes, & Lincove, 2015; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005).

Similarly, the gap between Black and White college students' enrollment parallels the difference in graduation rates between Black and White college students. For Black students pursuing a bachelor's degree full-time for the first time, starting in 2008, they had a 21% four year completion rate, a 35% five year completion rate, and a 40% six year completion rate. Compared to the same figures for their White counter parts, respectively (44%, 59%, and 63%), there is a sizeable lag in completion rates between the two groups (NCES, 2014). Specifically, for Black males, the completion rates for four, five, and six years respectively were 16%, 30%, and 35%, while Black females were 25%, 40%, and 44% (NCES, 2014).

Based on these multiple trends, it is important to recognize and address the academic gaps between Black students and White students, while considering how best to approach these issues. Therefore, this study addressed concerns surrounding the question of why it is important to study Black students in college, specifically high-achieving Black female undergraduate students.

<u>General Background</u>

Prior to the Brown v. Board of Education case in 1954, access to a formal education for Black people, especially in the South, was difficult at best. During the years of slavery in the United States, earning an education was not deemed "appropriate behavior" for Black people, as declared by White people in power (Hill, 1985; Thomas, 1981). As a result, pursuing a formal

education was a feat which was feared by Black people at the time. Racism was used as a means to leverage power held by White people, which placed Black people at a grave disadvantage in society (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard III, 2003). Though seemingly impossible to reach, Black people valued a formal education and held it in high regard as a representation of triumph and freedom (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard III, 2003).

Over time, slavery was declared illegal and Black people were permitted to learn, formally, though Black education facilities were not as well-funded as White institutions. Enrollment of Black people in the education system increased, growing from approximately 3,000 students in the early 1900s to over 70,000 in the mid-1950s (Hill, 1985). Despite growth in enrollment, Black people still learned in separate facilities until the Brown v. Board of Education case in 1954. This case declared that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal. It struck down the ruling of Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896 which declared the separate facilities legal and equal (Hill, 1985).

Brown v. Board of Education opened the door to a number of other cases of racial segregation and federal regulations such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This Act allowed funds to be withheld from segregated institutions. Also, the Higher Education Act of 1965 helped to provide access to college for low-income students (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). Opening predominantly White institutions to Black students came with a multitude of challenges for Black students.

The college experience for Black students who, after 1954, were still attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) was very different from their counterparts at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Given a history of segregation at PWIs, Black students often battled issues of racism and other race-related issues, as well as, pressure to

culturally conform, and feelings of isolation (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Harper, 2005). As a result of these obstacles, as well as other contributing factors, many Black students have a low-achievement status at PWIs, though there are a great number of students who are high-achieving (Banks, 2009).

According to the literature, Black high-achieving students manage to overcome obstacles and other experiences that cause many of their culturally similar classmates to fail. Black high-achieving students are often motivated by supportive family members, who recognize their abilities to achieve and encourage these students to be successful throughout their lives. Additionally, Black high-achieving students are motivated by influential mentors, as well as, a desire to defy the stereotypes of their people (Herbert, 2002).

Overall, from the illegalization of Black people receiving a formal education to the recognition of high-achievement in Black students, the journey of formal education for Blacks has been long-standing. Given this realization, it is important to recognize and address the experiences of high-achieving Black students. Specifically, studying the successful experiences of high-achieving Black female students, who are not often featured in the literature, will provide much needed insight on several levels. Not only will such research provide a better understanding of how to support students similar to the participants, but also perhaps reveal how to better address the needs of other culturally similar students.

Significance of the Study

There is a body of research which contributes to the literature regarding high-achieving Black undergraduate students (Archer-Banks, & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Dare, & Nowicki, 2015; Davis, Nagle, Richards, & Awokoya, 2013; Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt, 2000; Fries-Britt, 2002; Freeman, 1999; Gordan, 1995; Griffin, 2006). However, the literature has not

focused on the success stories of Black high-achieving female students, and what contributes to their success at a PWI. It is important to concentrate on this student population because Black female student enrollment in undergraduate programs has continually increased over the years, although a gap in academic success still remains when compared to White students (NCES, 2014). Despite growing numbers in enrollment, Black female students face a number of challenges during their undergraduate years. Some of these issues include navigating isolation and defying stereotypes in order to achieve academic success (Banks, 2009).

Therefore, this study explored the lived experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a PWI, considering the experiences which contribute to their success. With time, these students have had experiences which have ultimately assisted in their continued college success.

In 2014, the graduation rate for Black female undergraduate students was 11.9% (NCES, 2015). By understanding the lived experiences and motivations of the successful students, this research aims to present recommendations for faculty, administrators, and policy makers who work to support Black students in their development.

<u>Purpose Statement</u>

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the experiences contributing to the success of high-achieving Black female college students at a PWI. Data were collected for this phenomenological inquiry through a multi-phase study including semi-structured, one on one interviews and a Sister Circle group process. The data were collected from students at a large predominantly White university in the Southeastern United States. This phenomenological perspective facilitated the process of discovering the essence of the participants' shared

experiences. This assisted in articulating and amplifying their experiences with success at a predominantly White institution (Moustakas, 1994).

<div align="center">Research Questions</div>

The over-arching research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution regarding their success in college? The sub-questions for this study were:

- How do the pre-college experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students contribute to the essence of their success in college?

- How do experiences with negative stereotypes in college influence the success of Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution?

- How do Black female undergraduate students make sense of success?

- What motivates Black female undergraduate students to succeed at a predominantly White institution?

- What challenges do Black female undergraduate students face related to their race, gender, and academic achievement at a predominantly White institution?

- What experiences contribute to the persistence of Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution?

<div align="center">Definition of Terms</div>

The following terms are used throughout this study.

Black

The demographic term "Black" is defined as persons having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (NCES, 2014).

Racism

According to Tatum (1997), racism is defined as a system of advantage based on race.

HBCU

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are defined as "any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principle mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans" (Avery, 2009, p. 327).

PWI

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) are schools of higher learning in which White students account for at least 50% of the enrollment (Jones, 2014)

High-achieving students

For the purposes of this dissertation, the term "high-achieving" will define students who hold at least a 3.0 grade point average on a 4.0 scale and who are a member of a student leadership development program (Harper, 2005).

Resilience

For the purposes of this dissertation, resilience will be defined as the ability to thrive, advance, and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances (Gordan, 1995).

Persistence

Persistence is a major area of research today and is widely defined as a student's continuation behavior in a postsecondary education, which leads to graduation (Arnold, 1999)

Undergraduate student

A student enrolled in a 4- or 5- year bachelor's degree program, an associate's degree program, or a vocational, or technical program below the baccalaureate (NCES, 2016)

Graduation rate

The rate required for disclosure and/or reporting purposes under Student Right-to Know Act. This rate is calculated as the total number of completers within 150% of normal time divided by the revised adjusted cohort (NCES, 2016).

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research method and phenomenological approach using semi-structured interviews and a Sister Circle group process for data collection (Johnson, 2011). This methodology allowed the researcher to explore the experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students. Participants were interviewed twice for between 20-120 minutes each and there was a single two-hour Sister Circle group process conducted with seven participants. The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the experiences contributed to the success of high-achieving Black female students at a PWI. During the interviews and group process, participants answered open-ended questions about their pre-college experiences. Additionally, they answered questions about their college experiences which have contributed to the essence of their success. Once collected, the data was analyzed using a modified approach to Colaizzi's (1978) method of descriptive phenomenological analysis, while under the umbrella of Moustakas' (1994) transcendental principles.

Positionality

Qualitative research is interpretive in nature, therefore the researcher has an active role in making meaning of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2014; Seidman, 2012). This distinction of qualitative research can potentially introduce a range of ethical and personal issues into the research process (Seidman, 2012). Therefore, it is important that researchers reflect upon their relationship with the phenomenon under exploration. It is also important for the researcher to explore how their own past experiences may affect how they approach the research

(Moustakas, 1994). Given these needs, and for the purposes of this study, my positionality is made explicit.

I identify as a Black female who was raised in a two-parent home where both parents received bachelor's degrees. I have one older sister and both of us experienced a culture of encouragement in the household in terms of academics and self-concept. We were raised with a social class distinction between working and middle class, though our socio-economic status was never made explicit in our home. I always felt provided for.

I am a doctoral candidate who, in my undergraduate years, was a high-achieving student according to the definition used for this study. Throughout my research and literature exploration journey, I became interested in learning about high-achieving Black students. I am able to relate to some of the instances I found in the literature about these students' experiences. I, as a result, have a personal interest in understanding the experiences of these students and what aids in their success at a PWI. Also, the interest in this topic stemmed from my experience with mentoring undergraduate students of color to assist with their overall success in college. I previously worked full-time at a Historically Black University (HBCU) and had the opportunity to interact with and mentor a number of Black student leaders on campus. The majority of these students held positions on campus, much like the participants in the current study. While assisting them in their journeys, I understood the importance of support in their success, and this prompted my desire to explore the experiences of student leaders at a PWI.

Further, it is important to note that I was previously acquainted with six of the participants. I knew most of these women through their involvement with the leadership development program where I work. I know of the other participant because of her involvement

on campus and my connection to the Black student community. These facts had the potential to influence the way I interpreted what the participants shared.

I understand that my previous experience identifying with the participants and mentoring student leaders had the potential to shape my interpretations during the study. For instance, my experiences may have caused me to lean toward certain themes, or actively look for evidence to support my position. Also, my closeness to the research had the potential to influence my creating favorable or unfavorable conclusions about the participants or data collection site.

In an effort to address my potential bias in interpreting and analyzing the data, I maintained notes of my perceptions of the students' experiences during the interview and Sister Circle processes. I then reflected on how their experiences were similar and different from my own personal experience as a high-achieving undergraduate. Additionally, during the interviews, I refrained from mentioning my personal experiences in order to allow the participants to lead the direction of the conversations and fully explain their experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Conversely, during the Sister Circle group process, according to the nature of Sister Circles, I shared personal stories simply as a way to encourage the students to participate and speak about their lived experiences.

Lastly, steps were taken to obtain permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to protect the rights of the participants and conduct the study. A copy of the approval letter is provided in Appendix L. When study details were originally submitted to IRB, there were a number of revisions that needed to be made. For instance, I had to ensure that the students' GPA information was not being used in the study. Several measures were taken to ensure that student identities and other personal information were kept confidential. Overall, according to Creswell

(2014), it is important to include all of the aforementioned information to capture an understanding of the role of the researcher in the study.

<div align="center">Limitations/Delimitations</div>

General limitations of qualitative research include lack of generalizability, time consuming data collection and analysis, and a greater possibility of researcher's bias (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). This study utilized a phenomenological research approach, which recommends bracketing the researcher's personal experiences. This process may be difficult for the researcher because interpretations of the data include the assumptions the researcher will bring to the topic (Creswell, 2014). Though this presented as a potential difficulty, exercising a transcendental or epoche approach allowed the researcher to bracket her own experiences and perceive the phenomenon freshly, as if for the first time (Moustakas, 1994).

An additional limitation for this specific study was the sample itself. The study only include students who are members of leadership development programs. Doing so excluded students who are not involved in leadership development programs. According to Hycner (1985), despite the exclusion of some participants and the smaller sample of students, the results may not be generalizable overall, but they can be phenomenologically informative about human beings in general. Therefore, despite students not being involved in leadership development programs, the results could still be applicable to their experiences.

Lastly, a perceived limitation is the limited number of participants who were in the study; eight participants. Though this can be perceived as a limitation, due to the type of phenomenological research conducted and the extensive data collection process, there was a vast amount of data which emerged. The focus of the research was on the quality of the data versus the quantity of participants. Therefore, despite the small number of participants, many

researchers find that qualitative research may be transferable to similar settings when approached with careful consideration (Chenail, 2010; Hycner, 1985).

<div align="center">Summary</div>

High-achieving Black female undergraduate students play an important role in higher education in the 21st century. It is important to ensure these students continue to succeed academically in order to serve as an example for low-achieving Black students and to continue to provide diverse leadership for our world. Exploring the lived experiences of high-achieving Black female students assisted in providing recommendations for supporting other Black female college students. By understanding what contributes to the success of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students, the overall college success experience for Black female college students may improve.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of literature relating to the experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution. This study specifically targeted high-achievement because literature concerning Black students and their success at a predominantly White institution, disproportionately, focuses on their low performance (Fries-Britt, 2002). Additionally, this study highlighted Black female students because there is limited research regarding the experiences contributing to their college success compared to their Black male counterparts.

This chapter begins with the definition of the demographic term "Black" to better understand the population to be studied. Next, an exploration of the general literature regarding the experiences of Black students in higher education over time will be provided. Further, this review outlines the conceptual framework guiding the present study, which include the areas of Black feminism, Resilience, and Persistence. Lastly, this chapter defines and expounds upon the concept of student high-achievement in higher education.

Defining the Demographic Term "Black"

The demographic term "Black" is defined as persons having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (NCES, 2014). The term "African American" is used to describe Black people who are natives of mainland North America but who trace their heritage to Africa as a result of a history of enslavement (Berlin, 2010). Prior to changing immigration laws in 1965, which allowed more immigrant access to the country, most Black people in the United States were African American. However, during the 1990s, 900,000 Black immigrants came from the

Caribbean and 400,000 came from Africa, thus diversifying the Black population in the United States (Berlin, 2010).

While these groups of Black people do not share a common history, as Black individuals who live in the United States, they are all subject to the same institutional classification (Berlin, 2010). In majority White institutions, people who are not Black often exercise their use of privilege by not differentiating among the vastly diverse origins of Black people. This use of privilege can, in turn, oppress Black people's expression of cultural identity. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the terms "Black" and "African American" were recognized as interchangeable to describe Black people, primarily students, who attend PWIs in the United States. Additionally, for this study the researcher considered the individual cultural backgrounds of the participants in order to remain inclusive of their diverse identities.

To gain a better understanding of the population who was studied, it is important to have an informed perspective of who Black students are and what they have experienced in higher education (Gasman & Hilton, 2012; Rogers, 2009). The following section highlights relevant experiences of Black students in higher education. Figure 1 below displays the outline of the literature review for the ease of the reader. The figure begins with the broad and encompassing historical perspective of Black students in education and narrows to the specific experiences of high-achieving Black students in college. Each circle of the figure demonstrates the order in which the sections are mentioned.
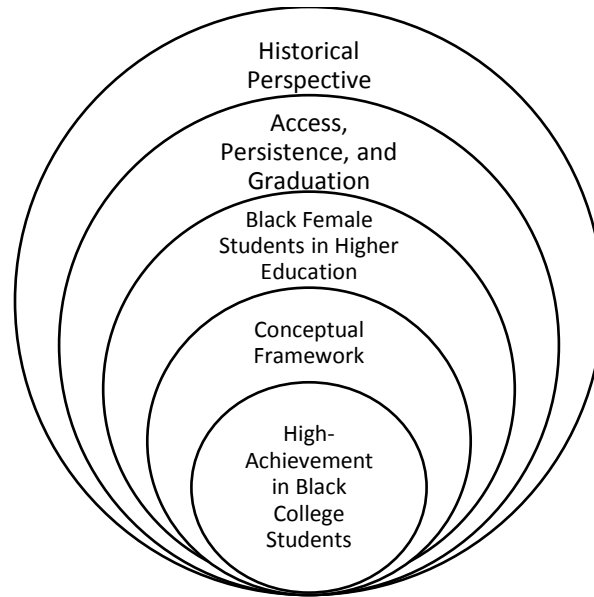
Figure 1: Outline of the Literature Review

The Historical Record: Black Student Experiences in Higher Education

Acknowledging the historical events which shaped the experiences of Black students in higher education creates a lens through which to understand these students' experiences today. This section discusses three different parts of the history of Black students' attendance in higher education. The first section recognizes Black students' experiences in higher education prior to the Brown v. Board of Education case in 1954. The second section refers to events and policies related to higher education which occurred as a result of Brown v. Board of Education. The third section is about Black students' experiences in higher education after Brown v. Board of Education in 1954.

Continuing, this section acknowledges the literature regarding Black student access, persistence, and graduation in higher education. Lastly, this section discusses the specific experiences of Black female students in higher education.

Blacks Students' Experiences in Higher Education Prior to Brown v. Board of Education

Prior to the end of the Civil War, the United States' policy regarding the education of Black Americans was dictated by the institution of slavery (Hill, 1985). Slavery prescribed the social values and norms deemed both "appropriate" and "inappropriate" for Black Americans (Hill, 1985). Any formal learning, outside of religious instruction, was considered inappropriate behavior for Blacks and was prohibited (Hill, 1985; Thomas, 1981). As a result of these restrictive and racially motivated governmental mandates, Blacks were denied access to the American Higher Education system (Karkouti, 2016).

According to Tatum (1997), racism is defined as a system of advantage based on race, which inherently means that others are disadvantaged. During a time when slavery was written into law, racism was used as a platform to leverage the use of power held by Whites. Blacks viewed their formal education and the pursuit of learning as a symbol of freedom, while Whites viewed it as the possibility for rebellion and uproar (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard III, 2003). It was not unusual for Blacks who were caught learning to read to be beaten and chastised with increasing rigor the more times they were caught. In an effort to gain a formal education, Blacks often went as far as to bribe White children with gifts in exchange for reading lessons (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard III, 2003).

After the illegalization of slavery in 1865, Blacks continued to make their pursuit of a formal education a high priority. Despite newly attained freedom for Blacks, racism still plagued the governmental structures of the South and Blacks were not allowed to learn in formal education facilities alongside Whites (Gasman & Hilton, 2012).

In 1890, the Second Morrill Act in the United States helped to establish formal educational institutions for Blacks in the South (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). This Act required

states to provide Black students access to majority White institutions or to allocate funding for separate institutions for Blacks as an alternative (Post-Secondary National Policy Institution, 2016). As a result, states chose to keep the institutions segregated.

In the landmark case of Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, separate educational facilities for both Blacks and Whites were legalized and considered equal (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). This view of equality gave legitimacy to the disadvantage of Blacks in education. These disadvantages included under-funded institutions and under-prepared instructors who could not properly educate their students at the post-secondary level, compared to White institutions (Hill, 1985). Though higher education institutions remained racially separated, federal support provided funding for public Black institutions named Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). HBCUs are defined as "any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principle mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans" (Avery, 2009, p. 327).

As a result of the Plessy v. Ferguson decision, a plethora of racial segregation or "Jim Crow" laws sprouted, which led to an increase in violence towards Blacks in the United States (Thomas, 1981). Building HBCUs during a time when Blacks were under heavy scrutiny proved difficult, at best, for these institutions' leaders. HBCUs played a crucial role in the higher education of Blacks in the United States because these institutions, especially in the South, were the only options Blacks had to attend college until 1954 (Hill, 1985).

According to the Federal government's first report on Black secondary and higher level schools in 1915, Black student enrollment for HBCUs at the time was approximately 3,000 (Hill, 1985). By 1954, this number increased by twenty-five times, reaching a total of 75,000 undergraduate students. These numbers demonstrated the impact HBCUs had on Black students'

higher education attainment (Hill, 1985). Regardless of the progress made to formally educate Black students, HBCUs continued to lag behind their majority White institution counter-parts regarding sufficiency in funding and resources.

Higher Education Legislation Influenced by Brown v. Board of Education

While the gap in institutional progress of HBCUs and majority White institutions remained, change was under way. In the court case of Brown v. The Board of Education in 1954, the Supreme Court declared that separate educational facilities for Blacks and Whites was inherently unequal (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). Brown v. The Board of Education overturned the Plessy v. Ferguson decision and became a monumental step for the education of Blacks in the United States. It was one of the first national recognitions of a difference in the education received by Blacks, as well as, the lack of resources available. Overall, the Brown v. The Board of Education case struck down state-sponsored racial segregation in the United States public schools (Patterson, 2001). Though this case was concluded for applicability in K-12 schools, it paved the way for a number of legislations in the United States. Other cases, such as Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, helped to break down barriers for higher education institutions to grant access for all. In the Sipuel case of 1948, the US Supreme court addressed racial segregation towards Blacks at the University of Oklahoma. This occurred when Ada Sipuel became the first Black person to attend the University of Oklahoma School of Law, an all-white law school in the South. She received her law degree in 1951 (Wattley, 2010).

Continuing, both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 provided more opportunity and access for Blacks to pursue a higher education in the United States. The Civil Rights Act allowed for the withholding of funds from institutions that did not adhere to federal regulations to desegregate (Gasman & Hilton, 2012; Rose, 2016). This

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regulation granted Black students the chance to pursue the institution of their choice instead of only being able to attend HBCUs.

Though the opportunity to attend desegregated institutions was a step in the right direction for Blacks, affordability was still an issue. Thus, the Higher Education Act of 1965 was implemented as a means to serve low-income students, a status encompassed by many Black students at the time (Gasman & Hilton, 2012; Rose, 2016). This Act provided economically disadvantaged students the opportunity to attend college, while creating scholarships and low-interest student loans (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). Overall, understanding the monumental role played by these legislative Acts is key when considering the road to access and affordability for Black students in higher education.

Black Students' Experiences at PWIs After Brown v. Board of Education

Since 1954, the patterns of Black college student attendance changed drastically. The number of Black students at PWIs increased heavily after the decision of Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). Whereas in 1964, 60% of Black students in higher education attended HBCUs, by 1973 that number declined to approximately 25% (Allen, 1985). See Figure 2.
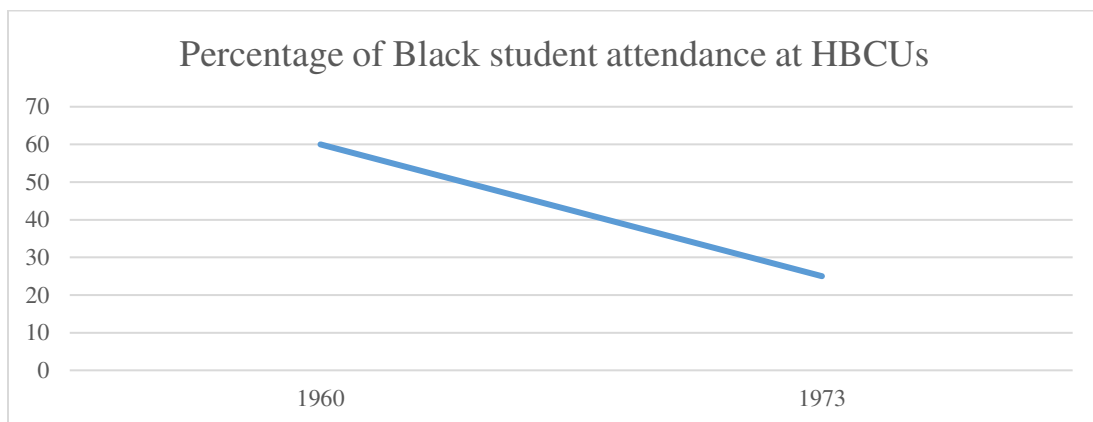
Figure 2: Percentage of Black student attendance at HBCUs
Source: Allen, 1985

Until 1968, 80% of all undergraduate degrees earned by Black students were attained at an HBCU. Ten years later that number decreased and the majority of degrees earned by Black students (56%) were from PWIs (Allen, 1985). With the change in student attendance came a shift in institutional and student culture. Black students changed from having a majority cultural status to a minority status at their institutions.

The on-campus experience Black students had in the 1960s at HBCUs was often very different from that of Black students who attended PWIs. For instance, during the student movements of the 1960s, students of color encountered a number of issues at predominantly White institutions. They faced issues such as classroom curricula which focused on Eurocentric beliefs, very few faculty of color, low numbers or absence of students of color, the racial segregation of student life, and racist violence on campus (Barlow, 1991).

Racism and other race-related issues were obstacles Black students faced in the 1960s, as well as, in recent PWI campus culture. Black students often feel pressured to suppress their own cultural norms in order to adapt to the majority White culture. They feel the need to talk, dress, and act in ways congruent with White culture (Cole & Arriola, 2007; Feagin & Sikes, 1995). Overall, Black students often make significant adjustments when attending a PWI (D'Augelli, & Hershberger, 1993).

Literature regarding the experiences of Black students at PWIs creates a context for understanding the journey of high-achieving Black female students at these institutions. Considering the experience of these students is important because their stories of success despite the level of support provided contributes greatly to their specific experiences with high-achievement.

Black Student Access, Persistence, and Graduation in Higher Education

Following Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 until the late 1970s, advocacy for Black student access in higher education was a high priority (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). Almost all selective universities adopted affirmative action practices by the mid-1970s. They did so in an effort to address the graduation gap between White and non-White young adults. By 1975, only 15% of non-White young adults held college degrees, compared to 24% for White students (Gandara & Orfield, 2010).

Whereas the priorities during the early to mid-1970s focused on Black college student access, the years following the early 1980s determined access alone was not enough to lessen the racial achievement gap (Gandara & Orfield, 2010). There was a change in the political climate of the United States in the 1980s as a result of the Regents of California v. Bakke case in 1978. There was a steady retreat from the use of Affirmative Action and progressive access policies in higher education (Gandara & Orfield, 2010). The Bakke case struck down the use of racial quotas in admissions policies which disproportionately and negatively affected students' of color college enrollment compared to their White counterparts (Gandara & Orfield, 2010).

Critics of Affirmative Action breached the surface during this time, arguing that colleges needed to be more selective in their student choice in order to maintain the integrity of the university (Gandara & Orfield, 2010). Due to these policies, conservatives referred to universities as becoming mediocre because the standards were not high enough (Gandara & Orfield, 2010). As a result, there was a downturn in access for students of color through the 1980s which caused increasing gaps among disadvantaged and advantaged groups in college admissions (Gandara & Orfield, 2010). Ultimately, though Black students were attending higher

education institutions at an all-time high, their completion rates told a much different story (Gandara & Orfield, 2010).

Black students at PWIs have been found to have lower persistence rates, as well as, lower academic achievement levels than their White counterparts (Allen, 1985). One explanation for this phenomenon derives from the social conservative perspective in higher education. These critics believe Black students who are underprepared for college should not attend more selective universities. Conservatives believe that underprepared students should first be funneled into community colleges until they gain the adequate skill level to thrive at a four year university (Gandara & Orfield, 2010).

While social conservatives consider the student's lack of preparation, social progressives place the responsibility of Black students' persistence on the institutions to help meet their academic needs (Gandara & Orfield, 2010). Progressives value diversity on campus and believe it is a vital priority to make at a four year institution. Therefore, in order for the country to progress socially and economically, it is important for students from marginalized populations to be admitted to selective post-secondary institutions. While there, these students should be supported and encouraged to succeed (Gandara & Orfield, 2010). Due to the competing perspectives concerning Black student access to and persistence in college, it is important to consider these existing ideas when exploring high-achieving Black female college students and their success.

The next portion of this section will address further literature regarding Black student access, persistence, and graduation in higher education. It will mention issues of standardized testing in higher education admissions processes and its effect on Black students, as well as, other contributing factors of persistence and graduation.

The Effects of Standardized Testing on Black Students' College Access

During the first half of the twentieth century, educational standardized testing was used as a primary method for assessing students and schools on a national level (Maranto, 2015). This method was used to monitor the progression of students and schools in their performance. This occurred until there was an ideological shift in educational reform.

In the 1983 report "A Nation at Risk", standardized testing was promoted as a hugely critical step for both diagnosing and evaluating the progress of students in order to remedy the state of education at the time (Maranto, 2015). After evaluating relevant educational initiatives, subjects such as language, science, and mathematics were chosen as the subjects most crucial to student success. Therefore, this report received a lot of attention. It sparked the moment in which data collection and heavy emphasis on disciplines such as math and reading became a driving force behind education reform. All other subjects took a back seat (Maranto, 2015). As a result of the education reform introduced in "A Nation at Risk", the use of standardized testing became more of a priority for secondary schools. This new emphasis demanded change in both classroom curriculum and educational policies (Maranto, 2015).

The emphasis on standardized testing crept its way into the political spheres of education surrounding issues of equality and educational standards. As a result, the objectives of standardized testing changed (Maranto, 2015). Previously, standardized tests were used as a means to measure individual student performance. Gradually, with the changes in school and political policies, they were adopted as accountability and control tools. Test scores were more widely used as one of the primary measures of student success in the K-12 educational system (Allard & Fish, 1990). Thus, the success of students depended heavily on what they learned about the exam in school, which was different at every secondary institution. As a result of the

shift in standardized testing, Black students were greatly affected because of their school's lack of resources (Allard & Fish, 1990). Standardized tests were viewed as fair and objective in nature because all students took the same exam. Students received the same test not considering the teachers, principal, or parental bias which could influence a student's results (Allard & Fish, 1990). Thus, the Black and White student achievement gap continued to exist.

With standardized test scores held as a high priority in the educational system, teachers had limited autonomy with their classroom curriculum. They were often required to adhere to pre-set lesson plans aimed at passing tests (Thompson & Allen, 2012). This reality, alongside a lack of professional development for teachers, had a grave effect on what the students learned in the classroom. This influence on student learning affected students' access to college and ultimately affected their persistence and eventual graduation (Thompson & Allen, 2012).

<center>Factors Affecting Black Students' Persistence and Graduation in College</center>

Two commonly referenced factors regarding the persistence and graduation of Black undergraduate students include on-campus engagement and financial obligation. According to Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005), student experience and involvement during college counts more for what they learn and whether they persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college. Specifically when engaging Black students, it is important to consider the campus environment in which they learn. Research reveals that even if a student of color is gifted and very capable academically, they can perform negatively or under-perform if they have no connection to their college experience (Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). It is important that institutions are perceived by these students as inclusive and affirming so students feel a sense of belonging. (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whit, & Associates, 2005).

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More specifically, Black students often face issues of racial hostility, intellectual belittlement, marginalization, and discomfort at PWIs, and even outside of the university (Quaye & Harper, 2015). High-achieving Black students have must invest extra effort to develop their levels of campus engagement and academic success, while navigating negative institutional experiences. These students cannot leave societal issues at the door as they enter the university; these issues travel with them throughout their postsecondary educational experience.

Additionally, financial obligation is a contributing factor of Black students' persistence and graduation in college. These students often carry the burden of financing their own education (Baker & Robnett, 2012). When an obligation of this magnitude is undertaken by a high-achieving student of color, specifically, it minimizes the time they have to engage in campus activities (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whit, & Associates, 2005). This situation could become a huge hindrance to their college persistence and ultimate academic success. In contrast, when students of color have the financial assistance they need, they can be more engaged in a holistic college experience and not be frequently anxious regarding how to pay for it (John, Rowley, & Hu, 2009).

<u>Black Female Students in Higher Education</u>

The following section outlines a number of topics related to the experiences of Black female students in higher education. First, this portion discusses the graduation rates of Black female college students. Next, obstacles faced by Black female undergraduate students are discussed. Lastly, this section discusses the role of mentorship and support in the experiences of Black undergraduate female students.

Black Female Student Graduation Rates in Higher Education.

Black female students have traversed long roads in higher education. Though there has been improvement in Black female college graduation rates, there is still a gap compared to White female undergraduate students. This disparity raises the critical question of, why does race matter?

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), graduation rates for the 2008 cohort of bachelor's degree seeking students at four-year universities revealed significant differences between Black and White female students. Within four years, five years, and six years of graduation, as illustrated in Figure 2, Black female student compared to White female student degree conference were as follows, respectively: 24.9% versus 48.6%, 39.6% versus 62.8%, and 44.8% versus 65.9% (NCES 2015).
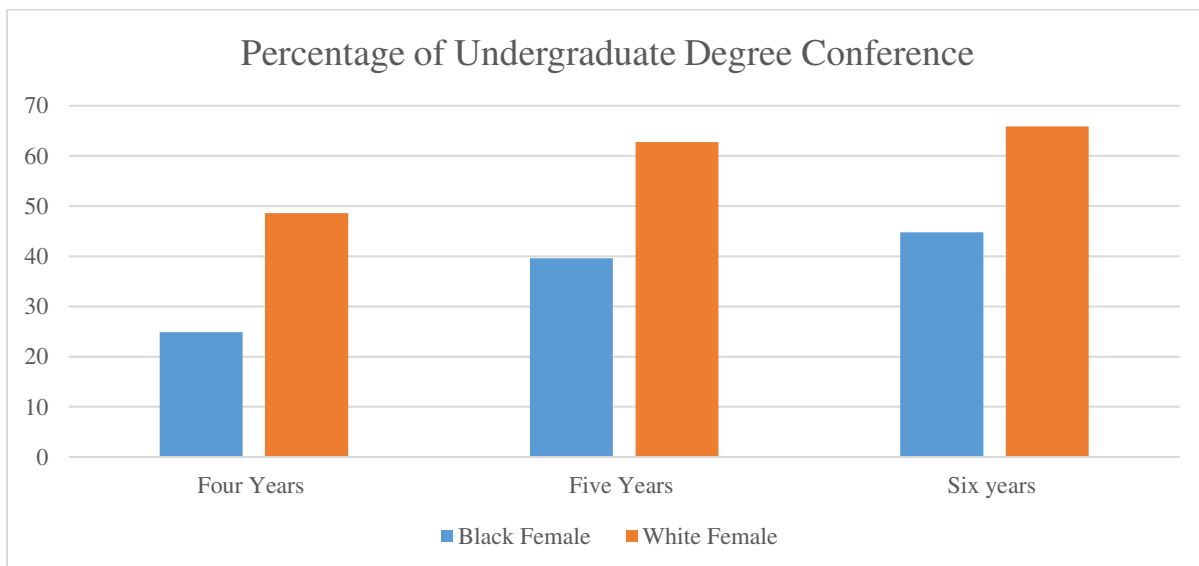
Figure 3: Percentage of Undergraduate Degree Conference
Source: NCES, 2015

As revealed by Figure 3, it is important to consider the reasons why Black female students lag behind their White counterparts. As a result, it is even more important to explore the contributing experiences of those who are successful in their completion.

In the 2013-2014 academic year, among the female undergraduate students who earned a bachelor's degree from all postsecondary institutions in the United States, 66.1% were White and 11.9% were Black (NCES, 2015). The current study aimed to explore the experiences of those who were persistent towards graduation. By understanding these students' experiences, tactics, and motivations to succeed, administrators and educators can design and offer concrete strategies for the remaining percentage of Black female students who do not persist.

Obstacles Faced by Black Female Students in Higher Education

Black female students in college face a number of obstacles including juggling concurrent roles, discrimination against their intelligence, isolation on campus, and navigation of stereotypes. These difficulties are often faced while Black female students simultaneously work to be academically successful in college.

One obstacle for Black female college students is that they must cope with multiple, concurrent roles and identities. Black female students may have to manage the roles of being a student, mother, and employee (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Maintaining all of these roles while trying to be a successful student can be taxing on their overall experience. Simultaneously, Black female students have to manage multiple identities such as their race, gender, socioeconomic, and marital statuses (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Added potential stressors to Black female experiences in college can pose as road blocks for their overall academic success.

Research attests that Black female undergraduate students often have their intelligence called into question by others on campus (Strayhorn, 2009). In this case, intelligence refers to students' academic ability, as a measure of IQ (Strayhorn, 2009). It is important to understand that Black students' concept of intelligence may be different than the standard definition. A study by Aronson, Fried, and Good (2002) was conducted, advocating the view of intelligence as

malleable. This concept helped the students feel more confident in their abilities because it created an enduring and beneficial change in the students' attitudes about intelligence (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Hoxby & Turner, 2015). Understanding intelligence as a more malleable concept allows Black high-achieving students the opportunity to embrace intelligence from a personal perspective and succeed because of that (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002).

An additional obstacle faced by Black female undergraduate students is isolation. This feeling is often triggered by experiences of unfairness and condescension, especially at predominantly White institutions (Allen, 1985; Allen, 1992; Cuyjet, 1998; Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, et.al, 2004; Patton, Harris, Ranero-Ramirez, Villacampa, & Lui, 2015). Patton, Harris, Ranero-Ramirez, Villacampa, and Lui, (2015) argued that despite a greater representation of all women on campuses, issues that are rooted in racial and gender discrimination continue to affect the collegiate experiences of women of color, disproportionately.

Their research illuminated the fact that literature paints an illusion that because women are greatly represented in the university, they are more engaged and thus need fewer resources or attention than their male counterparts (Patton, Harris, Ranero-Ramirez, Villacampa, & Lui, 2015). This assumption can be a hindrance to Black female students, contributing to their feelings of isolation. This assertion underwrites the importance of the current study and the value which can be derived from understanding how high-achieving Black female students are successful despite feelings of isolation (Patton, Harris, Ranero-Ramirez, Villacampa, & Lui, 2015; Quaye & Harper, 2015).

Lastly, an obstacle faced by Black female undergraduate students is the perpetuation of stereotypes about women of color on campus. Navigating a campus environment which does not

encounter the positive aspects of Black female culture can make student life difficult, without adequate support (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Without the backing of staff or faculty on campus, women of color are often expected to address issues, such as stereotype threat, alone. Doing so may eventually cause Black female students to become less engaged and thus, less likely to persist to graduation (Quaye & Harper, 2015).

Moreover, women of color encounter a multitude of obstacles while in higher education and many times have to experience this issues alone. The end result is that enduring their college journey can be overwhelming which necessitates the study of Black female students who thrive despite the odds.

The Role of Mentorship and Support for Black Female Students in Higher Education

The journey for Black female students pursuing undergraduate studies begins before they get to college. In a study conducted by Banks (2009), many of the Black female student participants identified having a treasured relationship with their high school guidance counselor. One student had this to say about her guidance counselor: "She was like my second mom…she helped me pick all my classes. She helped me get into [named University]. She helped me get a scholarship. She just helped with everything" (Banks, 2009, p. 96). This experience is not true for all, but Black female students who have the opportunity to utilize these services report feelings of satisfaction with the relationship. The participants appreciated having the support of someone from whom they gained both useful information and life guidance (Banks, 2009).

To add, mentorship plays an important role in the overall academic success of students of color in college (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). It is an experience which can include faculty-student mentoring relationships, as well as, peer mentoring (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007).

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Specifically for Black undergraduate women, mentor relationships can play a large role in their admittance to school, persistence in school, and academic success while in school (Banks, 2009).

Similarly, Syed, Azmitia, and Cooper (2011) highlighted the importance of agents such as mentors and instrumental support from families, peers, teachers, and programs for students' academic success leading up to and during college. These agents provide emotional, as well as, instrumental support for students. In turn, students draw on this support when pursuing careers and maintaining overall positive mental health (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011). Though all students, regardless of cultural background, require and benefit from support, Black female students' needs for support are heightened given the differences in their experiences. For instance, on predominantly White campuses, Black female students often feel isolated and stereotyped about their ability to succeed (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011).

Mentorship aids Black female students in the development of their identities, while a lack of support serves as a barrier to their advancement (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011). Some research considered the importance of role models and mentors from similar cultural backgrounds as being a priority for Black female students. Black female representation in faculty and administration provide prototypes that facilitate students' ability to envision themselves occupying those positions in the future, which instills a sense of academic self-efficacy (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011). Despite the consideration of culture in mentorship, research discussed how mentorship connections are most effective when the student yearns for the relationship. With this desire present, students are more likely to be assisted with their identity development (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011). Though mentorship and ally support are privileges not shared by all Black female students, this study emphasized the importance of such support in the enhancement of the participants' student experience.

Not only is it important for Black female undergraduate students to have mentors, it is just as important for them to have allies-defined as people who understand and partake in their struggles as students and otherwise (Banks, 2009). Usually, these individuals are friends, helpers, supporters, assistants, and partners (Banks, 2009). Regardless of who is helping, Black female undergraduate students benefit most from not navigating their journeys in isolation.

Family can also play a role in the mentorship and support of Black female undergraduate students. Parental and family involvement with the student's school life is stressed as an important factor in their collegiate experience (Banks, 2009; Hrabowski, Maton, Greene, & Greif, 2002). Successful Black female students reported that their parents who consistently referred to the importance of education in the home helped them maintain high expectations for themselves and from their family (Banks, 2009). Doing so ultimately helped students remain focused on their scholastic achievement in the face of challenges they may encounter in college (Hrabowski, Maton, Greene, & Greif, 2002).

Despite the importance of family support, much of the literature focuses on the ways in which the familial involvement and background of students of color can be a hindrance to them. Research has most often considered the deficit approach to students' lack of achievement based on their family's lack of financial capital (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011). However, Yosso (2005) emphasized the important roles social and cultural capital play in the success of students of color, as well. These factors are important to consider in the lives of Black students because they can be viewed as even more important that economic capital (Yosso, 2005). Thus, less blame is placed on families for students not succeeding and more responsibility is placed on societal constructs.

To contrast the deficit approach, Syed, Azmitia, and Cooper (2011) highlighted a positive view of families' often low educational attainment and economic capital. Parents with low educational attainment tend to have high expectations for their children and use their disadvantaged backgrounds as a way to inspire and motivate their children (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011). Further, these parents tend to use alternative strategies to communication and volunteering practices with their children's teachers, which are more characteristic of White middle-class families. The families of students of color often practice strategies such as verbal communication and financial sacrifice, as well as, discuss stigmas and prejudices which their children may face (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011). Moreover, ethnic minority students often coordinate multiple support systems, such as family, friends, teachers, and communities in order to foster their academic success (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011).

Lastly, despite the contributions of students' families to their overall success, research discussed the important role and influence of friends in students' support. Syed, Azmitia, and Cooper (2011) described support as a dynamic process. The role of different agents in the support system of students changes over time. For instance, as students move through their years of adolescence and into young adulthood, their reliance on friends for social and emotional support increases. This shift in support from primarily family to the increasing importance of friends, demonstrates the perspective of peers being viewed as both a resource and challenge for students' academic achievement (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011).

Overall, it is important to understand Black students' experiences in higher education from both a historical and research-related perspective. Exploring these viewpoints provides context which helps researchers and administrators better comprehend the current experiences of high-achieving Black undergraduate female students.

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by three concepts, which was used to explore and analyze the experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution. These include Black feminism, Resilience, and Persistence and they will be used to demonstrate an intersectional analysis of the students' experiences. Using these concepts as a framework may reveal some of the ways in which high-achieving Black female college students achieve their level of success in college from a theoretical standpoint.

Black Feminism

Black women continue to be an oppressed group in the United States, which makes the concept of Black feminism continually important to study (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1982). The over-arching purpose of Black feminism is to resist oppression, in both practice and idea. These concepts declare that Black women experience intersecting oppressions in being both female and Black in the United States (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013; Crenshaw, 1997; hooks, 1982). One distinguishing feature of U.S Black feminism is the linking of experiences between Black women and their oppressions. Regardless of age, social class, religion, and other identities, Black women encounter restricting societal practices which work to inhibit their success (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1982).

Black women in the United States stem from a rich intellectual tradition with seminal female leaders such as scholars Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Zora Neale Hurston (Collins, 2000). Despite the accomplishments of these Black women, less literature has documented their struggle with sexual politics and isolation during their journey towards success (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1982). Black feminism attests that the position held by Black women in America is a reflection of a system of oppression designed to keep Black women in an assigned,

subordinate place. The larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Blacks as intellectuals and to protect elite White male interests and worldviews (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; hooks, 1982). Therefore, regardless of the success experienced by Black women, according to Black feminism, they are still challenged by the obstacles of overcoming the stereotypes about them.

When considering challenges of Black women in the United States, it is conceivable to understand the struggle of Black high-achieving female college students. Black women live in a society where their intelligence and capacity for success are consistently challenged. Additionally, the accomplishments and success of Black women are often considered a surprise (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1982). Juggling multiple oppressive identities raises the inquiry of how Black high-achieving female college students succeed. In a society set up for them to fail, Black high-achieving female students overcome the odds.

<center>Resilience</center>

The following section explores literature regarding resilience as a phenomenon. The sub-sections include: defining resilience, pre-requisites of resilience, and factors that affect resilience. Also, this section include sub-sections regarding how resilience is measured and resilience in Black female students.

<u>Defining Resilience</u>

Resilience as a phenomenon has been defined in a number of ways. It considers an individual's capacity to overcome tough life events in the psychosocial realm, as well as, their achievement beyond what is expected (Anthony & Koupernik, 1974; Bartelt, 1994; Gordan, 1995; Rutter, 1979; Wang & Gordon, 1994; Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1997; Werner & Smith,

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1992). Some researchers argued that resilience is a process which involves overcoming the aversive effects of risk exposure, successfully navigating traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative possibilities associated with those risks (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Luthar, 2003; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009; Rutter, 1985).

Also important to note is the specification of whether resilience is viewed as a trait, process, or an outcome. Resilience exists on a continuum which presents itself in different ways across varying domains of life (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014). Resilience may change over time as a function of development and one's interaction with the environment (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014). Therefore, resilience is not a phenomenon that is experienced in the same way by every individual, nor is it experienced in the same why by the same individual every time.

For the purposes of this dissertation, resilience is defined as the ability to thrive, advance, and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances (Gordan, 1995). The adverse circumstances or conditions can be longstanding and chronic or severe and infrequent. According to Gordan (1995), in order to thrive, mature, and increase competence, individuals draw upon their resources. Resilience is a multifaceted phenomenon including both individual and environmental factors. Therefore, these resources can be accessed from any or all of the following: biological, psychological, and environmental sources Gordan (1995).

Understanding resilience in the context of high-achieving Black female students is important. Exploring their resilience could lead to recommendations for increasing the levels of college success of lower achieving students within this student population (Gordan, 1995).

Pre-requisites of Resilience

Resilience is a phenomenon that has been heavily studied in a number of fields including Psychology and secondary education (Borman & Overman, 2004; Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011; Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014). Through the extensive study of resilience, researchers declared there are prerequisites to determine if resilience is present in an individual.

According to Morales and Trotman (2004), academic resilience targets students' abilities to excel academically despite negative and potentially disruptive circumstances. Morales and Trotman (2004) determined that resilience focuses on the journey of a student and not the result. They indicated that resilience is only experienced if one has been a member of a disadvantaged group, for instance, minority students and or low socio-economic students. Thus, according to Morales and Trotman (2004), a minority or poverty status is a prerequisite of resilience. Further, according to Perez Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009), a key requirement of resilience is the presence of both risk and protective factors that either assist in bringing forth a positive outcome or reduce and avoid a negative one.

Further, Ballenger-Browning and Johnson (2010) established some prerequisites for resilience, in relation to psychosocial factors an individual may experience. Prerequisites such as a risk or predisposition to biopsychosocial or environmental conditions, exposure to a high-magnitude stressor, stress response, and return to baseline functioning and symptom levels. These established prerequisites imply that in order for resilience to exist, there needs to be some sort of event, circumstance, or situation that causes resilience to be necessary (Ballenger-Browning & Johnson, 2010; Morales & Trotman, 2004; Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014).

According to Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, and Yehuda (2014), resilient individuals may encounter different adversities. Some of these adversities are exposure to interpersonal violence, the trauma of war, death of a loved one, natural disasters, serious industrial or other accidents, and terrorism. Also considered as ongoing stressors are experiences such as bullying, a harassing work place, challenging relationships, stress of poverty, and the impact of environmental stressors such as weather and global warming. Overall, the determinants of resilience vary based on the individual's identity and the context of the situation (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014).

Factors that Affect Resilience

Resilience is a multifaceted, dynamic phenomenon which is affected by a number of moving parts. Therefore, factors such as dispositional or individual factors, external factors, protective factors, and gender related factors all have an effect on a student's resilience in their postsecondary journey. These factors will be explained below, as well as, how resilience is measured and how resilience is demonstrated in Black female students.

Dispositional Factors

The journey of resilience reveals personal characteristics necessary to endure the process, thus pushing individuals to utilize strategies necessary to overcome obstacles (Morales & Trotman, 2004). Individual characteristics contribute greatly to the likelihood of someone being resilient. According to Morales and Trotman (2004), some dispositional factors that are important to consider are a positive responsiveness to others and thoughtfulness in meeting new situations. Also, internal locus of control is a dispositional factor which determines from where individuals attribute their decision making. Traits such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-

concept also contribute to an individual's likelihood for resiliency (Borman & Overman, 2004; Garmezy,1991; Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011).

According to Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009), additional dispositional factors which are important to consider are social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and sense of purpose and future. All of these attributes are relevant to the overall concept of resilience because they serve as a filter through which individual experiences are passed. Each of these characteristics and the extent to which an individual is positively affected by them can determine their likelihood for resilience. Ultimately, the more resources possessed during times of stress, the better the chance of successfully coping with difficulties (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009).

According to the research of Werner and Smith (1992), as a result of resilience, children exhibit good communication, sense of responsibility, achievement orientation, internal locus of control, and positive self-concept. These results demonstrate the positive outcomes resilience has on an individual's overall well-being. Measures of resilience have been found to be related to individuals' global adjustment, work and social functioning, and physical and psychological health (Werner & Smith, 1992). People whose resilience thrives have been found to have high self-esteem and self-confidence. Additionally, individuals with a high level of resilience tend to have a positive outlook toward the world, and thus are more likely to see opportunity in a difficult situation and solicit external support (Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011).

External Factors

According to Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009), in addition to dispositional factors, there are external factors that affect an undergraduate student's journey of resilience. For instance, parental support is a factor, as well as, other adult mentoring.

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Additionally, community organizations that promote positive youth development can play a role in an individual's resilience (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes, 2009). Having the support of others in a community aligns with the support needed by Black students in order to succeed on campus (Harper, 2005).

Moreover, individuals tend to utilize community and other external resources in stressful situations in order to protect themselves from risks (Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011). Extracurricular participation and volunteerism often positively contribute to an individual's level of resilience, as well. Engagement outside of the classroom highlights the importance of community-related opportunities in order to develop relationships with supportive adults and peers (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). Understanding the importance of external factors is crucial because of the role they play in the resilience of an individual.

Protective Factors

Protective factors are defined as moderators of risk and adversity that enhance developmentally appropriate outcomes (Werner, 2000). The protective factors within an individual will ultimately mitigate whether or not the effects of stress or conditions will negatively affect them (Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011). In life, internal and external stressors are inevitable, and an individual's ability to cope with these situations is often determined by their adaptation (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Gordan, 1995). Those adaptations are referred to as protective factors.

According to Werner (2000), protective factors may operate through three different mechanisms: compensation, challenge, and immunization. The compensatory mechanism attests that stress factors and protective factors combine in the prediction of outcomes (Werner, 2000). According to the compensatory model, severe stress can be counteracted by personal qualities or

sources of support (Werner, 2000). The challenge mechanism demonstrates that stress can

potentially enhance competence if the degree of stress is not excessive. Thus, the relationship

between stress and competence may be curvilinear (Werner, 2000). Lastly, the immunity

mechanism declares that the conditional relationship between stressors and protective factors

moderate the impact of stress on the quality of adaptation. Despite the impact, this relationship

has no detectable effects in the absence of a stressor (Werner, 2000).

Moreover, these mechanisms or models of protective factors are not mutually exclusive.

They may operate simultaneously or sequentially in the adaptive mentality of resilience

individual, depending on their stage of development (Werner, 2000).

Gender as a Factor

Gender has been frequently confirmed as a correlate of resilience, assuming a protective

role (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). A longitudinal study indicated that

women are generally more skilled in accessing and using social supports and resources (Perez,

Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). Research further indicated that women reported

more extraversion, trust, gregariousness, and nurturance, which are hypothesized to be important

personal protective factors (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). Understanding

the gender differences in resilience provides a context for determining potential reasons for the

success of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students.

Cycles of Resilience: How Resilience is Measured

Resilience has been identified as an important contributor of lifelong health and well-

being (Gonzalez, Moore, Newton, & Galli, 2016). As a phenomenon, it embodies the personal

qualities that enable an individual to thrive and be successful in the face of adversity (Connor &

Davidson, 2003). As a result, resilience may be viewed as a measure of stress coping ability

(Connor & Davidson, 2003). The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale is a tool which was created as a rating scale to assess resilience. The scale consists of 25 items, each rated on a 5-point scale, with greater scores reflecting greater resilience. It is rated based on how the participant felt over the past month (Connor & Davidson, 2003). This scale and interest in resilience stemmed from its relevance in the treatment outcomes of anxiety, depression, and stress reactions (Connor & Davidson, 2003).

The scale was constructed with three goals in mind. First, to develop a valid and reliable means to measure and quantify resilience. Second, to establish reference values in the general population and in clinical samples regarding resilience. Lastly, to assess the interchangeability of resilience as a response to pharmacologic treatment in a clinical population (Connor & Davidson, 2003).

The content of the Scale includes items reflective of control, commitment, and change, as well as, developing strategy with a clear goal or aim. Additionally, it contains items which measure action orientation, strong self-esteem/confidence, and adaptability when coping with change. Further, it assesses social problem solving skills, humor in the face of stress, strengthening effect of stress, and taking on responsibilities for dealing with stress. The Scale also measures secure/stable affectional bonds, as well as, previous experiences of success and achievement (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Lastly, the assessment accounts for patience, the ability to endure stress or pain, and lastly, faith and a belief in benevolent intervention. These components were pooled from several other researchers who studied concepts relevant to resilience (Kobasa, 1979; Rutter, 1985).

Once the scale was created, researchers concluded that the findings of the study did match up with the objectives. The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale found that resilience is

quantifiable and can be influenced by an individual's health status (Connor-Davidson, 2003).

Resilience is not sedentary and can be modified and improved with treatment. When there is

improvement in an individual's resilience, such individual may also experience higher levels of

far reaching improvement (Connor & Davidson, 2003).

Another measure of resilience is the Response to Stressful Experiences Scale (RSES).

This scale is a 22-item measure of resilience which was designed to measure resilient coping

tendencies. Some of the coping behaviors mentioned are items related to prayer or mediation as a

strategy, as well as, looking at a problem from a number of ways (De La Rosa, Webb-Murphy, &

Johnston, 2016). The RSES is intended to complement other measures of resilience by providing

an assessment which focuses on how an individual responds during and immediately after the

most stressful events in life (De La Rosa, Webb-Murphy, & Johnston, 2016). The RSES does

this by extending the dimension of resilience to include factors such as cognitive flexibility,

meaning making, and restoration. It also encompasses a comprehensive measure of individual

characteristics that may provide protection against the potential effects of high stress situations

(Johnson, Polusny, Erbes, King, King, Litz, Schurr, Friedman, Pietrzak, & Southwick, 2011).

Understanding how resilience is measured helps to determine how best the concept can

be applied. The findings related to resilience lend clarity to the role it may play in the lives of

high-achieving Black female students.

<u>Resilience in Black Female Students</u>

Resilience is often defined in relation to the risk factors experienced by an individuals,

especially by the number and intensity of the risks (Evans-Winters, 2014). Black female students

have often been considered high-risk due to the prominence of living in low-income

neighborhoods and low high school completion rates. Their high-risk distinction makes them

more likely to experience issues of both racism, sexism, and overall stress (Evans-Winters, 2014).

Though there are risks faced by this group, Evans-Winters (2014) attested that educators, families, and communities often aid in the protective process among the students. Additionally, they help promote resilience in the face of risk for the student. Also important to consider is the resilience of Black female students and that their supports both inside and outside of the classroom provided a holistic spectrum of assistance (Evans-Winters, 2014).

Taylor (1994) conducted research which examined Black students and their families and explored patterns which promoted resilience in school. Taylor (1994) concluded the following: parents who were involved with their student's schooling, underscored how important it is, and informed students of racial discrimination often produced more competent students. Also, Taylor (1994) concluded that in poorer families, support from extended relatives helped to reduce the psychological stress parents had. This support ultimately helped the student's competence and adaptability. Lastly, Taylor (1994) attested that intellectual skills are protective factors that help develop strategies for sustaining academic performance. Moreover, Taylor's (1994) research revealed that Black students learn how best to identify strategies of adaptation in order to effectively survive despite an unjust society.

It has also been concluded that resilient Black girls in K-12 schools often report identifying with at least one positive adult female in the school who encourages academic excellence (Evans-Winters, 2014). Having adult figures to relate to during the K-12 years can prepare Black female students to seek the necessary support in college.

Persistence

Persistence in Higher Education

For the purpose of this study, persistence is defined as a student's continuation behavior in a postsecondary education, which leads to graduation (Arnold, 1999). In contrast, attrition measures the rate and reasons for which students leave college or drop out (Panos & Astin, 1968). Persistence as a phenomenon considers students' reasons not just for overcoming their obstacles, but also for continuing their success in college.

As a seminal theory regarding student persistence and resilience in college, it is vital to understand Tinto's Model of Student Retention (Tinto, 1975, 1987). According to Tinto's Model, student persistence or attrition in college results from the interaction between a student and their educational environment (Tinto, 1975, 1987). In other words, the experiences students have at their institution such as encounters with staff, peers, and campus culture will determine if they remain at an institution and graduate or if they drop out.

Tinto's Model (1975, 1987) determined that a student's match with an institution is a telling element of the level of commitment that student will have to that institution (Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1990; Tinto 1975, 1987). Match is determined by an individual's motivation and academic aptitude, coupled with an institution's social and academic characteristics. Commitment, in this regard, is defined as a pledge to complete college at a particular institution (Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1990).

Despite the applicability of Tinto's Model to the current study, it has not survived without criticism. One major criticism of Tinto's Model is of the assimilation and acculturation components it includes (Braxton, 2002). Tinto's Model indicated that in order for a student to be immersed into the college culture, they must assimilate into the university culture and negate

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their own cultural norms (Braxton, 2002). Critics of Tinto's use of assimilation and acculturation aspects in his theory raise questions surrounding the consideration of students of color, for whom dropping their culture is often not simple (Braxton, 2002). With this critique, Tinto's Model, although influential, lacks fundamental components that are important to consider when studying students of color.

Similar to Tinto's Model of Student Retention, the key focus of Bean's Model is students' psychological responses to the campus environment. The psychological dimensions of students' college experience, including their reaction to the racial climate affects their academic integration and achievement at the institution (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014). Also, students' responses to the university and other interactions can affect their sense of institutional fit, intentions to persist, and their actual persistence at an institution (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014).

In addition, Bean's Student Attrition Model considered reasons why students leave college in order to determine why they persist (Bean, 1980, 1981). This model mentioned specific aspects that are related to a student's experiences, comparing the process of persistence to turnover in work organizations (Bean, 1981). The Model also demonstrated the importance of students' intentions to stay or leave, as predictors of persistence behavior (Bean, 1981). It was presumed that behavioral intentions are shaped by a student's beliefs and attitudes about whether they will be successful in college (Bean, 1981). Further, Bean's Model considered the social experiences and students' self-assessments about whether they will succeed in college (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014). Overall, Bean's Model demonstrated the importance of understanding these reasons regarding what may cause students to leave college.

Ultimately, from the interactions they have in the classroom to the experiences and attitudes they possess when they enter college, students' motivation to continue in school is heavily determined by what they experience (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014). Therefore, for instance, Black students who enter the institution often carry experiences from their pre-college life. Experiences such as traumatic racial incidents and financial burden are likely to affect their decision to persist, especially if they have further detrimental experiences while in college (Fries-Britt, 2002; Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014).

Persistence is an important factor to consider when studying the resilience of high-achieving Black female students. There is only a small amount of literature regarding resilience stems from a higher education foundation. Therefore, it is vital to include persistence as a component of this conceptual framework.

<u>High-achievement in Black College Students</u>

Even with the increase in Black student access, there are still achievement and graduation gaps between Black students and their White counterparts in higher education (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; NCES, 2015). In spite of low-achievement in the Black college student community, there are students who overcome the odds and achieve academically. These students defy the stereotypes of Black undergraduate students and they persist through to graduation. Specifically studying Black female high-achieving college students can provide tremendous insight into how these students succeed best (Fries-Britt, 2000). The results of this dissertation provides recommendations for creating environments to improve low-achieving Black student academic development.

Defining High-achievement

The definition of high-achievement has changed over time. High-achievement was once assumed to be a term only used to describe the academic achievements of students (including grade point average and standardized test scores). With time, that definition has expanded to include much more (Bonner, 2001).

Much of the literature regarding high-achievement in undergraduate education considers graduation as the ultimate demonstration of high-achievement. Whereas, for the purposes of this study, "high-achieving" was considered the process students encounter in order to become successful. The emphasis on this identification was on the journey of their success and not the destination.

Research attests that when exploring the experiences of high-achieving college students, it is also important to consider the experience of gifted high school students as well. Studying gifted high school students provides insight and demonstrates that their pre-college experiences often mimic the experiences of high-achieving college students (Bonner, 2001). Also, high-achieving college students often carry their gifted skills from high school to college (Bonner, 2001). The Florida Department of Education (2007) defined gifted as being a superior ability or potential over peers in the areas of intellect, creativity, and leadership capacity. Also emphasized in the definition is the fact that cultural background does not play a role in the likelihood of someone being gifted. Therefore, Black female college students have just as much a capacity for achievement as their White counterparts who are often highlighted for being in gifted programs (Florida Department of Education, 2017).

When considering the experiences of gifted high school students, it is important to specifically take into account the characteristics of minority gifted students. Highlighting the

experiences of this specific student population is important for the current study because the majority of the participants identified with the gifted student population prior to college. According to Kerr, Colangelo, Maxey, and Christensen (1992), the experiences of gifted minority students is different from their White counterparts. Gifted minority students typically perform poorly on standardized exams due to cultural barriers and test bias present in standardized testing (Kerr, Colangelo, Maxey, & Christensen, 1992). Therefore, nontraditional strategies including specialized programming, curricular modification, and counseling were all recommended in order for gifted students to understand what their identification means to them. These strategies were suggested in order to help minority students overcome conflicts between their ethnic identity and giftedness (Kerr, Colangelo, Maxey, & Christensen, 1992).

Kerr, Colangelo, Maxey, and Christensen (1992) conducted a study regarding gifted minority students and found a key characteristic of these students. The ethnic minority high-performing student participants expressed a higher degree of preference for various services and specialized programming than their White counterparts (Kerr, Colangelo, Maxey, & Christensen, 1992). Compared to their White counterparts, Black students had higher levels of interest in the desires for study skills, personal counseling, independent study, honors courses, financial aid, and employment. Thus, admissions counselors who aim to recruit Black high-achieving students should be aware of these students' preferences for services and consider the differences among Black students compared to their White counterparts.

Given the focus of gifted Black students, other researchers built upon a more traditional definition of high-achievement and described it as a means of superior intelligence based on IQ, participation in an Honor's Program, and standardized test scores (Strayhorn, 2009). Fries-Britt (2002) went a step further to not only include academic achievement, but also background

characteristics of students. In her research, high-achieving students often come from families where at least one parent is educated, where the student went to a majority White high school, and who have at least a 3.0 GPA (Fries-Britt, 2002).

Lastly, in the quest for defining high achieving, Harper (2005) based his definition on factors outside of academics. Harper (2005) discussed the following factors regarding high-achieving student status: participation in educationally enriching program (i.e. study abroad and internships), involvement in student organizations, leadership in student organizations, and receiving scholarships, awards, and honors based on their achievement in school. Though there is not one concrete definition of high-achievement, this compilation of definitions has provided an exhaustive foundation for identifying the most appropriate choice for this study.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the term "high-achieving" defines students who have at least a 3.0 grade point average on a 4.0 scale and who are a member of a leadership development program (Harper, 2005). With a definition of high-achievement established, it is also important to consider the research regarding student success and how this phenomenon is defined.

Student Success Defined

The targeted phenomenon for the current study was the success of high-achieving Black female students at a PWI. Given the focus of student success, it is vital to introduce the theoretical literature which discusses different approaches to success. Holland's theory is specifically highlighted due to its wide use in social science research.

Holland's theory of person-environment fit was introduced as an applicable philosophy of student success in postsecondary education. This theory assumed that students' choice of college major is an expression of their personalities, and also that most people identify with of

the six primary personality types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional (Feldman, Smart, & Ethington, 2008). Holland's theory stems from a social science foundation though it has been applied to the field of higher education as well, when considering student success.

Holland's theory prescribes to two major assumptions as the basis for patterns of student success in postsecondary education. The first, which is the *congruence assumption,* assumes that student success is a function of "fit" between the students' chosen academic environment and their personality type (Felman, Smart, & Ethington, 2008). This approach has historically been utilized to determine whether student learning occurs as a result of their congruency with the institutional environment. The *congruence assumption* seeks to determine whether person-environment congruence contributes to student learning regarding the initial growth in their prominent characteristics at the time they entered college (Felman, Smart, & Ethington, 2008). The congruence pattern of student success results in students enhancing their prominent characteristics while other characteristics like attitudes, interests, and abilities remain stable. In other words, when students aim to find a best "fit" with their major academic field, they are most likely to develop in their field of choice, but less likely to make adjustments in attitudes, interests, and abilities.

Conversely, because of their focus on "fit", students tend to decline in other academic areas concerning their attitudes, interests, and abilities. Overall, according to the congruence approach, students who enroll in incongruent academic environments would not be as successful in developing their initially prominent characteristics. The incongruent environment would not attribute to enhancing the student's overall success because it would provide opportunities,

activities, tasks, and roles which do not "match" the student's interests and self-perceptions (Felman, Smart, & Ethington, 2008).

The second assumption of Holland's theory is the *socialization assumption*, which assumes that student success is determined by the "extent to which students learn the distinctive patterns of attitudes, interests, and abilities that are required, reinforced, and rewarded by their chosen academic environments, irrespective of the 'fit' or congruence between students' personality types and their chosen academic environments" (Felman, Smart, & Ethington, 2008, p. 337). The socialization assumption of Holland's theory results in a balanced profile of student learning and success. With this approach, students' attitudes, interests, and abilities develop within their chosen academic environment regardless of their "fit, while their prominent personality characteristics remain stable. In other words, their resulting student success profile is more balanced because students have two areas of strength reflected in their attitudes and reinforced by their academic environment and prominent personality characteristics.

Considering the socialization approach, faculty members and their efforts to socialize students take precedence over the students' personalities when placing responsibility for students' success. Therefore, within the *socialization assumption*, student success is determined by the "extent to which students grow in terms of the abilities and interests reinforced and rewarded by their chosen environment, rather than enhancing their initially prominent characteristics" (Felman, Smart, & Ethington, 2008, p.342).

With an understanding of high-achievement and student success established, it is also important to consider characteristics and motivations of high-achieving Black students in order to further accurately describe their holistic experiences.

Characteristics and Motivations of High-achieving Black Students

Compared to their non-high achieving counterparts, high achieving students tend to be more curious and abstract thinkers. They also often learn at a faster rate (Dare & Nowicki, 2015). High-achieving Black students tend to define success more non-traditionally, considering their campus involvement and engagement as a dominant component for determining their success (Harper, 2005). Research indicated that these students' active engagement in both campus activities and academic involvement increased the likelihood of them persisting to graduation (Harper, 2005). Additionally, when students intentionally engaged in campus activities, outside of the classroom, it assisted in their efforts toward creating meaningful academic experiences (Harper, 2005).

The level of engagement Black students exhibit on campus is largely due to the extent to which they feel supported. Wright, Good, and Lampley (2011) also asserted that positive relationships with administrators, faculty members, and staff were deemed necessary. These relationships were some of the most significant contributors to Black students' capability to safely and successfully navigate academic, social, and cultural pathways leading to graduation. Whether these students attended PWIs or HBCUs, a supportive campus environment was determined to be a significant factor in enhancing student engagement and achievement (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007; Quaye & Harper, 2015).

The motivations of Black high-achieving students has been presented in the research literature for several decades (Dare & Nowicki, 2015; Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1998, 2002; Harper, 2005; Hebert, 2012). According to Dare and Nowicki (2015), who conducted a study of high-achieving high school students, high-achieving students have a multitude of motivational

factors which contribute to their success. Their motivation to accelerate past their counterparts stemmed from preparing for college, demonstrating initiative, getting ahead in their classes, seeking a challenge, and socializing with others. These factors all contributed to reasons why these accelerated students excelled in their high-achievement and success (Dare & Nowicki, 2015).

Additional motivation for Black high-achieving students is often a supportive family. The recognition of their abilities by their family members early in their lives increased high-achieving students' motivation to succeed (Hebert, 2002). With a family who identified qualities and characteristics in them early in their lives, such students establish a strong foundation of support, reassurance, and validation (Herbert, 2002).

In a study of African-American undergraduate males, Hebert (2002) found many of these students were motivated by their influential mothers who worked to nurture their children. The participants in the study identified their mothers as playing a large part in shaping them as young men. Further, mothers were recognized as encouraging the intellectual abilities of their sons, despite their own lack of similar educational opportunities Hebert (2002). Moreover, family plays an important role in the motivational lives of high-achieving Black undergraduate students (Fries-Britt, 2002; Hebert, 2002).

In addition to family playing an important role in the lives of high-achieving Black students, instructors and other mentors play an important role in motivating these students to succeed (Herbert, 2002). Significant teachers during their school experiences who reinforced positive messages from their family contributed to these students' overall sense of self-efficacy (Hebert, 2002). Literature demonstrated that students benefit from mentorship when it provides a unique opportunity for them to grow, increases their confidence, and advance their maturation in

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different professional and scholarly realms (Williams, 2013). According to Freeman (1999), Black high-achieving students find importance in having a mentor. The mentors provide trust and encouragement, inspire the students to thinking bigger about the future and possibilities, and, in some cases, serve as a second mother or father (Freeman, 1999).

Additionally, Black high-achieving students report a desire to overcome stereotypes of their race (Banks, 2009; Harper, 2005). Black high-achieving students often find themselves negotiating negative stereotypes about their population. High-achieving Black male students reported their intentional efforts to devote their time in the most meaningful ways possible to avoid being grouped into the negative stereotypes of their peers (Harper, 2005). A similar sentiment was felt by the Black female high-achieving undergraduate students in a study by Banks (2009). These Black female students' feelings regarding negotiating negative stereotypes had a great effect on their actions. They understood the role they play as high-achieving students in a society where their racial population suffers from a number of oppressive experiences (Banks, 2009). Therefore, experiences such as speaking up in class and being heard proved unique and complicated for Black female students to navigate. It often proved difficult because of their potential negative consequences (Banks, 2009).

Further, another characteristic and motivation of high-achieving Black students may have to do with an ascending cross-class culture identification. Ascending cross-class culture is a factor of major importance in the success of first-generation college students prior to and during college (Rodriguez, 2001). This identification recognizes the aspects of a desired experience or identity and determines and acquires a means to attain it (Rodriguez, 2001). Ultimately, students with this classification advocate for themselves and shed the limitations of their environments

which may inhibit the development of their natural potential. There are several steps in the process of achieving ascending cross-class identification.

First, participants need to recognize the limitations imposed by their environments as the obstacles to healthy development. Second, the participants need to imagine themselves as free of these limitations. Third, the participants need to believe their imagined freedom is deserved and right for them. Fourth, the students need a means of learning in some detail what freedom is actually like. Lastly, the students need a means to attain the freedom. This classification can be a characteristic of high-achieving Black students (Rodriguez, 2001). It is important to understand that a number of experiences contribute to their success, some of which may stem from their early years of believing in themselves and imagining their success.

Lastly, although the aforementioned characteristics and motivations may be applicable to all high-achieving Black students, the specific demographics of this study's participants' differ and may lead to some variations in these areas. A potential characteristic of the high-achieving students in the current study includes membership in the Generation Z social classification. Age and time period have effects on generational trends. It is important to note that not every Generation Z student aligns with every finding or topic discovered about this generation.

Generation Z students are those who were born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). These students only know a world which has been shaped by the internet and can easily find detailed information and make a distant experience seem close to home. Characteristics of this generation include heightened connectedness, open-mindedness, and very diverse culturally (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Overall, given the majority of the participants in this study will likely belong to this group, it is important to recognize Generation Z as a

classification which may have an influence on the experiences contributing to the success of the high-achieving Black female students in this study.

<u>Academic Self-Concept in Black College Students</u>

This section specifically targets the academic self-concept of Black high-achievers. Black students are often characterized as having poor academic self-concept when they have poor academic achievement (Cokley, 2000). Academic self-concept is defined by how a student views their academic ability when compared to other students (Cokley, 2000). Cokley (2000) discussed how Black students at HBCUs tend to have a higher academic self-concept than their counterparts at PWIs. This comparison demonstrated that, though standardized testing scores have historically been utilized to predict academic self-concept, non-cognitive variables are better predictors of academic self-concept for Black students (Cokley, 2000).

There are several factors which affect academic self-concept in Black college students. First, Cokley (2000) mentioned that the quality of student-faculty relationships outside of the classroom are a positive predictor of academic self-concept for Black students. Positive connections with faculty outside of the classroom benefits students both academically and cognitively. Therefore, it is best for institutions to find ways to promote positive faculty-student contact (Cokley, 2000).

A second factor affecting Black students' academic self-concept is gender (Cokley, 2000). Black female students tended to feel less competent than their male counterparts. Cokley's (2000) study found that Black women at PWIs exhibited high levels of anxiety about their feelings of academic competence, which is not comparable to their competitive abilities. In other words, Black female students often felt less competent in their academic environments at PWIs despite being academically capable (Cokley, 2000).

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The third and final factor affecting academic self-concept is academic class status (Cokley, 2000). Freshmen students have a lower academic self-concept than upperclassmen students. While freshmen and sophomore students tended to try out different academic majors, switching when they lost interest or failed, juniors and seniors exhibited more maturity (Cokley, 2000). Overall, understanding the academic self-concept of Black students contributes to the overall comprehension of the experiences of high-achieving Black female students and their success in college.

<div align="center">Obstacles Faced by Black High-achievers at PWIs</div>

Black students at PWIs face a number of different issues compared to their Black counterparts at HBCUs. According to Terenzini, Yaeger, Bohr, Pascarella, and Amaury (1997), the experiences of Black students at HBCUs are more positive than those at PWIs. Black students at HBCUs appear to have greater overall satisfaction, social and faculty support, as well as fewer racial incidents and sentiments (Karkouti, 2016). Additionally, Black students at HBCUs have been found to be more integrated into campus life and to perceive their college as providing institutional support. They also experience a higher level of social involvement with more favorable relationships with professors (Karkouti, 2016). As a result of the positive experience of Black students at HBCUs versus PWIs, the gap of achievement among these two student groups continue to exist.

Literature regarding the experiences of Black college students at PWIs often reveals a story of adaptation, cultural navigation, and isolation (Strayhorn, 2009). Specifically, literature regarding high-achieving Black college students demonstrates that they harbor a unique set of experiences.

In addition to not feeling a sense of belonging or social and academic membership at PWIs, high-achieving Black students often also experience isolation and the need to camouflage their academic abilities (Baber, 2012; Fries-Britt, 2002; Griffin, 2006; Terenzini, Yaeger, Bohr, Pascarella, & Nora, 1997). Experiencing loneliness during the undergraduate journey can be significantly stunting for the overall undergraduate experience. Research demonstrated the importance of support to a student's retention and persistence in college (Strayhorn, 2009). Thus, when high-achieving Black students lack this support, their journey becomes much more taxing than comparable college students.

Additionally, camouflaging academic abilities can be a toxic experience. Stebleton, Soria, and Huesman, Jr. (2014) define sense of belonging as a desire or need to feel connected to others through formal or informal interactions. Sense of belonging is held as a high priority while in college (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, Jr., 2014). It can be detrimental to a student's success when they do not feel connected to the institution. Camouflaging academic abilities directly affects a student's sense of belonging as it does not allow for a genuine connection to be made through interactions (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, Jr., 2014). This strategy, ultimately, is negatively tied to a student's capabilities for high-achievement.

In addition to Black female students camouflaging their abilities, these students often are subjected to stereotype threat. Stereotype threat refers to the process by which negative stereotypes about a group are internalized by individuals and impairs their performance, thus confirming the stereotype (Syed, Amizitia, & Cooper, 2011; Inzlicht & Zeev, 2003). Similarly to the effect of camouflaging abilities, stereotypes can negatively affect Black female students' sense of belonging in academic settings, which increases the importance of identity and academic self-concept (Syed, Amizitia, & Cooper, 2011; Inzlicht & Zeev, 2003). High-

achieving Black students are most at risk for the stereotype threat phenomenon because they highly identify with the domain being threatened; classroom performance, for instance.

Further, high-achieving Black students have to negotiate their own racial, cultural, and individual identities in order to feel a part of certain sub-groups at PWIs (McGee, 2013). Compromising their own cultural norms in order to accommodate the culture and climate of the university is an additional hurdle Black high-achieving students face at PWIs.

Very often, high-achieving students in large, highly diverse college classrooms can get lost in the mix for teacher attention. Faculty generally work to appease the middle distribution of students and may pay less attention to those who demonstrate extremes, including high-achieving students (Varsavsky & Raynor, 2013). Although literature documents a wide range of strategies for supporting poor-performing students in large post-secondary classroom settings, little work has been published on catering to more capable, high-achieving students (Varsavsky & Raynor, 2013). Additionally, high-achieving students are often not challenged to the extent they prefer because little attention is paid to their abilities. This lack of challenge is due to the expectancy that they will succeed regardless (Ritchotte, Suhr, Alfurayh, & Graefe, 2016).

There are additional factors that are often not considered in the support efforts for high-achieving student success. These factors include their financial need, as well as, the influence of their high school experiences. A number of Black high-achieving students come from low-income households, and if they are not supported, many students fail (Chambers & Huggins, 2014; Davis, 2013; What Works Clearinghouse, 2014).

Overall, in order to explore the general literature regarding Black student experiences in higher education, this chapter highlighted the historical component of this student journey. Next, this chapter outlined the conceptual framework guiding the present study, emphasizing areas of

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Black feminism, resilience, and persistence. Finally, this chapter defined and expounded upon the concept of high-achievement in the context of higher education. With an ultimate focus on the experiences contributing to the success of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students, this chapter provided a foundation for understanding the experiences of this student population.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

<u>Introduction</u>

This chapter provides details regarding the methodology for the current study. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences contributed to the success of high-achieving Black undergraduate female students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Black students at PWIs often face a myriad issues, including a lack of campus engagement, race-related victimization, and isolation (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). Given these issues, it is important to consider Black students' experiences at PWIs to further explore how these students manage to succeed, despite the obstacles they often face.

This study specifically explored the experiences of high-achieving Black female students because little research has been conducted to distinguish the experiences of this population from their male counterparts (Harper, 2005). Much of the literature regarding high-achieving Black students provided insight into the experiences of Black males, with significantly less research devoted to high-achieving Black female students. Therefore, it is important to study the experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students; particularly because they represent an increasing population in higher education (NCES, 2014). Using a qualitative phenomenological research method, this study aimed to fill a gap in the literature surrounding high-achieving Black female students at PWIs.

This chapter serves as a preface for the next two chapters which introduce the profiles of the participants and the study findings. In this chapter the researcher outlines the rationale for utilizing a qualitative phenomenological research design and why it is the most appropriate to explore the phenomenon presented. Additionally, the study site and sample; the data collection procedures and data management; and my positionality are discussed. Further, the researcher

provides a rationale for the Sister Circle and interview questions, and outlines the data analysis process. Lastly, the processes utilized to provide validity and reliability to ensure trustworthiness of the study are discussed.

<u>Research Questions</u>

Research questions used to guide a qualitative study seek to gather a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes (Glesne, 2011; Sheel, 2014). Glesne (2011) attested that qualitative research questions usually stem from two different areas: questions that ask about social, cultural, economic, political and/or environmental structures; and those that focus on individual experiences within those structures (Sheel, 2014). Given this, the focus of this study appropriately fit the objective of qualitative research questions. After reviewing the literature, I determined there was a gap regarding the experiences of high-achieving Black undergraduate females at a PWI. Therefore, the purpose of the research questions in this study was to gather a deeper understanding of the students' experiences and how those experiences contributed to their success at a PWI.

The over-arching research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution regarding their success in college?

The sub-questions for this study were:

- How do the pre-college experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students contribute to the essence of their success in college?

- How do experiences with negative stereotypes in college influence the success of Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution?

- How do Black female undergraduate students make sense of success?

- What motivates Black female undergraduate students to succeed at a predominantly White institution?

- What challenges do Black female undergraduate students face related to their race, gender, and academic achievement at a predominantly White institution?

- What experiences contribute to the persistence of Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution?

<u>The Research Paradigm</u>

The worldview or paradigm which guided this methodological approach was Constructivism. Constructivism attests that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work, and they develop subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2014). Given the complexity of views drawn from the participants, the goal of constructivist research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied (Creswell, 2014). According to Glasersfeld (1989), one of the principles of constructivism is that knowledge is not passively received but actively built by the cognizing subject. In order to achieve this, I crafted questions that were open-ended, as I listened to the participants and how they portrayed their experiences.

Additionally, recognized in Constructivism is the fact that I, as the researcher, understand and make explicit the role of how my own background may shape the way I interpreted the data. Thus, it was important for me as the researcher to acknowledge my own personal, cultural, and historical experiences. I fully intended for my experiences not to influence the interpretation of the students' contributions. However, it was also important for me to acknowledge the fact that my ultimate intention was to encompass the essence of the students' success and my own experiences ultimately served as my lens for exploring and presenting the findings.

Rationale for Qualitative Method

Qualitative studies highlight individual perspectives which give voice to personal experiences (Creswell, 2013). The goal of a qualitative method is to gain a deep, rich understanding of participants' experiences, thus requiring the researcher to actively listen and remain open to participants' responses (Habermann-Little, 1991). The current study utilized a qualitative method to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of high-achieving Black female college students at a predominantly White institution. The current study aimed to gain insight from the participants in order to gather the essence of their success. A qualitative research method is used when a specific problem, issue, or experience needs to be explored (Creswell, 2013, Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002). For the present study, the phenomena I was seeking to better understand were the experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution.

Additionally, qualitative research is used to provide an involved and detailed understanding of participants' lived experiences. This type of data is most appropriately acquired by talking directly with participants and inviting them to tell their stories. In an effort to validate the experiences of the Black female students in this study, a qualitative method was used to empower the individuals to share their experiences and as a way to minimize the power relationship between the researcher and participant (Creswell, 2013). Consistent with the Black Feminism construct of this study, the goal of this specific research approach is to resist oppressive ideas and place power into the hands of the participants (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1982).

Further, according to Patton (2002), qualitative research methods are used when a study is focused on, or involves, participatory research. It is also used when the study involves

exploration of values, incorporates collaboration, and captures and communicates stories (Patton, 2002). One key characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher is used as the key instrument. In other words, unlike with quantitative research, I collected the data myself by gathering information and stories from the participants (Creswell, 2014). An additional characteristic of qualitative researcher is the use of multiple sources of data. By using both interviews and a Sister Circle, I chose not to solely rely on a single data source but instead chose multiple means of gathering information to allow the final themes to emerge. Lastly, in a qualitative design, the researcher inquirers and reflects about their own role and personal background which they bring with them to the study (Creswell, 2014). This is important to note because of the biases, values, and cultural influence I bring to the study. Identifying or bracketing these biases is used as a way to allow the stories of the participants to remain top priority. These qualifications make qualitative research methods the most appropriate for the present study which aimed to create a partnership between the researcher and the participant.

The literature identified many strengths of qualitative research. For example, Johnson and Christensen (2004) discussed that qualitative research methods use a very individualized approach, in that the researcher produces data which is derived from the participant's own meaning and individual information. For the current study, this strength is important because without the voices of the participants there would be no rich and telling data for use when describing their stories. Several authors highlighted how qualitative research allows for the in-depth study of a small number of cases. This specific focus on a smaller number of participants allows for more time to be devoted to the participants and gathering data to gain insight into their experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002). By focusing on a smaller number of participants in the current study, I was able to spend more meaningful

time with them and delve into their experiences. As a result, I was able to build or strengthen rapport with each study participant, which enhanced their desire to share both in the interviews and during the Sister Circle.

Additionally, qualitative research produces rich descriptions of experiences and phenomena which can provide insight into contributing or impacting contextual and setting factors (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research further allows for cross-case comparisons and the presentation of a vivid demonstration of a phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). As aforementioned, this study aimed to consider the experiences contributing to the success of high-achieving Black undergraduate female students at a PWI. By using a qualitative approach, I was able to inquire about different aspects of the students' experiences from their pre-college journey to the influence of being at a predominantly White institution. Therefore, by detailing the participants' experiences, I hope the findings and procedures will serve as a relatable study which will help contribute to similar studies. For all reasons discussed above, a qualitative research method was selected for this study.

Ultimately, a qualitative research method values and recognizes the context and settings within which the research and researcher appreciates the uniqueness of the participants and their situations (Creswell, 2013). Given the parameters of the present study, a quantitative or mixed methods design was not appropriate.

<u>Design Strategy</u>

The design strategy which guided this study was phenomenology. All approaches to phenomenological research are similar, in that they each seek to understand the life world or human experience as it is lived (Laverty, 2003). According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological approach to research explores the essence of the lived experiences of

individuals, while focusing on their perception of reality and how they view the world. Phenomenology was most appropriate to use for this study because I asked questions of the participants with the objective of understanding the essence of their shared experience through the lens of their own perceptions. My aim was to gather the stories of different individuals who shared a common experience in order to highlight their stories as told by them.

According to Patton (2002), qualitative research and the findings that come from in depth interviews, observations, and document analysis "illuminate the people behind the numbers and put faces on the statistics…[helping to] deepen understanding" (p.10). This is especially true with the phenomenological approach. The participant quotes, alongside their written portraits, demonstrated a deeper understanding of the participants and their stories. Johnson and Christensen (2004) also attested that phenomenology can be used to focus on the unique characteristics of an individual's experience with a phenomenon. In the case of the current study, phenomenology allowed me to highlight the journeys of the participants, including the experiences which they felt contributed to their success. Overall, utilizing phenomenology as a methodological approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the students' stories, and specifically, their experiences connected to the phenomenon.

<p style="text-align:center">Descriptive Phenomenology</p>

The specific phenomenological approach used for this study was descriptive phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology is concerned with revealing the essence of any phenomenon under exploration, focusing on the features that make the phenomenon what it is (Brooks, 2015). In other words, descriptive phenomenology aims to tell the story of the participants as they understand it. In this study, descriptive phenomenology was used instead of interpretive phenomenology because the ultimate goal of the study was to articulate the essence

of the students' experiences and not to make meaning of the phenomenon. Interpretive phenomenology identifies both the researcher and participant as intrinsically sense-making creatures, and considers the researcher as trying to make sense of the participants who are trying to make sense of their world (Brooks, 2015). Interpretive phenomenology eliminates bracketing, asserting that impartiality is impossible because the researcher becomes enmeshed with the experience (Reiners, 2012). Conversely, bracketing is of key importance in descriptive phenomenology. Though the present study did utilize bracketing of my personal experience, I did not claim that my experiences would be completely removed. On the contrary, I made explicit the understanding that my background and experiences ultimately serve as a lens through which I saw the themes and significant statements emerge.

Later in this chapter, I outline the data analysis method of Colaizzi (1978) whose procedure uses a distinctive seven step process, staying close to the data at all times, and providing an encompassing description of the phenomenon. The Colaizzi (1978) analysis method was utilized for this study under the umbrella of the Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological principles. Moustakas (1994) values the common feature of human science research such as a focus on the wholeness of experience and a search for the essences of experiences.

A key to Moustakas' (1994) principles, and the main reason for its use as an overarching analysis approach for this study, is its emphasis on epoche. The term "epoche" is used to describe the process of setting aside judgments: it is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). The over-arching transcendental phenomenological approach was the most appropriate design strategy for this study because it challenged me to fully immerse myself into the lived experience of the participants and their

stories. According to Moustakas (1994), for phenomenologists to experience something in its purest form, any preconceptions or learned feelings about the experience being studied need to be bracketed or suspended. Considering this need, and because I had a personal relation to the population and purpose of the study, bracketing personal feelings helped reduce bias and frame the student experience as new, fresh, and particular to the participants. Specifically, engaging in bracketing and including a Positionality section in this dissertation further supports identifying the meaning and essence of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Moustakas, 1994).

From another perspective, although bracketing, or suspending, helps to reduce researcher bias, the personal experiences of the researcher allow for a deeper understanding of the philosophical underpinnings and broader context of the student experience (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, I allowed the study to be steered by the participants' input and only commented about my personal experiences as a means to empower the students to share information. This was especially true during the Sister Circle group experience. As students shared their stories, I contributed when I related to an experience. This was done in an effort to prompt students to elaborate further or to encourage students who were not fully engaged.

Further, a phenomenological approach, while exploring the essence of the lived experiences of the individuals, focuses on their perception of reality and how they view the world (Moustakas, 1994). In the effort to consider the experiences contributing to the success of the students, it was important to gather the richest data by offering a level of autonomy to the students. A phenomenological approach to research allows participants to take charge of the process and guide the conversation. I entered the interviews with pre-determined questions, but

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the interviews and Sister Circle were steered based on the responses from the students and what they chose to contribute.

Though the phenomenological approach was most appropriate for the present study, this design does not come without challenges. Phenomenology requires an understanding of the broader philosophical assumptions of the phenomenon being studied, all of which have to be identified and stated in the study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In the literature review, I addressed this challenge by outlining the background of the subject matter and by explicitly stating my positionality as a researcher who is closely tied to the subject of the study.

Additionally, a frequent criticism of phenomenology is the often lack of randomness in the selection of participants (Hycner, 1985). To counter this argument, Hycner (1985) attested that often it is necessary for the researcher to specifically seek out participants who have had the experience being explored, and who are able to articulate their experience. Choosing specific participants was vital for this study because, upon completion, I needed to be able to forge a common understanding of the phenomenon amongst the participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, randomness might have kept me from fully investigating the phenomenon in the in-depth manner necessary (Hycner, 1985).

Another challenge of phenomenology is the question of validity. Considering whether the data is valid and fully captures the phenomenon being studied is important. I took several measures to ensure validity of the data, which will be outlined in the Data Analysis section of this chapter. Processes such as member checking and inter-rater reliability were each utilized to assist with the validity of the study findings and to ensure that the phenomenon in question was accurately captured.

All participants for this study were chosen based on certain criteria, which are outlined in the Study Sample section of this chapter. Recruiting students based on these requirements ensured that the emergent themes were pulled from the shared experiences of students who experienced the same phenomenon, though not in the same way.

<u>Study Sample and Site</u>

In this section the study sample, sampling technique, and study site are discussed.

Sample

The sample for this study included female students who self-identify as Black according to the given definition for this study. These students had to have at least a 3.0 grade point average on a 4.0 scale, a minimum of 60 academic credits completed, be at least a third-year student, have attended the host institution since their first year of school, and be a member of a student leadership development program. Leadership development programs vary in requirements and experiences. Some students become involved with programs during high school, which helped to develop their leadership, while others become members of organizations in college. An example of criteria used for a college leadership development program is provided in Appendix J. All students in this study attend the same large, predominantly White institution in the Southeastern United States.

Seven out of the eight participants were alumnae of the same student leadership development program, while one student was involved elsewhere on campus. I invited the students who fit the majority of the criteria through a listserv of student alumnae of the aforementioned student leadership program. Within two days of my request, I heard back from seven students who fit the criteria outlined in the invitation email. The remaining student was contacted and invited because of her personal association with me. She accepted the invitation

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within one day of it being sent. The mostly frequently used means of communication prior to the first interview was email for each participant, and the most frequently used method of communication after the first interview was text messaging. I found that the participants were generally quicker with their responses when they were texted. The original email invitation contained parameters for participation requirements, as well as outlined the permissions and powers of the participants.

Sampling Technique

Qualitative researchers must first decide whom or what they want to study (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). It is important for qualitative researchers to identify which populations are relevant to the research and require focus. Therefore, in order to identify the specific participants for this study, I used criterion sampling. I defined a set of criteria that the participants had to possess and which distinguished the students of potential interest from those who did not qualify (Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

Criterion sampling is defined as a type of purposeful sampling of cases based on preconceived criteria (Sandelowski, 2000). Criterion sampling was used as the technique for this study because the researcher targeted a specific student population. The selected requirements for the participants yielded data from the students according to their shared experiences.

Study Site

This study took place on a single university campus. The institution is a large, public, four-year university in the Southeastern United States. The total student population is between 40,000 to 65,000 students. The institution grants bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in over 150 programs. During the 2015-2016 academic school year, the institution served a student

population with less than 50% students of color (11% Black) and more than 50% White students (NCES, 2015b). The institution has a graduation rate higher than 50% (College Factual, 2016).

The interviews and Sister Circle themselves took place in the office suite of a student leadership development program at the host campus. Within the suite, the interviews and Sister Circle were conducted in an empty classroom. I reserved the space through the office manager during times when classes and meetings were not in session. This site was chosen given the convenience of me working there and to offer a level of privacy to each of the participants. Snacks and food were provided at every interview and at the Sister Circle.

<div align="center">Data Collection and Management Plan</div>

Once the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received, I recruited my participants for the study. Once recruited, I conducted two interviews with each participant and a Sister Circle group process. I sought to describe and understand the lived experiences of success from a purposeful sample of high-achieving Black female students at a PWI. As such, data was collected through a multi-phase study including semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and a Sister Circle (Johnson 2011) group process.

<div align="center">Interviews</div>

Individual interviews offered a level of privacy for the student participants, but also provided me the opportunity to guide the conversation in a direction that was most beneficial for the research interests (Rubin & Rubin, 2014). Semi-structured interviews allowed me to inquire about what a participant experienced and how they felt about that experience. I prepared set questions in advance and had an idea of the topics which were to be covered (Fylan, 2005; Horton, Macve, & Struyven, 2004; Rubin & Rubin, 2014; Seidman, 2012), but I also allowed the participants to steer the conversation and left room for the interview to vary (Fylan, 2005;

Horton, Macve, & Struyven, 2004). This process allowed me to inquire about the journeys of the participants, including their pre-college experiences, time while in college, and get overall insight regarding what has contributed to their success.

Given that the process of interviewing requires development of rapport and trust, I made sure this was established with every participant. I immediately reached out to participants as they agreed to be a part of the study through email. I sent the students pre-set date and time options to choose from for their interviews to prevent them from feeling overwhelmed with scheduling. I kept in constant communication with the students to ensure the final chosen times were based on their convenience and availability. For the students that I did not have a previous acquaintance with, I made sure the interviews opened with questions designed to build rapport and increase their level of comfort and trust. For the students I knew prior to the data collection process, having that relationship helped break down barriers that may have interfered with them opening up and sharing their stories. I allotted at least one hour for each of the interviews, making sure not to have anything scheduled too closely to the start and proposed end times of the interviews.

At the start of each interview, once rapport was established, participants were briefed on the parameters of the research. I explained to them their right to confidentiality and I reminded them of their volunteer capacity and that they could stop their participation at any time. I also encouraged them to be as honest as possible, and I provided them with the summary explanation of the research form. Students were also given the opportunity to ask any clarifying questions. None of the participants expressed any confusion about the study, but several participants inquired about having access to my dissertation once it was complete, and I assured them they would be sent a copy if they desired. Additionally, each participant understood and agreed for the interviews to be audio recorded for later transcription purposes. They were also advised that

their names would not be used in the final report, but rather that a pseudonym would be used to protect their identity as much as possible.

The interview protocols in both this chapter and in Appendices F and G provide the questions which were asked during each of the two interviews. The questions included in the second interview were created with the intention of going deeper than the first interview to encourage the participants to provide in-depth insight into their experiences. As the participants told their stories, I took notes regarding key statements they made, as well as their non-verbal communication. Taking notes allowed me to capture phrases and emotions which often prompted me to ask follow-up questions to statements that were made.

At the end of each interview, I gave the participants the opportunity to provide any additional insight which I did not inquire about during the interview. Several students provided further understanding of their experiences being at a PWI, while others offered recommendations for administrators who work with Black female students. The students received snacks during the interviews as an incentive and show of appreciation for their participation. The students were grateful for the snacks but often did not partake in them, but instead expressed gratitude for being a part of the study.

<div align="center">Sister Circle</div>

Additionally, I collected data using a Sister Circle, which is a data collection method which is qualitative in nature and simultaneously serves as a support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women (Dorsey, 2000; Johnson, 2011; Gaston, Porter, & Thomas, 2007; Harley, 2002; Neal-Barrett, Stadulis, Payne, Crosby, Mitchell, Williams, & Williams-Costa, 2011). It is a non-traditional type of research methodology drawn from the wisdom of social relations of Black women which transcends different Black nations (Johnson, 2011;

Harley, 2002). Sister Circles have been found to be effective because traditional western research practices do not consider (rather, ignore) the social and cultural relations of Black women specifically, yet these practices continue to serve as their normal practice (Johnson, 2011; Gaston, Porter, & Thomas, 2007; Harley, 2002). Historically, Sister Circles were support groups among Black women who were often in the same community, profession, or organization. These support groups sprouted from friendships or networks already existing between Black women (Harley, 2002; Neal-Barnett, et al, 2011).

The students participated in a single Sister Circle group process. This process occurred approximately two weeks after all sixteen of the individual interviews were conducted. This allowed enough time for me to consider all the data which had already been collected in order to determine what questions needed to be asked during the Sister Circle. Also, two weeks was not so long that the participants became disinterested in continuing with the study. The Sister Circle focused on the same relevant theme of student success to gauge the collective experiences of the participants. The participants were provided food and drinks during the process and the first few minutes of the Sister Circle were used to build rapport between the participants, some of whom did not know each other.

I acted as both a facilitator and participant, as I posed questions to the group and contributed my own experiences in order to encourage the participants to contribute. Also present was a faculty member and seasoned researcher who served as the facilitator's assistant. She is a Black female, and her inclusion was strategic because both her race and gender aided in the progression of conversation during the group process. The assistant took notes during the Sister Circle and was encouraged to contribute her experiences to the discussion. Having her present served as an excellent contribution to the data collection process. She offered insight

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from a different generational perspective, but still from the perspective of a high-achieving Black woman. Despite the difference in age between the participants and both the facilitator and facilitator's assistant, there was consistency in the experiences between everyone in the Sister Circle. The participants added to one another's contributions and often referenced each other's contributions when making their own contributions to the discussion. Conducting the Sister Circle after the interviews only confirmed and enhanced the messages portrayed by the students during the interviews regarding their experiences with success at a PWI.

Seven of the eight original participants were able to attend the Sister Circle; one of the participants had to work. The Sister Circle lasted about an hour and forty-five minutes and was audio recorded and later transcribed.

Further, the following explanation indicates how the data is being stored. Given that the data from the interviews and Sister Circle were audio recorded, the content was stored and uploaded as computer files immediately after the sessions and secured with passcodes. In addition, the files were kept on the original recording device in order to have a backup copy. The data will be stored for up to five years and the audio files will be destroyed after this time.

Interview Protocol

The data collection methods for this study included semi-structured individual interviews (protocols provided in Appendix F and G) and a Sister Circle group process (protocol provided in Appendix H). Each of the eight participants participated in two interviews each. Each of the interviews lasted between approximately 20 minutes and an hour and twenty minutes. The interview format was an appropriate format to begin the study because it allowed me to capture the individual narratives of the participants. Following individual interviews, all of the participants were invited to participate in the Sister Circle. One student was unable to participate

because of a scheduling conflict with her work. Keeping the same participants from the interviews created a level of consistency because the students were already well-versed in the objective of the study and had already shared individual experiences. The one on one individual interviews were used to gauge the participants' individual experiences with the phenomenon. Conversely, the group process was used as a way for participants to commune with and empower similar students in order to understand shared experiences.

The interview and Sister Circle questions were generated from the literature regarding common experiences of high-achieving Black college students. The questions were also created based on what the literature describes as common experiences for Black female students in college. The questions were also guided by the over-arching and sub-research questions in terms of scope, topic, and detail. Table 1 provides a summary of the impacting factors, challenges, and interventions which guided the interview and Sister Circle questions. Table 1 also documents the sources from which the guiding information was provided. The table distinguishes each of the questions according to interview one, interview two, and the Sister Circle group.

Table 1: Rationale for Interview/ Sister Circle Questions

Interview/Sister Circle Question	Impacting Factor, Challenge, Intervention	Source
Interview 1 1. Tell me about your academic experience prior to college within or outside of high school. **Interview 2** 2. What about your experiences prior to college would you say contributed to your success in college? **Sister Circle** 3. What do you think has contributed most significantly to your success?	• Family supporting and encouraging academic endeavors growing up	• Fries-Britt (2002); Herbert (2002)
	• Students often from families with at least one formally educated parent. • Student often attended a majority White high school	• Dare & Nowicki (2015); Fries-Britt (2002)
	• Students often classified as gifted or took honors classes in high school.	• Bonner (2001); Dare & Nowicki (2015); Rodriguez, 2001
Interview 1 1a. Think about your experiences in college so far. Would you share with me any experiences you might have had with Black female student stereotypes?	• As a result of negative stereotypes, Black female students often experience unfairness, condescension, and isolation at PWIs	• Allen (1985); Banks (2009); Harper (2005)

Interview/Sister Circle Question	Impacting Factor, Challenge, Intervention	Source
Interview 1 1b. Complete this statement for me: "When I have reached success in college, I will have…" 1c. So, how would you define success? 1d. Much of the literature lists different attributes that contribute to success. What would be on your list? ***Interview 2*** 2a. How important is it for you to succeed? Why? ***Sister Circle*** 3a. How do you define success?	• Black students tend to define success more non-traditionally	• Harper (2005); Strayhorn (2009)
Interview 1 1e. What motivates you to succeed? ***Interview 2*** 2b. How does being at a PWI influence your success? ***Sister Circle*** 3b. Have you been successful? Why? Why not?	• Supportive family	• Herbert (2002); Fries-Britt (2002)
	• Mentorship from teachers/academic staff	Fries-Britt (1998); Freeman (1999); Williams (2013); Wright, Good, & Lampley (2011)
	• Overcome stereotypes	• Banks (2009); Harper (2005)

Interview/Sister Circle Question	Impacting Factor, Challenge, Intervention	Source
Interview 1 1f. Please describe any challenges you have encountered while in college related to your race, gender, and academic achievement. 1g. What approaches have you taken to address these challenges? *Interview 2* 2c. If you were writing a how-to guide about how you process the different experiences you have had regarding race, gender, etc. what would you include? *Sister Circle* 3c. Have you had any challenges? What are those challenges attributed to?	• Experience isolation, adaptation, cultural navigation, and camouflaging abilities	• Baber (2012); Fries-Britt (2002); Griffin (2006); Terenzini, Yaeger, Bohr, Pascarella, & Nora (1997)
Interview 1 1h. What has contributed to your persistence in college up until this point? *Interview 2* 2d. If you had to create a mathematical formula regarding your success and persistence in college (i.e. a + b = success), what would it be? *Sister Circle* 3d. What keeps you going in college?	• Support and engagement is crucial for Black student persistence	• Chen, Ingram, & Davis (2014); Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates (2007); Strayhorn (2009); Quaye & Harper (2015)

Note: The full protocols for the interviews and Sister Circle are all located in Appendices F, G, and H.

Data Analysis

When considering qualitative data analysis, according to Miles and Huberman (1994), there are three flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction refers to the process used to select, focus, simplify, summarize, and transform the data that appear in written notes or transcriptions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process continues throughout the life of any qualitative project or study. The researcher does anticipatory data reduction before the data are collected and further reduction happens after the fieldwork is complete.

Data display refers to an organized, compressed collection of information that permits conclusion drawing and action (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data display helps the researcher and readers alike better understand what is happening and prompts action, whether to further analyze or make changes, based on understanding. Lastly, conclusion drawing/verification refers to decision making regarding what things mean, considering regularities, patterns, possible configurations, and causal flows (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Continuing verification refers to the validity of a research study's results. Validity determines whether data are plausible, sturdy, and confirmable (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Understanding the general nature of Miles and Huberman's explanation (1994) when considering qualitative data analysis, I utilized a combination of data analysis procedures for the purpose of holistically considering the data of the study. I used Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach as the over-arching guide for the data analysis process. This approach dictated that I put aside my own biases and experiences as I sought to understand the experiences of my study participants. Thus, per Moustakas' principle, I attempted to "see" the study phenomenon for the first time.

With this principle as a guide, I utilized a slightly modified version of the Colaizzi (1978) method of data analysis. Colaizzi (1978) developed a distinctive seven step process that provides a rigorous analysis, where each step stays close to the data. The steps which were modified were steps five and six. Step five consisted of exhaustively describing the investigated phenomenon. Because both the Findings and Discussion chapters of this dissertation describe the phenomenon in great detail, this step was not specifically addressed. Step six requires the description of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. This step was not included in order to prevent redundancy in the Discussion chapter of this dissertation. Colaizzi's (1978) method is most effective when it depends on rich first-person accounts of the experience like the one on one interviews and Sister Circle conducted in this study. Figure 4 below provides a visual representation of the data analysis approach. Following the figure, the stages of data analysis are outlined, along with how the process implemented during this study.

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│        Moustakas (1994), Transcendental Phenomenology    │
│                                                          │
│                   (Bracketing Biases)                    │
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        ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
        │        Colaizzi (1978), Analysis Method      │
        │                                              │
        │            (Modified 7-step process)         │
        └─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
            ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
            │  1.  Acquiring a sense of each transcript│
            └─────────────────────────────────────────┘
            ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
            │  2.  Extracting Significant Statements   │
            └─────────────────────────────────────────┘
            ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
            │  3.  Formulation of Meanings             │
            └─────────────────────────────────────────┘
            ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
            │  4.  Organizing formulated meanings into │
            │      clusters of themes                  │
            └─────────────────────────────────────────┘
            ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
            │  5.  Exhaustively describing the         │
            │      investigated phenomenon             │
            │      (Included in Chapter 6, Discussion) │
            └─────────────────────────────────────────┘
            ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
            │  6.  Describing the fundamental structure│
            │      of the phenomenon                   │
            │      (Did not include to prevent redundancy)│
            └─────────────────────────────────────────┘
            ┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
            │  7.  Returning to the participants       │
            └─────────────────────────────────────────┘
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Figure 4**:** Data Analysis Approach

Stage 1: Acquiring a sense of each transcript. In the present study, I conducted each of

the interviews personally and facilitated the Sister Circle. This approach helped me to gain a

sense of the whole experience for each participant and all of them as a collective. Colaizzi (1978)

advocated that the researcher should read the participants' narratives to acquire a feeling for their

ideas. Reading the narratives, as well as listening to the audio recordings, is done in order to understand participants.

To gain a sense of each participant's description of their lived experience with success, I listened to each of the audio tapes at least twice and read each transcript multiple times. During this stage, I reflected on any thoughts, feelings, and ideas I had to assist with the bracketing process (Moustakas, 1994). I felt it was vital to involve the participants at this stage of the process, so they could verify that all words transcribed were accurate. I provided them with a copy of each interview transcript and asked them to provide any feedback they felt necessary. Two of the participants returned feedback, to clarify some misspellings in the transcripts and to correct some of the acronyms used. All other participants felt that their transcripts accurately represented what was said during the interviews and were true to their experience of success.

It should be noted that five of the individual interviews and the Sister Circle were transcribed by me, one was transcribed by a fellow researcher and doctoral candidate, and the remaining individual interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber. This method was used for the convenience of speedily accessing the transcriptions in order to commence analysis.

Stage 2: Extracting Significant Statements. Next, I moved into the phase of reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify and highlight the participants' experiences of success. Colaizzi (1978) recommended extracting significant phrases and statements from the transcripts that form a holistic meaning of the students' experience with success at a PWI. I analyzed each transcript and pinpointed key statements that told the story of the participants' lived experiences. Each of these statements was physically highlighted on each page of every transcript, with a highlighter. Doing so made the statements more visible and easier to return to when coding.

Next, each statement was cut from the appropriate transcript and transferred to a separate sheet. Once this was done, I re-read the statements with a new lens and was able to identify preliminary themes. Despite the various computer programs which perform coding procedures, I decided to choose the significant statements by hand in order to maintain intimacy with the data. Thoughts and feelings which arose during this process were also reflected upon to deepen the bracketing process. Over 150 significant statements and phrases were drawn from the transcripts. This same process was completed by an additional educational researcher to assist with the validity and trustworthiness of the data. I provided her with all of the transcripts and she identified significant statements which warranted follow-up. This process also helped to identify statements which we both consistently found to be important.

Table 2 provides an example of how I identified and extracted significant statements from the transcripts. The excerpt is presented in table format to demonstrate how the process of extracting significant statements occurred. Table 2 illustrates one of the statements which was highlighted, including the significant extractions pulled from the statements. This process proved to be an extensive and lengthy, but I felt it necessary to offer closeness and intimacy with the data. In addition, this approach helped me implement the Colaizzi (1978) method of data analysis with fidelity.

Table 2: Example of how significant statements were identified and extracted from Cali's Interview (Transcript 3, Page 6, Lines 169-173)

> *"Like, **I don't think can you put a cap on success**, to me. So that's where that like, you don't want to be too, like, complacent with it. You **just want to keep going**. So there's no cap on success in mind - which may be a bad thing, but hey. Some people are like 'You're never satisfied.' But, I just think **you're supposed to continue growing and there's always more to be done** so."*

Extracting significant statements assisted with the phenomenological data reduction process outlined at the beginning of the data analysis section of this chapter.

Stage 3: Formulation of Meanings. For this stage, Colaizzi (1978) recommended that the researcher attempt to formulate general meanings from the extracted statements. At this point, it was key to bracket any presuppositions I had about the participants and their stories. I made my biases explicit in the Positionality section of this chapter. At this stage in the process, it was important for me to formally state my experiences. Once the presuppositions were stated and laid aside as much as possible, I proceeded to examine the material that emerged during the second stage of the analysis. Each statement related to students' success and all other research sub-questions was studied carefully to determine meaning.

Formulated meanings were developed. Table 3 below illustrates examples of formulated meanings of participants' definitions of success extracted during the Significant Statements Stage. The purpose of this table is to portray the formulated meanings derived from the significant statements that served to describe the phenomenon of success according to high-achieving Black female students at a PWI. The formulated meanings were collected in an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of each item as it was determined.

Table 3: Process of Creating formulated meanings from significant statements

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings
To me, success is never ending.	Success is continuous and has no cap.
So I think success is definitely being a happy person, having peace of mind.	Success is equated to happiness.
So even if I had like so much money, won all these awards. But if I'm literally miserable, what's the point?	Success is not about how much money you have.
Your whole identity is excelling as an exceptional student and you're like 'what am I outside of that?'	Success is an attribute of identity, and is a part of who they are, personally.

Stage 4: Organizing formulated meanings into clusters of themes. Once I had formulated meanings for all of the significant statements that had been extracted, I arranged the formulated meanings into clusters of themes. During this process, both researchers used coding procedures to extract and cluster themes from the formulated meanings. Coding is an analysis procedure which uses codes or tags for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The codes were derived from the formulated meanings and were shared between the researchers as we examined the statements. As described in detail below, the researchers used open, axial, and selective coding.

Open coding involves segmenting data into initial categories. This segmentation occurred during the first round of data reduction by further reducing and recoding, allowing possible categories to emerge (Strauss, 1987). Axial coding involves placing the data into new categories, and linking them together based on similar properties. During this process, the researchers looked for causal conditions, contextual factors, actions, and interactions in response to the success of the high-achieving Black female participants. The researchers also looked for intervening conditions that assisted or hindered actions and interactions, as well as, consequences of actions and interactions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Lastly, selective coding was the final step in the coding sequence and it was used to integrate and refine the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using selective coding, ultimately, provided clarity regarding the final codes which were used to categorize themes from the participants' stories.

Though the codes were determined, the researchers remained open to allowing additional codes to emerge. Again, the purpose of the coding was to assist with clustering and revealing themes which existed in the data. The researchers did not communicate about the process during

the coding procedure in order to protect the integrity of the process on both sides and provide independent analyses.

Once all data were coded, including all sixteen interviews and the Sister Circle, the researchers convened and collectively decided on the theme clusters and final theme selections. This process was characterized by great synergy and included dialogue, collaboration, and visual and kinesthetic aids to promote analysis. The researchers met for a number of hours using dry erase boards and markers to map out theme clusters and then reach agreement on paring them down to the most significant themes. The process began with each of the theme clusters written on one board; the researchers used an additional dry erase board to break down each of the theme clusters. The use of two dry erase boards helped to determine what was most important to keep and what could be clustered into an already formulated meaning. In order to further explain and document the detailed process, photos are provided in Appendix M.

Among all extracted statements, 27 theme clusters originally emerged and were then collapsed into six over-arching themes of the phenomenon of success. The six emergent themes were common to all participants' descriptions of their experiences. The final six emergent themes and theme clusters are listed below in Table 4.

Table 4: Emergent Themes and theme clusters

Emergent Theme	Theme Cluster
Support	Family
	Mentorship
	Role Models
	Friend Groups
Background	Culture
	Grew up with honors distinction
Processing Situations	Feeling like the Black representative
	Empathy (Educating Others)
	Self-reflection during situations
	Having a conscious happiness
	PWI Experience had no effect
	Defying stereotypes
	Resilience during situations
Defining Success	Success is continuous and has no cap
	Success equals happiness
	Success does not equal money
	Does not view self as successful
	Deemed successful by others
	Humility plays a role in success
	Success is a part of identity

Emergent Theme	Theme Cluster
Motivation	Motivated by Family/Friends
	Motivated by the Future
	Internal Motivation
	Others believing in them
Involvement	Involvement equated to success
	Involvement Influences the Classroom
	Involvement for Connection/Belonging

Stage 5: Exhaustively describing the investigated phenomenon. In the fifth stage of analysis, Colaizzi (1978) advocated that the researcher integrate all resulting ideas into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. Having this rich and thick description helps to paint a picture for the reader and bring the themes to life with real life application through the participants' stories. In relation to this research study, the exhaustive description is presented in the Chapter 5 of this dissertation in the discussion section. This description contains all the dimensions of the lived experience of participants from a personal perspective. The rich description was achieved by incorporating the emergent themes, theme clusters, and formulated meanings into the description to create its overall structure. This strategy was used to ensure that the description contained all of the elements of the participants' experience.

The descriptive process also involved incorporating the meanings derived from the conceptual framework of the study. Using a conceptual framework assisted with underscoring elements of understanding concrete experiences and gaining an understanding of the relationships between concepts from the students' perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The concepts which make up the conceptual framework for this study were used to analyze the research questions. The constructs were Black Feminism, Resilience, and Persistence. Table 5 provides an alignment of the study's research questions to the conceptual framework constructs, along with the connecting themes derived from the data. It demonstrates how the conceptual framework aligned with the research questions for the data analysis process.

Table 5: Conceptual Framework Relationship to Research Question Analysis

Research/sub Questions	Black Feminism	Resilience	Persistence
Over-arching question	Overcoming stereotypes (*Processing Situations*)	Protective factors (*Support*)	Involvement (*Involvement*)
		Dispositional factors (*Defining Success*)	Motivation (*Motivation*)
Sub-question 1	Oppression (*Background*)	Relation to risk (*Support*)	Student Intention (*Motivation*)
Sub-question 2	Overcoming stereotypes (*Processing situations*)	Protective Factors (*Support; Processing Situations*)	Motivation (*Motivation*)
		Dispositional Factors (*Defining Success*)	Interaction w/ Environment (*Involvement*)
			Beliefs and Attitudes (*Processing Situations*)
Sub-question 3	Multiple oppressive Identities (*Processing Situations*)	Dispositional factors (*Defining Success*)	Involvement (*Involvement*)
Sub-question 4	Resist Oppression (*Processing Situations*)	External factors (*Motivation*)	
		Dispositional factors (*Motivation*)	
Sub-question 5	Oppressive System (*Processing Situations*)	External Factors (*Processing Situations; Background*)	
Sub-question 6	Overcoming Stereotypes (*Background*)	Resources (*Support*)	Campus Involvement (*Involvement*)
		Protective factors (*Defining Success*)	Commitment (*Support*)
			Motivation (*Motivation*)

Note: The associated themes are in italics and parentheses.

Stage 6: Describing the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. Colaizzi (1978) advocated that an essential structure of the phenomenon should be presented because the exhaustive description is quite lengthy. According to Colaizzi (1978), the fundamental structure must include a description of the processes and meanings derived through the previous steps of the analysis. In this study, to minimize redundancy, a separate fundamental structure was not included aside from the discussion in the final chapter of this document. This stage is similar to the previous step, in that it practices the process of reduction in data analysis as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Stage 7: Returning to the Participants. Colaizzi (1978) suggested that the final validation stage of data analysis should involve returning to the participants for a further interview. The purpose of such an interviews is to elicit participants' perspectives on the essential structure of the phenomenon. This step more fully ensures that the analysis represents participants' experiences. For this study, I conducted two individual interviews with each of the participants, as well as, a Sister Circle. Before each set of interviews and before the Sister Circle, I made sure to examine previously gathered data and presented discussion points in the next interview to gauge the consensus of the participants with those analyses.

Overall, utilizing a slightly modified version of the Colaizzi (1978) method with the over-arching principle of Moustakas (1994) provided a robust multi-step data analysis process. By not only including co-researchers to participate in analyzing data and constructing themes, but also participants' feedback on initial data analysis, the analysis was deeper and had a foundation for greater trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness and Validity

      Discussing the validity and reliability of a study assists with the accuracy and adds to the

credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2014). Validity is one of the strengths of qualitative

research and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the

researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014)

recommended using multiple approaches to validity. Some approaches include triangulation,

member checking, rich, thick description, clarifying bias, peer debriefing, and external auditor. I

employed all of these strategies to ensure the validity of this study. Table 6 below summarizes

the strategies highlighted by Creswell (2014) that were utilized.

Table 6: Validation Strategies

Validation Strategies	Description	In Relation to Study
Triangulation	Utilization of multiple sources, methods and theories to ensure evidence is accurate	Eight participants involved in two interviews each. Seven of the eight participants involved in the Sister Circle group process. Also, the conceptual framework used three constructs for analysis.
Clarifying Bias	Researcher elucidates bias so reader can understand the researcher's position, biases, and assumptions, which may affect the study.	Positionality of researcher was stated prior to beginning study – as part of the study proposal, and this positionality was clarified in a later chapter.
Member Checking	Researcher seeks participants' views on the transcripts and interpretations so they can assess accuracy and credibility	Participants were provided with the transcripts of their interviews to ensure accuracy. They were asked to provide feedback regarding any changes they thought should occur.
External Audit	External auditor examines the process and product of account	Dissertation chair served as external auditor and assessed whether the findings were supported by the collected data
Peer Debriefing	Locating a person who reviews and asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher.	Utilized inter-rater reliability and had an additional researcher assess the data and discuss the findings. With the inter-rater reliability approach, the data are independently coded by an additional researcher and the codes were compared to those developed by the primary researcher in search of agreement (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997).
Rich, thick description	Description may transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences.	Description provided in the Discussion portion of the last chapter of the dissertation. Description outlined the meaning extracted from the conceptual framework and how it related to the findings.

Note: Adapted from Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches, by J. W. Creswell, 2014, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

In order to ensure the reliability of the data, I checked the interview and Sister Circle transcripts to ensure they did not contain any obvious mistakes which could have been made during transcription (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, I monitored the coding process between the additional researcher and myself to make sure there was not a shift in the meaning of the codes during the coding analysis. During the coding process, we employed an inter-coder agreement

where we cross-checked each other's codes and kept a shared code book using a Google document. By writing memos about the codes and their definitions, I systematically tracked and increased the reliability of the data (Creswell, 2014). Further, the limitations of this study are outlined in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

<u>IRB Approval and Ethical Considerations</u>

After committee approval of my dissertation proposal, I obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the host institution to interview the study participants. Approval was necessary for this study given that I sought to work directly with human subjects. The IRB application was approved as exempt human research. Per university requirement, I also completed CITI Training, which provides training for ethical research standards dealing with human subjects. A copy of the IRB approval letter is provided in Appendix L. Given ethical and research guidelines, I obtained study participants' informed consent before they participated in the study.

<u>Written Confidentiality</u>

The identity of all of the participants was kept confidential in order to protect their privacy. I chose pseudonyms and used them in order to identify the participants for the purposes of this study. Data, recorded interviews, and the recorded Sister Circle were carefully protected and stored in order to ensure that anonymity was maintained.

<u>Summary</u>

Using a qualitative phenomenological method, this study sought to understand the experiences contributed to the success of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution. There is limited research regarding the high-achievement of Black students in college. Much of the literature concentrates on the underachievement and

attrition of Black students. Because of the lack of research and literature accessible regarding high-achieving Black female students, it may imply that the majority of Black students are ill-prepared for college (Fries-Britt, 2002). This view may cause high-achieving Black students to encounter stereotypes about their academic capabilities and capacity to achieve. The current study, conversely, aimed to address this assumption.

This chapter overviewed the methodology that was undertaken for this qualitative, phenomenological study. It examined the research paradigm, design and rationale, research questions and interview protocol, study sample and site, data collection and management, positionality, data analysis, trustworthiness and validity, as well as, the IRB approval and confidentiality overview.

CHAPTER FOUR: PORTRAITS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The purpose of this chapter is to paint a mental picture of the high-achieving Black female undergraduate students who participated in this study. These descriptions are based on demographic data, my perceptions as the interviewer, and personal quotes from the participants about their experiences. It is vital to acknowledge the fact that these written portraits will not fully and accurately communicate all emotions transmitted during both the interviews and Sister Circle group processes. By recognizing the inability to wholly describe the dynamic characteristics of each participant, I hope to express enough of a description to provide a context for the reader. This description will allow the reader to visualize and better understand the participants as you "hear" their voices in the coming chapter.

All of the students agreed to participate in my study within two days of distributing my request for participants. Upon receipt of their acceptance emails to participate in the study, I immediately contacted them to arrange their interviews and group process. This follow-up was completed swiftly in order to honor their time and demonstrate gratitude.

All of the participants were students from the host institution. They were either alumnae of a student leadership development program at the university or held a student leadership position in another area of campus involvement. I had the privilege of knowing six of the eight participants prior to their participation in the study. The remaining two women I grew to know throughout the entire research experience. I believe that a number of the students, at least in part, participated in the study because they know me personally, while others saw the study as an opportunity to tell their stories. Due to the personal relationships built or nurtured between the participants and myself, we created spaces of trust or increased the trust with the participants I

already knew. This space encouraged students to be honest and to feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

<div align="center">Participant Profiles</div>

In total, eight women participated in this study. Their personal profiles are outlined in table 7 below. I conducted two interviews with each participant, and conducted the Sister Circle with seven of the eight participants. All of the participants were graduating college seniors in May 2017, except for one participant who will graduate in December 2017. There was no attrition of participants throughout the study. It is important to note that because of this fact, it made for a richer and deeper data collection process.

Regarding their families and educational backgrounds, the participants disclosed the following information. All of the participants self-identified as Black, which was a requirement for participation. Specifically, three of the participants identified as Jamaican, two identified as Haitian, one identified as Nigerian, and the remaining participants did not disclose information regarding their nationalities. Four of the women specifically identified as being a child of immigrant parents. Five of the participants mentioned being raised in a two-parent household. One participant was raised by her grandparents. One student was raised by her mother and grandmother. The final student did not specifically mention being raised by a single mother or in a two-parent household, though she did put a lot of emphasis on her mother having a large influence in her life. Lastly, seven of the eight participants grew up taking honors, AP, and gifted courses throughout elementary school and into high school.

Table 7 below provides descriptions of each of the study participants.

Table 7: Personal Profiles of the Participants

Participant's Pseudonym	Major	Year in School	Nationality	Raised by whom?
Trish	Political Science	Senior	Jamaican, Chinese, Indian, +	Mother and Father
Victoria	Health Sciences	Senior	Jamaican	Grandparents
Barbara	Visual Arts Administration	Senior	Not Specified	Grandmother and Mother
Deon	Public Administration	Senior	Haitian	Not Specified. At least mother
Cali	Legal Studies	Senior	Not specified	Mother and Father
Yolanda	Accounting	Senior	Nigerian	Mother and Father
Sasha	Religion and Cultural Studies	Senior	Haitian	Mother and Father
Gina	Political Science	Senior	Jamaican	Mother and Father

Barbara

> I grew up in a very supportive environment that helped me accept that I did not even think that I wouldn't go on to do great things, you know? **(Transcript 1, Pages 2-3, Lines 65-67)**...I think successful people are people who keep going after things even though maybe they get rejected from one thing but push themselves a little further and try something else (**Transcript 1, Page 5, Lines 143-146).**

Barbara was the fifth student to become a participant in my study. I had no previous relationship with Barbara, and she replied to my email invitation within two days.

She was very responsive and clear in letting me know when she was available. Amongst her busy schedule, she found time on three different occasions to sit down and tell me her story. Though forthcoming during the interviews, Barbara was a bit more tentative when participating during the Sister Circle group process. On one occasion, I specifically asked her opinion on a question during the Sister Circle. Once she warmed up to the group, she said more without prompting.

My first interview with Barbara was 32 minutes and 39 seconds in length. Barbara waited for me in the lounge of my office suite, wearing a huge smile. She was fairly petite in stature, brown skinned, with straight hair. We spent a little time before the recording building rapport as I explained my research topic and what I hoped the research could do. I told her that it was important to me that successful Black female college students are recognized for their experiences. I had snacks and beverages waiting for her when she walked into the classroom and she was grateful for them. Barbara dove right into answering my questions and displayed no hesitancy or discomfort. Though concise, her answers were encompassing. For our second and follow-up interview, Barbara's interview lasted 23 minutes and 44 seconds. Because of an already established rapport, Barbara answered the questions in the second interview more concisely. Barbara is a Visual Arts Administration major with a minor in Marketing.

Barbara was raised by her mother and grandmother. Though her mother did not finish high school and her grandmother was pulled out of school in ninth grade to pick cotton, Barbara graduated high school with over 30 college credits completed. She admittedly grew up in a nurturing household, where she felt very supported, empowered, and confident in her abilities as a student. She has an older brother who is her elder by ten years, but she is not close to him. He graduated from college and because of their age gap, they never got close.

She grew up taking honors, gifted, and AP classes. For her K-12 education, Barbara attended majority White schools growing up where she was always one of the few Black people in her class. She mentioned how, until she got to college, she felt isolated and ridiculed by the other Black students. She was teased because she mostly hung out with White students who, she admitted, were the only individuals to whom she had access. Therefore, she was afraid to start college but was excited and comforted once she arrived and found a place in the Black student

community. Barbara was an Orientation Leader at her university and continues to participate in various leadership roles on campus. She graduated in May of 2017 and plans to pursue a career in Art History and Collections.

<p style="text-align:center">Cali</p>

> I think it is important to create spaces where black women can talk about their black experience. I think a lot of times, the black woman's experience is sort of a package deal just as a black student experience. And I think it's important to highlight that we have various aspects of who we are as women, as black people, as college students that are unique to us **(Transcript 3, Page 11, Lines 373-377).**

Cali was the fourth student to become a participant in my study. She responded 63 minutes after the email invitation was sent to confirm her participation. Cali and I were well acquainted and had a previously established mentor/mentee relationship. Communication with Cali was mostly through email. We conversed about her potential participation in the study prior to the invitation being sent and she was on board from the beginning. Cali was receptive to and excited about telling her story during both of the interviews and the Sister Circle. Cali is a busy scholar on campus so I was happy to be able to claim some of her time. Immediately following the Sister Circle, Cali approached me and thanked me for the opportunity to participate. While she was grateful for being able to participate, I was even more grateful to her for agreeing to assist. Cali is a Legal Studies major with a minor in Sociology and a certificate in Victim Advocacy.

Cali's first interview lasted 28 minutes and 51 seconds. She was incredibly thoughtful with her answers and there was noticeable intentionality in every word she used. She often looked up and motioned her hands to develop the "right" wording before she said anything. Cali was very exact with her answers, having very few pauses or tentativeness. Cali's second interview lasted 34 minutes and 10 seconds and she was heading to a student organization

function after the interview. She did not express any need to rush through the interview, and she was dressed in more-than-casual clothing. Cali dug deeper into her experiences during the second interview, which was exciting. She talked largely about her experiences as a Black female and the importance of getting involved.

Cali was raised in a two-parent household where her parents believed in her ability to excel. Cali was supported in her endeavors and commented on how her parents were always available for whatever help she needed. Cali is the middle child of three children, and she is the only girl. She did not express feeling extreme pressure to succeed from her parents because she set her own expectations. Growing up, Cali took many honors classes and qualified for gifted courses but did not want to take any because of the stigma she felt gifted classes had. Cali was also a high school athlete and played volleyball. Involvement has always been a passion of hers and she mentioned sometimes having 14 or 15 hour days because of it. Overall, she views campus and community engagement as a key to her success. Cali graduated in May of 2017 and will pursue law school full time.

<div align="center">Deon</div>

> My family. My mom and just like everything she's been through. My mom started to go back to school in 2008 and she just graduated…and it's like, that's almost ten years. And I'm so proud of her cuz to have five kids, working two jobs, and still going back to school. So, if like, she can do it, I can do it **(Transcript 5, Page 6, Lines 206-210).**

Deon was the sixth student to become a participant in my study; she responded two days after the email invitation. I was excited about her willingness to share her unique story with me. Deon and I had some familiarity with each other because she was a student leader in the leadership development program for which I work. Communication between Deon and I was mostly through email. She later sent me her phone number and we used text messages to provide updates and to clarify her questions during the member checking process. During the Sister

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Circle process, Deon was enthusiastic about attending and contributed greatly to the conversation. Prior to the Sister Circle, she told me she would need to leave a little early to catch her shuttle. During the group process, I was very conscious of her need to leave, assuring her that she could step out whenever she was ready. She never left. At the end of the Sister Circle, I approached her and asked if she was okay since she missed her shuttle and she simply replied "It's okay. I needed to be here."

Deon's first interview was 24 minutes and 32 seconds. Though we had previously established a rapport, Deon was very concise in her answers and tended not to tangent when she was asked a question. Deon had a bright white smile, dark brown skin, Black glasses, straight hair, and a shy demeanor. Deon was impressed by the snacks I had waiting for her in the room. She was tentative with some of her answers, often starting her answers with "I don't know…", but she was very thoughtful in her responses. Deon was not incredibly talkative but opened up during the interviews, discussing how she feels immense pressure from her family because of their expectations of her. Her family depends heavily on her success as a benchmark for achievement for all of the other children. Despite their intrusion they are still her biggest motivation.

Deon's second interview was a short 19 minutes and 18 seconds. She answered each question thoroughly but was terse in her approach to each question. I found myself probing for her to speak more, but once she felt she adequately answered a question, she stopped speaking. Deon is a Public Administration major with minors in Business and Non-profit Management.

Deon was raised by at least her mother, though she never directly stated that she grew up in a single-parent household. At only one point during any of her interviews did she mention her father and it was when she mentioned her parents were Haitian immigrants. She is very

empowered by her mother and spoke mostly of her as her biggest inspiration to do well. Her

mother worked two jobs and made her way through nursing school, taking almost ten years to

finish. Deon is one of five children and admittedly fought for attention growing up. She shared in

trust how, because she is a middle child, she never felt like she was noticed or given attention

unless she did well in school. Ultimately, academics were the way she sought attention in her

family.

Deon had honors classes throughout her life in school, and she was a part of a gifted

program. She grew up in majority White classrooms and toggled between having a Black self-

identity and a White self-identity. Once she enrolled in college, she was excited to learn about

the different organizations geared towards Black culture, especially her Haitian culture.

Regarding her involvement, she is engaged in many areas of campus. She was a peer mentor in a

student leadership development program, she was a member of the Caribbean Student

Association, and a member of a Black female development organization on her campus. She

graduated in May of 2017 and is considering her post-graduation options, deciding between a

career and graduate school.

<div align="center">Gina</div>

> I was never in need of empowerment based on my up-bringing. Like, the only difference between me and Rosa Parks was that my mom got a car. Like the difference between me and Maya Angelou was time. Like, I just always felt like I was on my way to being that person and I never thought that those people were not respected by the world, because everyone in my world had a respect for my ancestry. I didn't realize that we were respecting it because it was ours, I just thought we were respecting it because we were respectable **(Transcript 7, Page 2, Lines 46-51).**

Gina was the second student to become a part of my study. She responded 30 minutes

after the email was sent to confirm her participation. I was previously acquainted with Gina and

met her through a staff member in my office. Gina is a vibrant woman and small in stature. She

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walked into the interview wearing wide-legged printed pants, crop top, heeled shoes, and a large afro. I was thrilled by her enthusiasm as she replied to the invitation saying, "I am 100% down to support in any way I can." Gina was unable to make it to the Sister Circle because she had to work, but she was not shorter on words as a result of it. Gina shared a number of experiences, all of which were filtered through the lens of her being a Black female. She is very aware of and proud of her Blackness and understands the importance of expressing her Blackness at a predominantly White institution. Gina attributed a lot of her success to the support of her family and mentors on campus. In addition, having a great group of friends aided her while in college.

Gina, I feel, used our time together as a platform to express her feelings about her success and other perspectives about her experience being at a PWI. Her first interview lasted 61 minutes and 47 seconds with very little prompting from me. I sat and listened attentively as she spoke of how she was one of the only Black students in her classes for so long. She went on to explain how she felt about that dichotomy when she went home and was celebrated for her Blackness. Gina spoke with a fast pace and unmistakable passion. I periodically jumped in to clarify anything I did not fully understand and she continued telling her story. My second interview with Gina was 42 minutes and 50 seconds. We had an exchange full of feelings where Gina expressed the influence of her Jamaican cultural upbringing, contributions to her success, and her student experience at a PWI. Despite some feelings of negativity, Gina admitted that she could not picture herself being at any other institution.

Gina was raised in a two-parent household to Jamaican parents. Gina placed a lot of emphasis on the influence of her mother in her success and as an unwavering support network. She feels that it is her responsibility to be successful, so she does not disappoint her mother. Gina was enrolled in advanced programs in high school and learned to read early. Despite advanced

abilities, Gina described a minimal interest in classroom academics and placed more importance on her involvement and community activities. Gina admitted that her biggest goal was to be able to create change. Gina graduated in May of 2017 and plans to attend law school full time.

<div align="center">Sasha</div>

> I am not that type of person that could only do school, because when I did just school my freshman year, my grades weren't nearly as good. Both my Fall and Spring semester GPAs freshman year were lower than every GPA I have gotten since. That was when I was literally only working and going to school. So for sure I am, when you take a personality test, I am the type that likes being around other people. It helps me and it also motivates me to, I guess, complete school work **(Transcript 9, Page 6, Lines 262-267).**

Sasha was the last student to become a participant in my study, and she responded two days after the initial email. Standing a tall stature of approximately five feet and eight inches she had dark brown skin, white teeth, and straight hair, Sasha was excited to participate. She and I had a previous relationship and I knew her through the student leadership program in which I work. I casually spoke to Sasha before the start of the study about the research and she agreed to participate.

Soon after the interviews and Sister Circle, Sasha was nominated and chosen for the most prestigious award at her university. This recognition and her other involvement at the university keep her busy. Sasha is involved with a student leadership council, the Haitian cultural club, and the Student Government Association, to name a few. Therefore, I truly appreciated her willingness to make time on three different occasions to participate in my study. During the Sister Circle, Sasha was vocal and shared insight about her experiences. This insight included the pressure she often feels when she is constantly recognized for her accomplishments. She feels the pedestal which was created for her is sometimes hard to manage.

Sasha's first interview lasted 40 minutes and 55 seconds. She elaborated on her experiences prior to college where she went to Catholic school and was chosen for gifted,

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honors, and AP classes. She was always at the top of her class, which lived up to her parents' expectations. She elaborated on the different encounters she had with negative stereotypes on campus and how she avoids devoting energy to those types of situations. Sasha's second interview was 33 minutes and 55 seconds. She focused heavily on her definition of success. Success, in her opinion, is different for every individual. She equates success to happiness, and does not determine her happiness by the amount of money she has.

Sasha was raised in a two-parent household and her parents are immigrants from Haiti. Her family emphasized the importance of an education growing up because going to school was very important to them. Her family excelled in school in a country where not everyone has the opportunity to go to school. Sasha uses her faith as a motivator as she makes her way through school and she said "I have to keep [my] faith in God because that is where I gain my strength." Overall, the conversations with Sasha were encompassing and transparent as she expounded on her feelings during both the interviews and the Sister Circle. Sasha will graduate in December of 2017 and will explore the options of pursuing a career or going to graduate school.

Trish

…My mom's a mortgage broker and my dad's a realtor. Um, they did not complete school. They [parents] migrated actually from Jamaica when they were like 17..18, so in their mind, they were always like I want my daughter to finish school and that was their biggest thing **(Transcript 11, Page 3, Lines 72-75).**

Trish was the first student to become a participant in my study. I sent out the official email invitation to participate and she eagerly responded within nine minutes of the email being sent. Her enthusiasm was comforting. I had a previous relationship with Trish, and I knew her because of her affiliation with my job as a student leader. Trish was very quick and responsive with every piece of communication I sent her. Also, despite a fairly busy schedule, she always managed to arrange times to meet with great ease and cooperation.

My first interview with Trish lasted 38 minutes and 56 seconds. Trish walked into my office suite and I ushered her into the classroom where I had snacks and beverages waiting for her. She was very grateful. At the start of the interview, we had casual conversation before I began the recording. Trish was petite and fair skinned, and wore a huge bright smile as we began the interview. She was very thoughtful with her answers and often took long pauses to make sure her words were well organized in her head before she said them aloud. My second interview with Trish lasted 37 minutes and 17 seconds. Again, Trish was very thoughtful with every answer she gave. She even asked for a writing utensil and paper to gather her thoughts after some questions before answering. Overall, both interviews were incredibly informative as she told me about her experiences.

Trish was raised in a two-parent household with parents who were Jamaican immigrants. Her parents migrated to the United States when they were late into their teen years and raised Trish in a strict education-focused household. Trish understood the value of an education and always prioritized her education and other related experiences. Therefore, it came as no surprise that her parents did not agree with her desire to take a gap year after her undergraduate graduation to do service work. Service is a huge passion of Trish's, as much of her involvement while in college stemmed from service work. Trish is a Political Science major with a minor is Public Administration and she is pursuing a certificate in Public and Professional writing.

Trish was in the top 20% of her class of 827 in high school and was always enrolled in AP, as well as, dual enrollment courses. Trish went to a private religious school for many years before starting at a public high school. Therefore, transferring into a public high school atmosphere proved to be a bit jarring for her at first. Trish also developed a passion for women's empowerment. She admitted that her mother raised her to be a "fierce woman", which she

defined as a woman who is independent and makes sure her voice be heard. Trish has a younger sister for whom she is an elder by ten years, and neither of her parents completed college. Despite hardship, Trish enthusiastically admitted to the hard working nature of her parents which trickled down to her as they attained careers as a mortgage broker (mother) and a realtor (father). Trish graduated in May of 2017 and is exploring her options between pursuing a gap service year and pursuing graduate school.

<div align="center">Victoria</div>

> …so I was raised in a very strict, educationally-based household. So I remember from pre-k, my grandmother was like "read with me." I knew multiplication, like my times tables by like first grade. Yea, so she pretty much prepared me herself prior to me going to any kind of public school whatsoever **(Transcript 13, Page 1, Lines14-17).**

Victoria was the third student to become a participant in my study. I had no previous relationship with Victoria, but she replied to my invitation email with eager interest just 30 minutes after I sent it. Victoria works nearly a full-time job, so I was humbled and delighted by her enthusiasm and commitment to participate in the study. Once we established dates and times to meet, Victoria was communicative and kept me abreast of her whereabouts or if she needed to meet sooner or later.

For the first interview, Victoria wore a huge bright smile, colored glasses, ripped jeans, dark brown skin, and natural hair. My first interview with Victoria lasted twenty-six minutes and four seconds. Because we had no previous relationship, we spent some time establishing rapport before I began recording. I introduced my research topic in more depth and explained to Victoria how excited I was for her participation. Victoria was very willing to answer my questions and did so with little to no hesitancy, unless she asked questions for the purpose of clarification. My second interview with Victoria lasted twenty-six minutes and forty-four seconds. Very rarely did Victoria tangent away from the original questions, so her interview was concise yet

encompassing. Victoria is a Health Sciences major and is pursuing a certificate in Leadership Studies.

Victoria was raised by her grandparents. She is the oldest of four, born to a mother who consistently participated in toxic relationships. Her grandparents decided to adopt her at a very early age and raise her when her mother could not. She was raised as an only child. Victoria's mother earned her GED and she believes her biological father finished high school. Her grandfather does not know how to read and her grandmother did not finish high school, but Victoria's grandmother dedicated countless hours to her education. Victoria's preparation for success and excellence was her grandmother's biggest priority. Victoria was raised in an incredibly different environment than her siblings. Her siblings had less consistency in their home given her mother's relationships and achievement in education was not as much of a priority in that home. Her grandparents were born in Jamaica and prioritized education. Also, Victoria had a heavy Jamaican cultural influence in her childhood.

Additionally, Victoria grew up taking honors and AP courses, in which she excelled. In college, she has been involved with various areas of campus. For example, she was a career peer advisor and critiqued resumes for other students. She was also an Alternative Spring Break Coordinator, and currently is an employee with Americorp. Victoria graduated in May of 2017 and is currently working for Americorp, doing a gap year of service. After a year, she plans to pursue graduate school.

Yolanda

I would say, first of all, I was diagnosed with a learning disability in Grade 2 so I had a difficult time learning how to read, so that kind of did not make me motivated to do well in school. I didn't really start doing well in school until like my Junior Year of high school, to be honest. I barely ever passed **(Transcript 15, Page 1, Lines 6-9).**

Yolanda was the seventh student to become a participant in my study. She responded two days after the email invitation was sent to confirm her participation. Yolanda and I are well acquainted and I have known her since her sophomore year at the university. I met her through the leadership development program I work for and have been able to watch her grow over time. Prior to the start of the study, Yolanda and I had several casual conversations through text message where I explained to her what my research entailed and she expressed interest in becoming involved. Yolanda was enthusiastic about being a part of the study. Throughout her interviews and input during the Sister Circle, it was evident that Yolanda appreciates making connections with others. Doing so encourages her because she lived a difficult journey prior to college while she tried to cope with her disability. Therefore, she seemed to appreciate the time we shared in the interviews, and she definitely appreciated her time in the Sister Circle. Yolanda is an Accounting major with a minor in Health Services and a certificate in Leadership Studies.

Yolanda's first interview lasted 35 minutes and 50 seconds. She walked in with a petite figure, dark brown skin, and full head of natural hair. Yolanda was very reflective in her answers. Many times she alluded to her Nigerian cultural upbringing when asked about her academic experiences prior to college. She is highly influenced by her family. Often times during the interview Yolanda expressed herself through figurative dialogue and she described her stories through scenarios. This approach seemed to be her favored way of explaining her answers to the interview questions. At the conclusion of the first interview, I asked Yolanda if she had anything else to share. She spoke about her feelings regarding the dichotomy between Black men and

Black women and how she feels that Black women are often not treated with the respect they deserve. She feels there is an unnecessary competition between Black men and Black women.

Her second interview lasted 35 minutes and 19 seconds. Yolanda elaborated on the importance of her campus involvement to her overall success in school. She also explained how she processes different encounters at a PWI, and how the stereotypes of Black women and their emotions bother her. When considering the definition of success, Yolanda is an advocate for utilizing resources and connecting to a support network who will help during the journey in college. Yolanda emphasized this point during the Sister Circle as well, and she was very vocal in sharing her experiences with challenges and victories.

Yolanda was raised in a two-parent household. Her parents are immigrants from Nigeria. Her father went to college, but her mother did not. She was raised under the guidance of traditional Nigerian values, and education was a strict focus in her household. Not going to a university was never an option for Yolanda. When she was growing up, Yolanda often felt alienated and isolated from others because she had a learning disability: Dyslexia. She felt as though she was treated differently because others thought she was stupid. She worked extra hard to keep up with everyone else and because of her involvement in school, she learned to accept herself. Yolanda is involved with a student leadership development program, a Black female development organization, and has attended several alternative break trips to contribute service. She still battles with high anxiety and a fear of failure, but she said this all serves as motivation for her to excel. Yolanda graduated in May of 2017 and will be attending graduate school in Maryland.

These participant portraits provide a context for the reader and offers insight into the lives of each student. Their voices are further explored in the following chapter, which provide more depth to their experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The organization of Chapter Five is presented based on responses to the research sub-questions. The findings include the alignment of the research questions to the interview questions, subsequent themes that emerged, and how the themes were represented in the conceptual framework. The findings are presented in the following way: first, a table including the research question, related themes, and relevant constructs of the conceptual framework are presented. Following each table are excerpts from the students' voices as evidence to validate the inclusion of each theme and conceptual framework construct. As expected, the stories were all different. However, there were many similarities in their perceptions and experiences. The analysis of the data brought meaning to the findings. For this dissertation, the analysis includes the collective experiences of the participants in the Sister Circle. Using the Sister Circle data offered an encompassing perspective of each of the themes and constructs of the conceptual framework.

To maintain the integrity of the findings, the participants' quotes included in this dissertation were taken verbatim from the transcribed interviews. I used discretion to omit certain identifying words or names, in order to protect the identity of the participants. The participants' quotes are expressed in their own vernacular to accurately capture their words. Six major themes emerged from the student interviews and Sister Circle: Support, Background, Processing Situations, Defining Success, Motivation, and Involvement. These themes represent the experiences of most, if not all, of the eight participants. Percentages were included for each theme for descriptive purposes only. The numbers were included, not to bring validity to the data, but were used simply to describe the finding in a different way.

<u>Themes</u>

Support. Support was one of the over-arching themes which emerged from the data. Collectively, the students mentioned the importance of having support during their journeys, especially from the following entities. First, students mentioned family in a resounding manner as being a great support and contribution to their success. Additionally, the participants mentioned having both mentors and role models on campus who helped to support them along the way. Lastly, 75% of all participants mentioned friendships as being important, very important, or in some way relating to their success. They often indicated how the support of their friends served as a solace for them.

Background. Background was another one of the over-arching themes which emerged from the data and contained the following sub-themes. First, culture played a large role for 75% of the participants. They mentioned how their cultural backgrounds and the way they grew up influenced their success, by emphasizing the importance of education. Also, approximately 90% of the students mentioned being involved in an honors or equivalent program prior to college, and how those experiences played a role in their success.

Processing situations. Another emergent theme was the way in which students processed situations. There were several sub-themes that emerged under this umbrella theme. First, 50% of the students referred to feeling like a representative of the Black community in certain situations. Second, 75% of the students explained the importance of expressing empathy in certain situations that could, otherwise, be uncomfortable. Third, approximately 40% of the students discussed reflection as being an important factor to help them process situations. Fourth, 75% of the participants mentioned having to maintain a conscious level of happiness in certain situations. It was important for them to counter the emotions in their environment by choosing to

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be happy. The fifth sub-theme, though not overwhelmingly present in the data, did arise. Approximately 40% of the participants mentioned the PWI atmosphere having no effect on their experience, mainly because they grew up in majority white environments. Sixth, 100% of the participants mentioned, at some point, the importance of trying to defy stereotypes as a way for them to process different situations. Lastly, resilience played a role in processing situations as 50% of the students mentioned how they overcame different scenarios in order to be successful. Overall, processing situations served as a means for the participants to cope, which ultimately contributed to their success in college.

Defining Success. A fourth over-arching theme which contributed to the participants' stories was defining success. There were several sub-themes which emerged from this theme. First, approximately 90% of the participants defined success as being continuous and non-stop. Second, 100% of the participants also equated success to happiness. Third, 50% of the students mentioned that success was not equated to how much money one makes. Fourth, based on the definition of success they considered, approximately 40% of the participants admitted to actually not viewing themselves as successful. Fifth, 25% of the students talked about how they defined their successes through the lens of others' interpretations of them. Lastly, 50% of the participants defined success as being a part of their personal identity, while other participants agreed with their admissions during the Sister Circle process. Overall, how they defined success influenced their experiences which, in turn, contributed to their success in college.

Motivation. A fifth over-arching theme was motivation. There were numerous sub-themes which emerged from this theme. First, approximately 90% of the students mentioned family being a motivation for them, and many of them specifically commented on their mothers being a motivation. Additionally, at least 50% of the students in both interviews and the Sister

Circle, spoke about the role of their future being a big motivation for their success. Lastly, every student talked about their internal motivation to succeed.

Involvement. The sixth and final over-arching theme was involvement. The first sub-theme for this category was that many of the students equated their involvement to success. Many saw their involvement as being a direct link to their success. Second, participants mentioned how their out of classroom involvement influenced their performance and experience inside of the classroom. Lastly, the students commented on how being involved offered them a sense of connection and belonging.

<div align="center">The Voices of the Participants</div>

The over-arching research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution regarding their success in college? The over-arching question was answered using a series of sub-questions which addressed several areas of the larger question. The findings from each sub-question are provided below in order to reveal the themes associated with each component of the over-arching question and how it matched with the concepts outlined in the conceptual framework. The sequence lists the sub-question first and is then followed by a break-down of the relevant themes which correlate to each construct of the conceptual framework.

Table 8 lists the research sub-questions and the correlating interview and Sister Circle questions. A complete record of the interview questions are provided in Table 1 in Chapter 3.

Table 8: Research Sub-Questions and Interview Items

Sub-Questions	Interview Items
How do the pre-college experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students contribute to the essence of their success in college?	1,2,3
How do experiences with negative stereotypes in college influence the success of Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution?	1a
How do high-achieving Black female undergraduate students make sense of success?	1b, 1c, 1d, 2a, 3a
What motivates high-achieving Black female undergraduate students to succeed at a predominantly White institution?	1e, 2b, 3b
What challenges do high-achieving Black female undergraduate students face related to their race, gender, and academic achievement at a predominantly White institution?	1f, 1g, 2c, 3c
What experiences contribute to the persistence of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution?	1h, 2d, 3d

Sub-Question 1 - Pre College Experiences

Table 9 below illustrates that the component of "oppression" emerged as related to Black Feminism for this particular question. Black Feminism attests that the position held by Black women in America is a reflection of a system of oppression designed to keep Black women in an assigned, subordinate place (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; hooks, 1982). Oppression is a core factor in Black Feminism, and it was an appropriate piece to present regarding this question because the theme of student background affirmed the use of Oppression. Additionally, "relation to risk" emerged as a component from the construct of Resilience. Within the construct of Resilience, the number and intensity of risks often determine the level of resilience, but Evans-Winters (2014) attested that educators, families, and communities often aid in protecting students against risk. Lastly, "student intention" emerged from the construct of Persistence. Within this construct, it is presumed that a student's intention of whether to stay in college is often shaped by her attitudes and beliefs about whether they will be successful in college (Bean, 1981).

Table 9: Conceptual Framework Relation to Sub-Question 1

Sub Question	Black Feminism	Resilience	Persistence
Sub Question 1 How do pre-college experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students contribute to the meaning making of their success in college?	Oppression *Theme-Background*	Relation to risk *Theme- Support*	Student Intention *Theme- Motivation*

Black Feminism: Oppression - Background

As described above, Oppression was the identified concept for Black feminism in this sub-question and Background was the identified theme. The following section provides evidence to validate the use of the aforementioned concept and themes by providing applicable student quotes.

Barbara described her sentiments related to feeling alienated by other Black students because of her closeness with White students in her honors and magnet courses:

> I think it was middle school where there was just another group of black students who would constantly make fun of me and my white friends. I didn't see them except for– they weren't in any of my classes but I only saw them like out in the hallways or at lunch. And that was like the first time I felt alienated because I was like — I don't know, I got the idea that maybe they were jealous. Maybe they were resentful for me for, you know, hanging out with a bunch of White people, but those were the only people like I had access to, I guess **(Transcript 1, Page 2, Lines 36-43).**

Barbara further described her experiences with alienation and oppression while she struggled with her racial identity before starting college.

> So it kind of made me feel like, I guess, alienated. Like "Oh, I guess, I don't belong with them [Black students]. I can't relate to them." But I since learned, of course, that I can. That's been something that, from that point on, I've been having to struggle with and trying to figure out. Like "Oh, I'm not exactly a White person because the White people don't understand my hair, but I'm not exactly a Black person because I don't have lots of access to Black people." So, I think I've

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kind of been in the middle ground for a long time **(Transcript 1, Page 2, Lines 44-50)**.

Deon specifically discussed how she experienced oppression in her pre-college years by feeling isolated from other Black students while learning alongside White students with whom she related more. Similarly, Barbara discussed her experiences in high school and how she felt isolated from other Black students. Barbara's experiences translated to her feelings of oppression by being the "token Black friend".

> I think it was only probably high school that I started getting to know other Black students on a more personal level. Because, like I said, there was only ever one or two Black students who were even in the pool of people who could be in my classes. Who were the ones who were taking AP classes and honors classes, so I only ever got to be friends with like two or three of them. And even then, it was kind of like, "Oh, there's only one allowed per like friend group." You have to have one token Black person, otherwise there's too many or something like that **(Transcript 1, Pages 3-4, Lines 96-102).**

Considering issues of oppression expressed by Deon and Barbara, their accounts offered evidence of how oppression played a role in their experiences prior to college. Growing from these experiences, Deon and Barbara later attested to feeling a stronger sense of belonging among the Black student community in college. Deon shared,

> It wasn't until my second year [in college] when I realized I didn't have any friends that empathize with my specific background, who I can complain about certain things with and they understand. And it wasn't until I joined like groups--I joined Black Female Development Circle, and I remember I went to their first meeting and I'm like these are my people (*shared laughs*). And I went to a CSA [Caribbean Student Association] meeting and found people who speak creole **(Transcript 5, Page 7, Lines 238-242)**.

Similarly, Barbara felt enlightened and said the following,

> I think being around more empowered Black people [in college] who were speaking up for themselves kind of gave me the notion that, "You know what? I'm not different from them. And I am part of a bigger culture than my high school, you know? Like, there's a much bigger culture of people out there who are like me." And I started to find more people who had similar experiences to me. And I think that's what gave me a push to kind of find out more about them and more about the bigger culture to which I belong **(Transcript 1, Page 9, Lines 308-314)**.

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Resilience: Risk - Support

Continuing, the component of "relation to risk" emerged as a relevant factor from the concept of resilience as it relates to sub-question number one. During the coding process, the theme of support surfaced as a related concept to risk. The concept of risk, in terms of resilience, is defined in relation to risk factors experienced by individuals, especially by the number and intensity of the risks.

Several participants in the study referred to the importance of the degree of support they received and how it helped them manage their experiences with risk. Having support, essentially, served as a means of protection from potentially negative experiences. Trish described how her mother served as a huge support for her when she was growing up because her mother was determined for her children to succeed.

> I know I say my parents a lot, but my mom was just one of those people who was just really into making sure her children succeeded. So she was the one who would, at times, actually print materials for me and say "Trish, go in your room and read this." Umm, so I go back to my mom because she was the main one telling me to go out and do this **(Transcript 11, Page 2, Lines 48-52)**.

Gina also discussed how different individuals in her life motivated her to succeed and overcome any issues she encountered. Having the support of these individuals helps her to counter what life throws at her. She said "I'm motivated by the people who recognize my potential and really go out of their way to pour into that, tap into that, and identify that, and make me aware of that **(Transcript 7, Pages 7-8, Lines 328-330)**." Barbara expressed similar feelings regarding her family and how her achievement is greatly attributed to their support.

> I think now that I'm getting older, I'm starting to figure out that if I hadn't had people to support me and to tell me that I can do this even if days are hard and even if I don't feel like I can, then I think that it would've been a lot harder for me to kind of set my goals higher. You know, I might have set my goals at just graduating high school and going to work. But I think because I saw that they

were working really hard to provide for me and to make the time to help me with homework or doing the best that they could to give me resources to succeed, that I wanted to make the best of it **(Transcript 1, Page 3, Lines 85-93)**.

Barbara continued and said "I was very nurtured. Like, I grew up with people who love me and wanted me to succeed. So I think that's like a big part of my success, personally **(Transcript 2, Pages 3-4, Lines 94-96)**."

Persistence: Intention - Motivation

Further, the component of "intention" arose as a related factor from the construct of Persistence as it relates to sub-question number one. During the coding process, the theme of motivation emerged in relation to intention. The concept of intention in Persistence considers the fact that a student's behavior to remain at or leave an institution is based largely on their intentions to do so. It is presumed that these intentions are shaped by a student's beliefs and attitudes about whether they will be successful in college. Several participants in the study discussed their intentions to remain in school and how they never considered the alternative of not finishing school. For many of them, there were a number of reasons behind their intentions, including family and cultural values, intrinsic motivation, as well as, a focus on their future goals.

Trish discussed the importance of attending college because of the influence her decisions have on her younger sister. The decision to continue forward contributed to her intentions of staying in school and being successful, which ultimately resulted in her persistence. Trish said,

> Also contributing to my success is having a sister that's ten years apart from me. So when I was going to college, I was like about 18 and she was 8. I wanted to make sure that I was being a mentor for her. That she had, you know, good shoes to follow in **(Transcript 12, Page 1, Lines 21-24)**.

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Also considering her family in her intentions to persist in school, Gina referred to the investment of time and love her mother devoted to her. She continued and emphasized that she felt she had no other option but to continue and do great things. The experiences her mother had previously and continued to instill in her were her motivation. Additionally, Gina spoke about how she understood her life as being shared. Her life also belongs to her family because they have and continue to have a direct influence on who she is and becomes. Gina elaborated on this concept when she said,

> I think I'm older now, so I think I can understand my mom a lot more than I was able to when I was younger. Umm, so just when I think about how she has invested in me, and I think about what she's been able to do, I just cannot…it's just like no other option…but [to] be great, just out of respect. And I never use[d] to think that way before. I just use to think my life was mine **(Transcript 7, Page 9, Lines 337-342).**

Yolanda mentioned the influence her cultural values have had on her intentions to remain in school. For instance, she emphasized how she could not picture her life without a degree, especially given how individuals in her culture view education. Yolanda explained,

> I can't really picture life without a degree. In my culture, pretty much everybody..not everybody.., but a lot of people have their degrees. So, it's kinda like it would be really weird if I didn't go to college **(Transcript 17, Page 3, Lines 96-97)**.

Overall, Yolanda's intentions to remain in school are very heavily influenced by the cultural messages she received growing up. Victoria also touched upon how her culture influenced her view of education, alongside, the influence of her family which molded her intentions to do well in school and excel. She said,

> Umm, very Caribbean household. Both [grandparents were] born in Jamaica, so I was raised in a very strict, educationally-based household. So, I remember from pre-k, my grandmother was like "read with me." I knew like multiplication, like my times tables by like first grade. Yea, so she pretty much prepared me herself prior to me going to any kind of public schooling whatsoever **(Transcript 13, Page 1, Lines 14-17)**.

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Barbara also elaborated on how she internalized her success. Growing up she received encouraging messages from others who believed in her, which made her believe in herself. This belief made her feel like not finishing school was never an option. Therefore, her intention to succeed and persist through school was always made a priority. Barbara stated,

> I think, again, I'm gonna repeat. Not finishing college was never an option. That was something that I never seriously considered because once I start, it's like "okay, I'm going to finish". Whether or not I go to grad school, that might be up for debate, but as far as like undergrad, that wasn't really an option to not do it. Because so many people told me like "yea, you can definitely do that. No big deal." Not doing it wasn't really an option **(Transcript 17, Page 3, Lines 79-83)**.

Further considering internalization, Victoria elaborated on her experience prior to college and how she graduated early. She mentioned how she felt alone when she first started at her university because she was so young, but she relied on herself to give the push she needed to leave her comfort zone and to persist and succeed.

> Well, because I graduated early, I didn't graduate with my class. So, when I came to [host university], I was all alone. I didn't have my friends here. So, I had to be that push, you know? So, whenever I saw something and I said something along the lines of, "Wow, I would never do that"-- those things that I said that I would never do, I applied for it. And then I did it **(Transcript 14, Page 2, Lines 47-51).**
> .

Lastly, when considering the role of intention in students' pre-college experiences, many students referred to their future aspirations as a motivation for them to continue and persist in school. Victoria mentioned how she hopes to work and build a life for her future family, much like how her grandmother helped to build a foundation for her as she was growing up. When asked about what motivates her, Victoria stated,

> Really and truly now, as I guess I'm getting older...future tense. It's kind of ummm, building that foundation for my future family, for my future children. Umm, just how my grandmother built that foundation for me, and knew it was long lasting. I would love to do the same for them **(Transcript 13, Page 5, Lines 170-173)**.

Overall, the pre-college experiences of the participants contributed to the concepts of oppression within the Black Feminism construct, relation to risk within the Resilience construct, and intention within the Persistence construct. When tying the findings to the conceptual framework, all of the aforementioned concepts surfaced as related to the students' experiences of success.

Sub-Question 2: Stereotypes

As illustrated in Table 10 below, the concept of "overcoming stereotypes" emerged as related to the construct of Black Feminism for sub-question 2. Within the construct of Black Feminism, it states that regardless of how successful a Black woman is, she is still challenged by the obstacles of overcoming the stereotypes about herself (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1982). Additionally, protective and dispositional factors emerged as concepts from the construct of Resilience. Protective factors are moderators of risk and adversity that enhance developmentally appropriate outcomes (Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011). Dispositional factors are defined as personal characteristics necessary for an individual to endure a process (Morales & Trotman, 2004). Lastly, motivation, interaction with the environment, and beliefs and attitudes emerged from the construct of Persistence. Regarding the construct of Persistence, an individual's motivation and academic aptitude determine whether their institution will be a match for them. Also, a student's beliefs about whether they can be successful in college, as well as, how they engage with their environment all contribute to their persistence in college (Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1990).

Table 10: Conceptual Framework Relation to Sub-Question 2

Sub Question	Black Feminism	Resilience	Persistence
Sub Question 2 How do experiences with negative stereotypes in college influence the success of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution?	Overcoming Stereotypes *Theme- Processing situations*	Protective Factors *Theme- Support* *Theme- Processing situations*	Motivation *Theme-Motivation*
		Dispositional factors *Theme- Defining Success*	Interaction with Environment *Theme- Involvement*

Black Feminism: Overcoming Stereotypes - Processing Situations

Many students highlighted their experiences with negative stereotypes on campus and how they often felt the need to combat those stereotypes about Black women. They referred to specific situations they faced personally and negative stereotypes in general. They elaborated on the experiences they had with processing those situations.

Victoria mentioned her frustration with the stereotype of Black women being the least likely to get married. She mentioned also how this stereotype often prompted her to talk about her relationship because it is a positive example of how this stereotype is defied. Her successful relationship has played a big role in her success. Victoria had this to say:

> One of the challenges that we spoke about [was] when Black female successes are brought up in the media, it would then be followed by a rebuttal in regards to "but, Black women are least likely to get married." So, it's a challenge. So I really do, sometimes, like talking about my relationship because it's working. I think it's part of my success. I was able to find joy within myself, and that has been the best journey of my college career **(Transcript 17, Page 24, Lines 951-955)**.

Continuing with overcoming stereotypes, Sasha discussed the circumstances she experienced regarding issues specifically encountered by Black females and the pressures they

face within the Black community. She mentioned how she learned to be extra careful with the

information she shares on her social media because she understands how important image and

perception are. This awareness plays a large role in how she approaches situations. Sasha said,

> Then also, Black people put a type of pressure on other Black people that I feel isn't
> really fair but I guess it kind [of] makes sense given [our] history. So a Black guy can, I
> don't know if you remember me saying, he can do both. He can be out on a Saturday
> night, out having fun and take a picture and clearly not a professional picture, but we
> understand it is college and we understand its nothing illegal. But if I -- I always have to
> double think about my social media and that is something that is all about perception and
> image **(Transcript 9, Page 7, Lines 353-360)**.

Additionally, Cali discussed her experiences with negative Black female stereotypes and

how they played a role in her life over time. She felt the need to defy stereotypes when she was

growing up, because she was taught the importance of not being "another statistic." Cali

admitted having developed a "paranoia" because she was constantly trying to counter the

stereotypes of Black women. These experiences all played a role in her approach to the situations

she faced in college which contributed to her success. Cali explained,

> So I think that's sort of where my paranoia came because like growing up, you hear you
> don't want to be a statistic. So you don't want to be the minority girl that gets pregnant in
> middle school or high school, or doesn't go to college. Or you don't want to be the Black
> girl in the streets fighting, or talking recklessly, or not using proper English. So, that
> whole paranoia of not wanting to be a statistic, not wanting to be what the media or
> society portrays as like the Black stereotype growing up **(Transcript 4, Page 2, Lines
> 48-54)**.

Cali further explained how she often feels the need to hold back strong or differing

opinions in order to not be seen as an aggressor. She mentioned how she processed experiences

like these when she stated,

> And a lot of times, like the stereotype - you're not supposed to be loud or you shouldn't
> say certain things. You have to sort of watch what you say as a woman. You can't be as
> blunt or as straightforward as men are sometimes allowed to be. And I think, as a Black
> woman, that's heightened even more because you don't want to seem like an aggressor.
> So if you do have a very strong opinion or if you have a dissenting opinion, you may not
> be as likely right off the bat to communicate that because it's like, "Oh, I don't want to be

seen like the angry Black woman or the aggressive Black woman." So you kind of take a little bit off of it **(Transcript 4, Page 3, Lines 73-82)**.

Barbara also mentioned her encounters with Black female stereotypes and how it was something she faced numerous times over her lifetime. She always pushed herself to defy negative Black stereotypes in order to demonstrate that successful Black students do exist. Barbara attested that "Like, I mean, I've always been in a white school but I think I've always tried to push myself outside of that stereotype that black kids take standard classes. Black kids don't read well. Like, 'Hello! Look at me' **(Transcript 2, Page 6, Pages 207-209).**"

Lastly, Cali went so far as to mention that with negative stereotypes, she stays in a constant state of paranoia. She feels that because of her consistent paranoia, she may miss instances that could very well be interpreted as a stereotyped situation. Because of her paranoia and always being defensive, she could experience negative stereotypes more often than she realizes. This quote was an excerpt from Cali's account:

> Like the black paranoia type of thing where you're thinking someone may already have envisioned you as this sort of person because of the stereotype. Whether they've said it, whether they've made some sort of slight comment about it. Like, you already have that in mind. So I don't know whether that, in a way, kind of blocked me from even seeing that that was something else coming at me or not. Maybe I'm already on defense mode or whatever the case may be so I've missed some of it but that's the only [experience] that I can particularly think of **(Transcript 3, Page 8, Lines 241-248)**.

Resilience: Protective Factors - Support

Further, the concept of utilizing "protective factors" arose in relation to the construct of Resilience as it related to sub-question number two. During the coding process, the themes of support and processing situations emerged as relevant concepts to protective factors. The concept of protective factors when considering Resilience is defined as coping mechanisms within individuals during high stressed situations (Werner, 2000). Protective factors are largely determined by their ability to adapt in different situations. These protective factors within

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individuals mitigate whether or not the effects of stress or conditions will negatively affect them (Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011). Several participants in the study discussed their use of protective factors, which were highlighted through the themes of support and processing situations. Their use of protective factors contributed to their overall success by helping them combat negative stereotypes.

During the Sister Circle group process, Deon mentioned that her family motivated her to do better. This sentiment was shared by many other participants during the discussion. Deon mentioned that "Um, kinda like what she said, my family is my biggest motivation. I've seen the other side of what life looks like if you can't get a college degree, if you don't have the same opportunity, so…" **(Transcript 17, Page 3, Lines 84-86)** Her family's support helped her to overcome any issues she faced and aided in her resilience in college.

Cali mentioned how her family played a large role in her life. Their strong foundation provided the level of support she needed because she knew she could rely on them for help. She stated,

> But it's definitely not a question of if I needed it, whether it be money, just a pep talk or anything - my parents have always been there. Stuff like anything, they're just that strong foundation - that support I know that's going to be there no matter what **(Transcript 3, Page 7, Lines 199-202)**.

Similarly, Barbara talked about the support of her family and how they played a large role in her success. The support of her family helped to counter any obstacles she faced. Having her family's support was a protective factor for her during times when resilience was most necessary. Barbara elaborated, saying,

> I think that if it wasn't for them— I might not have acknowledged it before…I think now that I'm getting older, I'm starting to figure out that like if I hadn't had people to support me and to tell me that "you can do this" even if days are hard and even if you don't feel like you can, then I think that it would've been a lot harder for me to figure out, to kind of set my goals higher. You know, I might have set my goals at just graduating high school

and going to work. But I think because I saw that they were working really hard to provide for me and to make the time to help me with homework or doing the best that they can to give me resources to succeed, that I wanted to make the best of it **(Transcript 1, Page 3, Lines 84-93)**.

Parallel to family, Gina mentioned the importance of friends. Her friends played a big role in helping to ground her. She elaborated on how this specific bond is different from having supportive instructors and great books. Gina enthusiastically spoke about her experiences with successful friendship and how having good friends helped her in tough situations and helped her mitigate negativity. Gina said:

> Um, I think you need great friends. That is like fundamental because you can have great mentors, you can have great instructors, great teachers, you can have great books. But there's just gonna be a time where you just...you're gonna get frustrated. You're gonna get sad. You're gonna get over it. And if you don't have people around you that can at least acknowledge that that is real, and that that happens, you'll go crazy. I don't think I could have done it without good friends. And I have four, so I'm incredibly blessed **(Transcript 8, Page 2, Lines 63-70)**."

Gina took the topic a step further and also emphasized the importance of having the support of a good mentor. On several occasions, Gina referred to a mentor who she feels was a fundamental part of her success and who provided her with the space to express frustrations without being judged. This was the account she shared of her mentor:

> Um, I think you need good mentor. I couldn't have navigated anything..ANY of it without [impactful mentor]. Any of it. I think she gave me like space and opportunity to think about what I was thinking about. And she gave me space to talk about what I was talking about…without clouding it with how she felt or what she's come to know, what other students have learned, or anything like that. And she also connected me to people that felt similar things and decided to feel something else **(Transcript 8, Page 2, Lines 70-75)**.

Trish felt similarly about a mentor of hers. She mentioned her mentor during the Sister Circle group process and received nods and agreeable comments as the other participants in the room could relate to her experience. The participants collectively attributed their mentoring experiences to their success in college. In the following explanation, Trish conversed with her

mentor about how the expectations she felt were placed on her by instructors, family, etc. were

too much to handle. Her mentor explained to her the importance of distinguishing between

someone believing in her and someone having unrealistic expectations of her. Ultimately, Trish

felt that if it were not for the support of those believing in her, she would not have been able to

navigate any of the obstacles she faced. She said,

> All those expectations and then I went to a really big mentor of mine, [mentor]. And I broke down again in her office, and I said "how do I combat this?" and she said "it's not people putting these expectations on you, it's people believing in you. Make sure you know the difference." And I said "agreed". That's why I get that whole...you needed that assurance. It makes you wonder, what if I didn't have those people saying "Hey Trish, I know you're gonna do good. I know you'll do fine." What if I eliminated that? Would I be here in this Sister Circle right now? **(Transcript 17, Page 15, Lines 579-585)**

Lastly, Cali mentioned a broader context of support, considering the importance of being

surrounded by other Black females in general and the effect that had on her experience. She

talked about how she felt much more empowered when she was in the company of other Black

women. Cali said:

> It helps when you have other Black women around you, honestly, because if it's only me and you or me and one other person, it's a bit scarier to engage in it. You're a bit like, "Oh, crap, it's only us two." But when, kind of, like you have this united front, like, it's like three or four of us and like we're having a little girl talk in our conversation. All right, we can have our little circle, then that's more empowering. And I think you just get a bit more bold. And I think that's where it came from – just being still in these sort of White or male-dominated spaces, but seeing a couple more of us in there and having a more of my friends in there that I can really have these conversations with allowed me to get more comfortable **(Transcript 3, Page 10, Lines 294-302)**.

<u>Resilience: Protective Factors - Processing Situations</u>

An additional theme which surfaced related to protective factors was how the participants

processed the negative situations they faced. In order to adapt in these situations, the participants

recounted many times where they expressed empathy and took time to understand the other

person's point of view. Additionally, many of the participants discussed the fact that in those

situations, they made conscious decisions to be happy instead of being upset.

When asked about her different encounters with negative stereotypes and any other

potentially negative situations with other individuals, Victoria shared the following account for

how she processed those types of encounters:

> I would say to look at it from like someone looking in. Like, you're looking through a mirror. Like, you're watching like TV or a third person. You know, kind of remove yourself. Remove all emotions. Remove all associations. And kind of really look at the situation as a whole for what it is, you know? **(Transcript 14, Page 4, Lines 105-109)**

Similarly, Sasha recounted how she chose to educate herself. In turn, she educated others

when it comes to approaching situations specifically concerning racial discrimination, as

opposed to responding in anger. She said,

> But as far as me coping with racial discrimination or just people, don't-- like generalizations and things like that, I'm really good at identifying them. And then, I just always have those conversations with people. So people who understand what I mean and people who don't understand what I mean – just having those conversations definitely helps me because I realize if I just don't have that conversation, I just [get] angry, you know? So having healthy conversations about that and— that's it. Like, educating myself and then educating people **(Transcript 10, Pages 2-3, Lines 55-62)**.

Similar to Victoria and Sasha, Deon also discussed how she used empathy in potentially

negative situations. Deon said,

> One thing is, always remember that because you see it a certain way, it doesn't mean they see it that way. And like a person's experiences play into how they see different things. And while I may see like that's the obvious—like, this is obviously what's happening, they were obviously raised differently and they might not see that. But at the same time, don't let that invalidate your feelings. Like, if you're seeing it that way, then you're seeing it that way and that's— **(Transcript 6, Page 2, Lines 51-57)**

Additionally, she mentioned,

> I don't know how to say it. I mean, like educating someone about certain things, like aspects of diversity, your first instinct is immediately to attack and I felt this before. And it's very infuriating but just kind of reeling it back in and trying to find a way to communicate it effectively so they get the point **(Transcript6, Page 3, Lines 74-77)**.

Lastly, much like the previously mentioned participants, Barbara often deferred to empathy and open-mindedness when dealing with negativity. She found that it was overall more beneficial for her to not become angry with individuals but to counter that emotion and offer assistance. Barbara said:

> I think, having an open mind is a very important thing, knowing that other people haven't had the same experiences that you've had. And being willing to try and understand where they're coming from, even if you don't agree with them, because I think that that helps you better educate people. Because I've always found it more beneficial to me to not just get angry at people but to try and help them **(Transcript 2, Page 2, Lines 33-38)**.

Resilience: Dispositional Factors - Defining Success

In addition to protective factors being a relevant concept of Resilience, "dispositional factors" also played a role. Dispositional factors include personal characteristics of an individual to help them endure a process (Morales & Trotman, 2004). Some dispositional factors include a positive responsiveness to others, an internal locus of control, problem solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future (Morales & Trotman, 2004). Two themes most closely associated with this concept of resilience were defining success and student background.

During the Sister Circle group process, several participants mentioned how they defined success as not having a limitation. Their resilience in negative situations was greatly determined by their belief that they were destined to do more and achieve more. Several of the participants commented on this point during the Sister Circle, and many discussed that they equated success to purpose and fulfillment.

Barbara articulated the following account about her definition of success:

> Um, well I think success is less of an end goal. Less of something that you work towards and more something that you are doing every day. Like, I define success as when I can wake up and feel like my existence is purposeful and I'm doing something that matters **(Transcript 17, Page 7, Lines 259-261)**.

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Similarly, Sasha mentioned the importance of not putting a limitation on success. She said,

> But I think it's so funny because I think the question was "how [do] you define success?" And I remember prior, I said I don't think success is a destination. Often times people say I'll be happy when I get here" or "I'll be happy once I do this", and then they do it. They do achieve it, and then their like depressed. They're so depressed because then it's like, now what? You know, and life goes on **(Transcript 17, Page 10, Lines 378-382)**.

Further, Victoria mentioned how important it was to attach meaning and purpose to success. When I asked her if she felt successful, she recounted:

> So, I just want to– I don't want to have the success. I just want to make sure that I feel as though what I'm doing is meaningful. So I think I prefer like meaningful. Do you want to feel like you are meaningful? Yes. I want to feel as though I have some kind of meaning somewhere **(Transcript 14, Page 9, Lines 254-257)**.

Cali also agreed with the importance of not capping her success. This perspective encouraged her to push forward and strive for bigger and better endeavors in her life. Building up this momentum was attributed to her resilience to overcome negative situations. Cali said,

> And I don't want to stop one day because I think I've gotten the biggest award there is to get. Like, the person who won the Nobel Prize still gets up and goes to work the next day, a lot of times. It's like, you know? And that's why I don't think I want to define it. Like, I'm not naïve to not define goals. Like, I am going to define goals and marks for my life and those things. But I'm not going to say, "This is the ultimate. Once I reach it to this point with A, B, C and D, I reach the ultimate level of success. I don't want to cap it **(Transcript 4, Page 9, Lines 275-281)**.

Several students also considered dispositional factors when it came to success being defined as part of their core identities. They admitted that success and academics were a part of who they are. Below are several statements made during the Sister Circle, where all of the participants made a connection to the theme of defining success.

Trish mentioned:

> When people tell me that, I think pretty much what they're saying is that thing originates from when we are pre-schoolers. You know, going to daycare, then pre-school, then we go to elementary school, then middle school, then high school, then you go on to graduate, and then you go to undergrad, and then you're just like, what you mentioned, you're comfortable with the idea of school. The thought of school doesn't leave your

mind. And more than anything, what scares you is getting into society. Getting into the world because you're just conditioned since you were two years old for school. To the point where anything other than school; a gap year, service year, would scare the wits out of you **(Transcript 17, Pages 5-6, Lines 190-196)**.

Similarly, Cali mentioned the following during the Sister Circle:

But yea, I think when I started realizing that we are just so conditioned to just go to school, be stellar students…the expectation is to be a good student, and that's how my identity has almost been shaped for me. You didn't have a choice whether or not to go to school, so now it's like again, we don't have a choice, it's just translated differently... **(Transcript 17, Page 6, Lines 203-207)** It makes it hard to define yourself. Like we said, your whole identity is excelling as an exceptional student and you're like "what am I outside of that? What am I when I'm not meeting your expectations? Like what happens then or who am I then? So…**(Transcript 17, Page 16, Lines 633-635)**

Sasha rounded out this topic by making her statement about success and achievement being something that she has pursued automatically.

But I think as far as success – even my own success, I can't say there is a formula. Like, if I knew if there was a formula to success, I would have tried it already. You know what I mean? Like, you just do it **(Transcript 17, Page 10, Lines 288-290)**.

Persistence: Motivation - Motivation

Further, during the coding process, the concept of motivation emerged from the findings related to the construct of Persistence. When considering persistence, the concept of motivation referred to a student's match with an institution. The student's motivation, their academic aptitude, and an institution's social and academic characteristics determined if there was a best match present. When a student feels they "match" with their institution, they are more likely to persist (Bean, 1981). The findings in this section revealed what kept these students motivated in college. One salient category amongst the majority of the participants was internal motivation. All of their experiences contributed to how they used motivation to help them persist in college. This motivation and persistence equipped them to overcome any obstacles they faced along the way.

During the Sister Circle, Sasha commented on what motivated her and sustained her in college. When she contributed her answer, all of the other participants agreed and related to her experience. Sasha reflected on the fact that she never considered not going to college and always desired to excel. Sasha explained,

> What keeps me going in college, in terms of why I'm still enrolled in college, is I never really seriously considered not finishing college. So, as far as that surfacely, I just never considered not getting a degree. Um, as far as motivation, if that's what the connotation is, I just really want to excel as well **(Transcript 17, Page 2, Lines 58-61)**.

Also during the Sister Circle, Deon commented about how she felt a strong need to be the one who motivated herself. She does not have much family who went to college, so she felt obligated to create a path for herself since a lot of the instruction she received did not come from her family. Deon mentioned,

> It's like you had to set that stage for yourself, and [family] didn't know a lot [about] how the country works here. So, like how to apply to college, what it means to go to college, and what you can do with that degree. So, it was like you had to [motivate] yourself, because it wasn't gonna come from around you **(Transcript 5, Pages 3-4, Lines 146-149)**.

Lastly, during the Sister Circle, Trish commented on how her passion for the work she does really fuels her every day. Having a zest for service and her academics helped her achieve from day to day. Trish contributed:

> For me, it's honestly that I love what I'm doing right now. I love the coursework. I love the experiences that I've gained. So, honestly when I wake up every morning, I'm eager to come to school because I really love what I do and I'm passionate about it **(Transcript 17, Page 3, Lines 75-77)**.

Continuing with motivation, Cali talked about how she was inspired and motivated by other people. She discussed how others motivated her, in addition to, her own intrinsic motivation. She had a genuine love for others and this motivation sustained her despite any obstacles she faced. Cali mentioned,

People. People. Like, I thought just in general, like my parents, family members. But just literally, just seeing people. So whether it be like the kids or whether it be the peers that I have, like just friends and other organizations I'm in, friends from back home, old teachers who keep up with me on Facebook. It really is people outside of just my intrinsic motivation **(Transcript 3, Page 6, Lines 178-182)**.

<u>Persistence: Interaction with the Environment - Involvement</u>

In addition to the concept of motivation, interactions with the environment resonated with all of the participants, as a concept of Persistence. The theme which emerged related to this concept was Involvement. In a large part, student persistence depended on these participants' involvement with their institution. These interactions included encounters with staff and peers, and engagement with other aspects of campus culture. The participants in this study heavily equated their involvement to their success and mentioned how involvement actually enhanced their experiences in the classroom.

When considering involvement, Yolanda began by explaining how she was taught the value of out-of-classroom experiences. Yolanda always felt a strong affinity towards involvement because she understood its relevance to the overall success of her journey in college. Yolanda said, "My dad really taught me that education is power and that you're not going to learn everything from a classroom- you just [are] not." **(Transcript 15, Page 2, Lines 58-59)**

Yolanda then continued on to say:

> Like, [the] majority of the things that I learned in life were not taught to me in the classroom. I learned it through watching, going to like events. Doing different stuff like that, or volunteering, or going on service trips. That's when I really learned the most versus going to class **(Transcript 15, Page 2, Lines 60-64)**.

Similarly, Sasha mentioned how her involvement on campus motivated her to do well in the classroom. What she did outside of the classroom had a direct effect on what she did inside

of the classroom. Therefore, in the following excerpt she explained how important her campus

engagement was to her overall success. Sasha mentioned,

> I am not the type of person that could only do school, because when I did just school my
> freshman year my grades weren't nearly as good. Both my Fall and Spring semester
> GPAs freshman year are lower than every GPA I have gotten since. That's when I was
> literally only working and going to school. So for sure I am, when you take a personality
> test, I am the type that likes being around other people it helps me and it also motivates to
> I guess complete schoolwork **(Transcript 9, Page 6, Lines 262-267)**.

Like Yolanda and Sasha, Cali placed a lot of importance on her campus and community

involvement. Specifically similar to Yolanda, Cali kept her grades and classroom experiences a

high priority. She was also often reminded about the need to do well in the classroom so she

could continue being involved and engaged on campus. She emphasized the need for both and

how she couldn't have one without the other. Cali explained:

> I think also, my involvement, in a way, it's a reminder that I need to perform well
> academically because if I want to be like that student leader in that example then
> academics is always going to come first. So I definitely know that I can't have one
> without the other. And if I needed to have one, it would be those academics. So, because
> I love the involvement and everything else outside of the classroom so much, it kind of
> puts that pressure to make sure the classroom is taken care of **(Transcript 3, Page 5,
> Lines 137-142)**.

Sub-Question 2 Summary

Overall, when exploring the experiences of the participants with negative stereotypes,

their experiences contributed to the concepts of overcoming stereotypes within the Black

Feminism construct, protective and dispositional factors within the Resilience construct, and

motivation and interaction with the environment within the Persistence construct. When tying the

findings to the conceptual framework, all of the aforementioned concepts surfaced as relating to

the students' experiences of success.

As illustrated in Table 11 below, the concept of multiple oppressive identities emerged related to Black Feminism for this particular sub-question. This construct of Black Feminism attests that Black women battle with multiple oppressive identities being both Black and female in America (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1982). Additionally, dispositional factors emerged as a concept from the construct of Resilience, and involvement emerged from the construct of Persistence.

Table 11: Conceptual Framework Relation to Sub-Question 3

Sub Question	Black Feminism	Resilience	Persistence
Sub Question 3 How do high-achieving Black female undergraduate students make sense of success?	Multiple Oppressive Identities *Theme- Processing Situations*	Dispositional Factors *Theme-Defining Success*	Involvement *Theme-Involvement/Engagement*

Black Feminism: Multiple Oppressive Identities - Processing Situations

According to the construct of Black Feminism, Black women experience intersecting oppressive identities being both female and Black in the United States. Black women, regardless of age, social class, religion, and other identities encounter restricting societal practices which work to inhibit their success (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1982). The theme of processing situations emerged in relation to the concept of "multiple oppressive identities". The manner in which students interpret their success was influenced by how they process situations.

Yolanda reflected about how being a Black woman had its unique and specific challenges, and she distinguished this experience from being a Black person, in general. She also

contributed that a Black woman's experience in college can be lonely. Despite her feelings in difficult situations, Yolanda continued to succeed. Yolanda said,

> But what I would say is, with that, it's like when you're a Black female, you have to say "Black female". It's not the same as just being a Black person. But you're a Black female so you have to identify Black female because it's like you only have yourself **(Transcript 15, Page 17, Lines 535-538)**.

Sasha felt similarly, as she shared her sentiments about Black women being criticized for their behavior because it did not adhere to the expectations of society. She mentioned:

> …people don't allow Black women to be multidimensional in terms of, they will say "oh I thought you were all about the books." I mean I feel like that's in high school. People can't put two and two together what people want. Like I want to have fun like everyone else but also I want to do well in school. Like but for some reason you can't conceive that. For instance, I have a lot of black guy friends. People can't understand how is it possible that I can be out to dinner with my guy friend and him just be my friend **(Transcript 9, Page 9, Lines 365-374)**.

Lastly, Deon discussed the need for Black women to be strong because of the negative stereotypes associated with them. Deon believed that the intersecting identities of being both Black and a woman, was associated with its own set of expectations and feelings of responsibility. Deon then discussed the resilience of Black women in tough situations. Deon shared the following sentiment:

> I don't know. Everyone looks to Black women to be strong. You kinda have to build a back bone that everyone else doesn't have to. So, you just kinda grit your teeth and go with it **(Transcript 5, Page 8, Lines 272-274)**.

Resilience: Dispositional Factors - Defining Success

According to the construct of Resilience, the concept of "dispositional factors" emerged as a relevant component for sub-question 3. When considering how high-achieving Black female students make sense of success, the theme of defining success the most relevant theme to consider. Several sub-themes also emerged when the participants referred to the varying ways they view and define success for themselves. Many of the students viewed success as continuous,

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and did not consider it to be an ultimate goal to be achieved. Also, several of the participants

commented on how success for them was equated to happiness and fulfillment. Additionally, a

number of students did not consider themselves to be successful. Given how they perceived

success, they felt it was not accurate to define themselves as such. Further, several of the

participants mentioned how they were considered successful by others which ultimately

influenced their view of success for themselves. Finally, these students associated success with

their personal identities. Therefore, they did not perceive success as "achievable", but rather they

internalized achievement as a common self-practice.

First, when the participants discussed their definitions of success, many of them viewed

success as continuous. According to the participants, success should never be considered an end

goal. Instead, they believed success should be a perceived as a method of continuous goal

setting. Below are several accounts of the participants' individual yet similar inputs during the

Sister Circle.

During the Sister Circle, Barbara mentioned:

> Um, well I think success if less of an end goal. Less of something that you work towards and more something that you are doing every day. Like, I define success as when I can wake up and feel like my existence is purposeful and I'm doing something that matters **(Transcript 17, page 7, Lines 259-261)**.

With the similar sentiment, Victoria said "To me, success is never ending. You can never

really be as successful as you think because there are different areas to which you can be even

more successful **(Transcript 13, Page 4, lines 136-138)**."

In addition to the Sister Circle, participants discussed similar approaches to success,

viewing it as limitless. During her interview, Cali said,

> Yeah. It's an ongoing thing. Like, there's no definite end to success, for me. Like, I don't want there to be a definite end to success for me. So, it's something— [do] I feel like I can obtain success? Yes, because I want to do it every day. Like, in some shape or form,

I'm doing it every day. But to say that I can measure it and say I've done it, that's different for me. I don't think I can put a measure to it and say, 'That's success and I've obtained it **(Transcript 4, Page 7, Lines 207-212)**… And also, understanding that there's more– like you can't get complacent in what you're doing. Just because you feel like you've reached some level of success. Like I said, there's no cap on it **(Transcript 3, Page 11, Lines 352-354)**.

The participants also discussed how they viewed success as an equivalent to happiness and fulfilment. During the Sister Circle, Deon mentioned how encompassing her definition of success was. She underscored how success encompassed purpose and meaning. She said,

I feel like my definition is like really big, like way too deep. I define success as: I feel like everyone was put here for a purpose, and a lot of people don't internalize that, so I feel like success is finding something that you're good at. That you do well. Just putting your all into that, putting your whole being into that one thing that you do well **(Transcript 17, Page 7, Lines 248-250)**.

Sasha, very similarly and simplistically stated "So, I really just define success differently. I think success is definitely being a happy person, having peace of mind and whatever, whatever. And it's like having great people around you **(Transcript 10, Page 12, Lines 364-366)**." Similar to Deon, Sasha mentioned how success was ultimately tied to purpose, happiness, and fulfillment.

Further, Deon eloquently discussed a collective message which was mirrored in many of the participants' responses when she said the following:

I feel like everyone has a purpose. So everyone should strive to at least try and find out what that purpose is. Like, that's how I define success, just finding what it is that you're supposed to be doing, what's your destiny, what your combined skills amount to? So, that's your life's purpose. That's your life's goal. And that's success. So if you're not pushing towards reaching your life goal or getting to that point where you feel like you're at your best self then what are you doing? It's kind of like if success isn't very important then you're not doing anything, if that makes sense **(Transcript 6, Page 6, Lines 152-159)**.

Also, when making sense of success, some of the students disassociated themselves from the definition of success, all together. During the Sister Circle, Cali shared:

Um, for me. [Success] doesn't exist, like it's weird. Yea, it's weird. Um, but I don't call myself- like being successful is not something I put on myself. Like, I have had a lot of amazing victories. A lot of amazing experiences. And those, like I used to ignore them. I feel perplexed. I am grateful for them, but to put a label of 'successful' on myself, no. And again, I feel like that's a cap. Like, if I tell myself 'Cali, you're successful.' I'm like "Bruh, you're 22, you've got a lot more to do", so I'm not gonna label myself as successful like, again, I acknowledge those victories. Um, but no. I wouldn't say that I label myself as successful **(Transcript 17, Page 13, Lines 481-488)**.

Similarly, Sasha expressed how she felt about considering herself successful. She felt comfortable sharing that she often felt successful when completing certain tasks, but overall, she did not feel comfortable labeling herself as successful. She had this to contribute:

I would say that I have succeeded in a lot of things but I don't know if I can walk out and say I am a successful person. I don't know if that is something that anyone should do because then you just become complacent. I can say I am successful in getting the grades, I am successful in completing a task. But I wouldn't say I am not successful either, you know what I mean? **(Transcript 9, Page 3, Lines 120-125)**

Several of the participants also mentioned how they measure their success based others identifying them as successful. These participants wrestled with negative feelings regarding others' perceptions of their success, because they equated the associated feelings to pressure. She felt the attention received from others was often followed by assumptions regarding her capabilities. For instance, Sasha had the following to say about how she felt pressure from others: "Everyone is always is just like 'Oh, but we know YOU'RE gonna be great.' And I'm like 'no, I don't have it—'like, I do, but I don't know why people assume that." **(Transcript 17, Page 10, Lines 362-363).** Feeling pressured by others' expectations was first introduced in the Sister Circle by the primary researcher and several of the participants agreed and offered their related insight.

Sasha went on further to say,

Like, there's a lot of pressure when people constantly assert that you are successful, or that you're gonna be successful. I don't know why. Like, I don't know why I'm like

"please don't call me that." Things like "congratulations". Like, I appreciate it, I genuinely do, but I don't know **(Transcript 17, Page 13, Lines 498-501)**.

Much like Sasha, Deon expressed feeling pressure from her family because of their expectations for her success. Deon discussed how she felt like she was placed on a pedestal, which pressured her to always be the best. She had this to say:

> I grew up with people that told me like "you're the one that's gonna make it. You're gonna do this for us." My whole family always tells me that. And it makes me see failure in a different way. Like, if I'm not doing or if I didn't make that 100%, if I didn't get that one position, I feel like that failure a whole lot more because I'm supposed to be the good student. So, if I get like a 98%, I'm like "well, why wasn't it a 100%?" So I feel like, if anything it is more of a detriment if you constantly put me on that pedestal **(Transcript 17, Page 13, Lines 502-507)**.

Finally, Trish recounted a story from when she took her LSAT exam for law school and how she coped with her low score. She felt as though others pressured her to succeed on the exam. The pressure from others caused her to feel as though she disappointed them by not earning a higher score. She said,

> …I'm like "you've put me on this pedestal. You have such high expectations of me", and it makes me proud, but then I look at when I was taking my LSAT. And all people were like "you're gonna do amazing. You're gonna do great. You're just gonna be fine." And, I took the LSAT and I did horrible, I was in the 28th percentile. And that failure was okay for me, but I broke down in tears because (*getting emotional-tears welling up*) I thought about all the people who told me I was gonna make it. And that was consistently even that day of. And when I told people, I wish I could show you the face that they gave me. Like, "you?" And that hurt me more than anything **(Transcript 17, Page 15, Lines 573-579)**.

Lastly, the participants made sense of their successes by considering success and achievement as a part of their identities. Barbara, Trish, and Cali all discussed the relation of success to their identities during the Sister Circle. Though they were the only participants who made specific references to the topic, others in the group agreed with their statements. Barbara first said,

I think my personality was just built around leading up to a person who just excelled academically. So, the thought of not going to college for me was like an existential crisis, because if someone was just like "oh, don't go to college", I would be like "well, where am I gonna be? What do I do?" So I think that like after high school, I was like ready to be in college, you know, doing whatever it was that I was planning to do in college. But as far as like seriously considering not doing it, that was probably [scarier] for me than it was comforting **(Transcript 17, Page 5, Lines 174-179)**.

Trish then followed, saying,

You know, going to daycare, then pre-school, then we go to elementary school, then middle school, then high school, then you go on to graduate, and then you go to undergrad. And then you're just like, what you mentioned, you're comfortable with the idea of school. The thought of school doesn't leave your mind. And more than anything, what scares you is getting into society, getting into the world because you're just conditioned since you were two years old for school. To the point where anything other than school; a gap year [or] service year, would scare the wits out of you **(Transcript 17, Pages 5-6, Lines 191-196)**.

Cali continued with this discussion during the Sister Circle and said,

So it's like weird and that's probably why we struggle so much defining success because like we're not supposed to really think about it, we're not supposed to really state what it is or how we do it: what makes us so good. We're just supposed to do it **(Transcript 17, Page 20, Lines 760-762)**.

Lastly, Barbara discussed how she developed her identity over time. Therefore, once she

started college, she already had a record of success and achievement. She said,

I think that was kind of a persona that I had developed for myself like all through high school. Like, all [the way] up until college, I had become that person that was always taking the honors classes, taking the AP classes. And that kind of just compiled on itself. So when I got to college, it was kind of just like not even an option to do something different because that was just the person that I was **(Transcript 2, Page 1, Lines 7-11)**.

Persistence: Involvement - Involvement

When considering how high-achieving Black female students make sense of success, involvement was the most applicable concept to emerge from the construct of Persistence. The construct of Persistence attested that what students experience in school matters heavily in their decision to continue to graduation (Tinto, 1975, 1987). These experiences include their

involvement on campus. Thus, what a student does on campus, including what they do outside of the classroom, influences how they make sense of success. Several of the students in this study specifically equated their involvement experiences with their idea of success. Cali elaborated extensively about how her involvement on campus offered her a level of freedom which she doesn't receive in the classroom. This freedom allowed Cali to explore different parts of herself. She had this to say:

> Now, outside of the classroom, I think, I've definitely harnessed more of a freedom to say what I want to say. I think within the context of a classroom, I'm just a bit more careful because like it's my grades. In school, you don't want to mess with that too much. You don't want to rub a professor in the wrong way. And, you know, I don't want to play with my academics in that way. So I'm not [always as] open and ready to challenge [in] an academic setting. But outside of the classroom, I still am aware but I'm more inclined to speak up and say things no matter who's there or what the topic may be. But the classroom is definitely a bit more confined, just for me personally **(Transcript 4, Page 4, Lines 103-111)**.

Cali then also said:

> I think, going back to the previous question and linking them back in a way. I place so much pride [in] my involvement because I was thinking, it gave me more room like, to have that freedom that, I think, sometimes just education in itself doesn't allow for me. So when I'm in like RSO (Registered Student Organizations) meetings or like student organization meetings, or when I'm having discussions outside of the classroom or going to events and volunteering…I think that allows me to explore the different parts of myself and have conversations and say things that sometimes you just don't have the time for in the classroom or sometimes it's not a priority. There's no getting the time to do it because I could sit next to the same person for the entire year in a class and never talk to them. But I don't know, like, when I'm out volunteering with somebody, before I know it, like we're talking about our favorite movies on a bus ride to the service site. So I think my involvement just gives me a bit more freedom to like explore different things and meet new people that I don't always get in a classroom. And maybe that's because of how I approach the classroom. I'm in here like, "I'm here to do my work and get things done." We can get a conversation from time to time but when that door closes, like it's over **(Transcript 4, Page 5, Lines 149-164)**.

Additionally, a number of the participants commented on how being involved offered them a level of connection and belonging within different communities of people. Having these connections with others aided the students in the way they view and understand success.

Yolanda mentioned the following:

> Cuz my brother, at his graduation, he didn't do anything at [brother's college]. He just took pictures with us and went home. He didn't even have college friends, because he was like "what's the point?" So, the fact that I got to meet all these different people, just from being involved...I'm not saying there are right and wrong people...but people with similar goals and similar intentions as me, that I got to meet this people just from being involved **(Transcript16, Page 2, Lines 64-69)**.

Gina also mentioned the importance of connecting with people by saying:

> I don't even have the best grades in my major, at all. Grades are just irrelevant to me, but when I'm actually able to sit down and I know that somebody walked away from a conversation with me better…I wanna know I can connect to people **(Transcript 7, Page 9, Lines 357-360)**.

Gina went on further to elaborate on how powerful involvement is for her. She mentioned

how she feels that there are inadequate amounts of spaces available for Black people to be

celebrated. Therefore, by joining Black clubs and organizations, it gave her the opportunity to be

in the presence of other Black students and to be able to connect with them. She said:

> I realized that, just if any black women weren't getting credit. Weren't getting protection in my opinion. Our platforms were being disrespected if not neglected…That wasn't getting acknowledged as it should have been in my opinion. Um, and when I realized that, I was like "okay, I'm gonna contribute all my energy to convincing the rest of the world that we matter, that we're here." So, I sought out like Black clubs and organizations. Alright, that matters. Congregations of Black people matter to validate each other's experiences, so we're not one of 20 in a classroom, or 30, or 40, or whatever. Like, we can be together. You can take the mask off, you can take a load off, whatever. To know that you matter, to remember that you matter, to remember that you're seen **(Transcript8, Page 1, Lines 13-23)**.

Cali had a similar sentiment when recognizing the importance of being in places where

Black women are welcomed to talk about their experiences. It Cali's opinion, it is vital to create

open spaces which are available for this type of camaraderie. She had this to say:

> I think [it's important to create] spaces where black women can talk about their Black experience. I think a lot of times, the Black woman's experience is sort of a package deal just as a black student experience. And I think it's important to highlight that we have various aspects of who we are as women, as Black people, as college students that are unique to us. And being able to be in those spaces…outside of just like your particular

sorority or your particular organization – just creating open spaces where Black women from all across campus, or whoever, can talk about their experiences. Because, like I said, I think it just sometimes gets overshadowed. And before you know it, we're just all fighting the good fight for Black people in general which is nothing wrong with that but it's also like, "Okay, but what about as a Black woman?" Like, can we talk about this for a minute and just identify what this looks like, and what this feels like, and what impact it's having on us in this context? So, just the opportunity to create more spaces for that, like really see apply to like Black women only **(Transcript 3, Page 12, Lines 373-388)**.

In conclusion, Cali gave a summative statement targeting the importance of her

connections to others because of her involvement. She said:

It (involvement) definitely provides me with more context; being involved, being able to say, "I may [not have] travelled abroad, but I have spoken to people who may have or I connect with people who may have." So when I'm having these conversations about politics in other countries and the law, if I haven't been able to experience it myself through my involvement and connection to other people, I have some sort of context around to get outside – this wasn't [in] a textbook **(Transcript 3, Page 5, Lines 131-136)**.

<u>Sub-Question 3 Summary</u>

Overall, when exploring how high-achieving Black female students make sense of

success, their experiences contributed to the concepts of Multiple Oppressive Identities within

the Black Feminism construct, Dispositional Factors within the Resilience construct, and

Involvement within the Persistence construct. When tying the findings to the conceptual

framework, all of the aforementioned concepts surfaced as relating to the students' experiences

of success.

<div align="center">Sub-Question 4 - Motivation to Succeed</div>

Table 12 below demonstrates the relevant conceptual framework constructs for sub-

question four. Regarding Black Feminism, the specific concept most appropriate for this sub-

question was resisting oppression. The over-arching purpose of Black Feminism is to resist

oppression both in practice and idea (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1982).

Additionally, regarding the construct of Resilience, it is important to acknowledge the concepts

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of external factors and dispositional factors as it relates to the motivation of high-achieving

Black female students and what helps them succeed. External factors include areas of support a

student receives from outside sources which are often utilized in stressful situations to protect an

individual from risk (Mak, Ng & Wong, 2011). Overall, the following section provides evidence

of student voice regarding why these themes and constructs are important for answering the

research sub-question.

Table 12: Conceptual Framework Relation to Sub-Question 4

Sub Question	Black Feminism	Resilience	Persistence
Sub Question 4 What motivates high-achieving Black female undergraduate students to succeed at a predominantly White institution?	Resist Oppression *Theme-Processing situations*	External Factors *Theme-Motivation*	
		Dispositional Factors *Theme-Motivation*	

Black Feminism: Resist Oppression - Processing Situations

Black Feminism explains that resisting oppression is a key principle in the fundamentals

of the theory. In fact, the over-arching purpose of Black Feminism is to resist oppression in both

practice and idea. In other words, this theory declares that Black women should not accept

oppression as an inevitability but should intentionally work against it. Therefore, the most

relevant theme which emerged from the findings was "processing situations". Considering this

theme, many of the participants in the study discussed how important it was for them to have a

conscious level of happiness in their lives. By deciding to choose happiness over any other

attitude, these women fueled their motivation to press forward and succeed. For instance,

Victoria mentioned how she acknowledged that injustices occur, but because of her strong will

and desire to see past the situations, she did not let negative situations affect her. She had this to say "And I'm really sure maybe some social justice has happened to me, but I'm so like-- I don't know. I'm so strong-minded and strong-willed that it doesn't faze me. I forget about it."

Similarly, Sasha discussed that she chose where to spend her energy most. In other words, when she approached negative situations, she chose her "battles". She recognized and consciously decided that some "battles" were not worth her time. She also admitted that not giving energy to a situation did not make it right or permissible, but it was her responsibility to decide how best to use her time. Sasha had the following to say:

> It just something I can say I don't contribute a lot of energy to. Because you really have to educate somebody from like the beginning to say "why is it that you feel this type of way?" And then you make them think about it. You can't really concern yourself with a lot of different things all the time. If you really tried to change overwhelming amounts of what people think- It's just, I don't know, I guess you have to pick your battles. I am not saying it is okay but if anybody asks I will say like how I feel but it's not something that I want to constantly like assert. It's not something that is like right in your face all the time you know. When it comes up, I choose to decide that it is miniscule or not address it **(Transcript 9, Page 10, Lines 16-24)**.

Gina had a very similar sentiment but with a different approach by referring to the importance of taking time for herself. She emphasized how she learned to create a safe space inside of herself which she did not allow to be affected by issues that occurred outside of that space. She had this to say "I think that's like the biggest thing I've learned going here. Learning how to create a space inside of myself that is just not affected by the wild sh*t that gets said to me or about me **(Transcript 8, Page 9, Lines 318-319)**."

Cali, expressed herself using a different approach with the same message. Cali elaborated on how she often thought about her successes on campus and what they were ultimately attributed to. She thought about whether or not she attained a lot of her success on her own accord or to fill a diversity quota. Ultimately, Cali understood the importance of recognizing her

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own skill and capabilities and she attributed her success to the work she put in. She further

discussed how she learned to not get hung up on trying to make meaning of seemingly negative

experiences and, instead, [chose to be] unapologetically herself. This is what Cali had to say:

> Like, am I really getting the same evaluation as my White counterparts at this institution-
> across the board, no matter what I'm applying to, no matter what it may be, or is it the
> fact that I'm Black a factor? So that's the question. And sometimes, you just chop it up to
> "Yeah, it probably was." And that just sounds– it's just like… "No, I'm a bad a*s. Like, I
> got here because I deserve to be here." But either way, I just try not to get hung up on
> that. I'm just saying, "Okay now that I got it, I'm here, so let me just be Cali - be me."
> And they probably thought they were getting a quieter Black girl but they didn't. They
> got the loud-mouthed one, so I'm going to still be that person **(Transcript 4, Page 12,
> Lines 358-367)**.

Lastly, Barbara took a different approach and mentioned how her strength and ability to

power through situations came from the influence of other Black women. Barbara was

empowered by other Black women who she saw breaking stereotypes. This encouraged her to do

the same. She also commented on the pain she felt when she encountered negative situations, but

that she could not live her life hurt all the time. Therefore, she consciously decided to overcome

any potential barriers and built up a "thick skin". Barbara said:

> I have been able to kind of dust away those black female stereotypes that I had before
> because I came to college and saw so many empowered black women. And I think that
> maybe some of the stereotypes that I had before – even of myself, were diminished
> because I was seeing other people breaking stereotypes **(Transcript 1, Page 8, Lines
> 234-238)**… They might not have been exposed to as many things that I've been exposed
> to, you know? Like, my own heart hurts when I hear other people saying mean things
> about other people but I can't live my life being hurt all the time. So it pays to build up a
> tough skin so that you can see things objectively **(Transcript 2, Page 2, Lines 53-57)**.

Overall, these students contributing statements demonstrated how declaring a conscious

happiness assisted them in remaining motivated throughout their time in college thus far.

Resilience: External Factors - Motivation

Regarding the conceptual framework for the study, motivation was a key theme which

emerged related to the external factors concept regarding Resilience. External factors such as

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parental support, other adult mentoring, and overall use of external resources in times of high

stress were important as students used these resources to protect themselves from risks.

Deon spoke about how her family and her mom, especially, served as a motivation for

her while in school. Deon was inspired by her mom's efforts to pursue her education and provide

for her children. Deon had this to say:

> Umm, my family. My mom and just like everything she's been through. My mom started
> to go back in school in 2008 and she just graduated. And it's like, that's almost ten years.
> And I'm so proud of her, cuz to have five kids, working two jobs, and still going back to
> school…So, if like, she can do it, I can do it. So definitely my family, my mom,
> especially **(Transcript 5, Page 6, Lines 206-211)**.

Barbara had a similar sentiment about her family, more specifically her mother. She felt it

was important for her to succeed because of the sacrifices made by those who believed in her.

This observation, for Barbara, was a big motivating factor for her success. This is what she had

to say:

> So I think maybe it's fear of failure, maybe it's just being-- you know, the fear of being
> disappointed in myself and having all those people who love me be disappointed in me
> that keeps me going. But also, I think it's the desire to kind of do it for them - to make
> sure that they know that their hard work hasn't been for nothing. You know, like my
> mom didn't work 40 to 50 hours a week so that I could like get a job somewhere that I
> hate and resent my life for the rest of it. That what she was doing was going to be worth it
> **(Transcript 1, Page 6, Lines 165-171)**.

In addition to family, Trish mentioned how she was motivated by involvement

experiences. These experiences, rather than monetary rewards were what motivated her and on

what she hinged her success. She expounded on that point and made the observation that others

in the Sister Circle group shared in her sentiments by also never mentioning money as a

motivating factor. This is what Trish had to say:

> What's very interesting to me is that I would agree with what Cali was saying. What I
> think is very interesting [is], while I talk to a lot of my peers, is they define success in
> terms of monetary things, and like everything is money-based. And just hearing the sista
> circle (*shared laughs*), it's just like we have not mentioned in our definitions anything

about monetary. Um, what Cali was saying, we value these experiences and I think that's what brings us around this table right now. It's that those experiences have contributed to a meaningful success in college **(Transcript17, Page 9, Lines 347-352)**.

Moreover, several of the participants commented on how they were motivated by external factors and experiences which push them forward in their success in college.

Resilience: Dispositional Factors - Motivation

In addition to external factors, many of the participants referred to their dispositional factors which motivated them to succeed along the way. Dispositional factors are the personal factors necessary to endure the process and push forward when overcoming obstacles (Morales & Trotman, 2004).

Yolanda spoke about her belief in her own abilities. Yolanda always felt compelled to do well based her own acknowledgement of her capabilities. Yolanda always set goals for herself and believed she could excel. By setting goals for herself, she did not compare her accomplishments to others. This is what Yolanda had to say about being motivated by believing in herself:

> … I felt like people set goals for themselves, realistic goals for that particular person. So, my goals are definitely going to be different from Student G's. My goal is never to pass the class. My goal is to get an A in the class, so I always knew I was going to pass the class **(Transcript 17, Page 4, Lines 124-127)**…Because I knew myself and I knew my abilities. I knew if I wanted it, I would work hard for it. I knew that if I didn't have the answer, I would probably find the answer **(Transcript 17, Page 4, Lines 129-131)**.

Similarly, Victoria admitted that she set her own limits to success. In the following quote, Victoria discussed experiences contributed to her success. She mentioned that through leadership and self-motivation, she had been able to step outside of her comfort zone and push herself to achieve. Victoria said "Ummm. I mean, the only thing that I can honestly say is what led to my success 100%, was rooted within leadership and again, me pushing myself. Going outside of my comfort zone **(Transcript 13, Page 7-8, Lines 259-261).**"

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Similarly, Trish discussed being motivated and guided by her passion, faith, and values. Trish had this to say:

> But I think what motivates me, what makes me tick is honestly the concept of what I'm passionate about. So, I'm passionate about women's empowerment, passionate about youth and education, and gaining my different experiences, working with those little girls. Working in foster care, seeing that there is a need. Working with, you know, youth and education and you see that need, it's like "okay, I fill in that gap. I have to fill in that need. I think that's really, ultimately, what motivates me to actually keep going. umm, along with the faith, but I think it's my experiences that I've gained..umm..it, in a sense created a very large heart and made me want to fill it...(*laughs*) **(Transcript 11, Page 6, Lines 212-219)**.

Summarily, Barbara talked about how she felt success was a part of her identity. She talked about using herself as a measuring stick for her next level of success. Barbara said this:

> Yeah. I think it's kind of something that is just inside of me. Like, a part of who I am is like you keep going and you do better than you thought you could each time and you keep doing that **(Transcript 1, Page 6, Lines 176-178)**.

Sub-Question 4 Summary

Internal, or dispositional factors, ultimately, play a role in the motivation of high-achieving Black female students at a predominantly White institution. As evidenced above, these participants dug deep within themselves to find reasons to keep going and grabbed a hold of success for themselves.

Sub-Question 5 - Challenges Faced

As illustrated in Table 13 below, challenges faced by high-achieving Black female students at a predominantly White institution were related to several constructs of the conceptual framework. Regarding the construct of Black Feminism, the concept of an oppressive systems was relevant to this research sub-question. Additionally, regarding the construct of Resilience, the concept of external factors was relevant to include. Within the construct of Black Feminism, the position Black women hold in America is as a result of a system of oppression which is

designed to keep Black women in "their place" (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; hooks, 1982).

Also, according to Black Feminism, the larger system in America aims to promote and protect

the elite-ness of White male interests and views (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; hooks, 1982).

Both conceptual framework constructs helped contribute meaning to the participants'

experiences regarding the challenges they faced related to race, gender, and academic

achievement.

Table 13: Conceptual Framework Relation to Sub-Question 5

Sub Question	Black Feminism	Resilience	Persistence
Sub Question 5 What challenges do high-achieving Black female undergraduate students face related to their race, gender, and academic achievement at a predominantly White institution?	Oppressive System *Theme- Processing Situations*	External Factors *Theme- Processing situations* *Theme- Background*	

Black Feminism: Oppressive System - Processing Situations

       The theme of processing situations emerged as relevant to this particular sub-question.

Several participants in the study talked about their experiences with oppression and challenges

related to feeling like a "Black representative" in the company of White people. Gina elaborated

on her experiences with this phenomenon by saying:

> I didn't like being the only Black girl in my classes. I didn't like being one of two or one of three Black people in my classes. I didn't like that the Black people I ate lunch with weren't in my classes. I don't know, I just didn't like being the showman person **(Transcript7, Page 1, Lines 10-13)**.

       Gina elaborated on how she was not pleased with the fact that her closest friends were not

the individuals she hung out with in class. Also, feeling like the "show-person" in her classes

made her feel uncomfortable. Gina went on further to talk about the exhaustion she often felt in

her classes when she contributed to discussions. She felt the need to speak up on behalf of Black

people during conversations but often felt overwhelmed because of this role. Due to her level of

discomfort, she found solace in what she named "Black Land", referring to her Black friends

who were not in her classes. This is what Gina had to say:

> My approach to classes, whether or not I speak up, whether or not I wanted to speak up. It got to the point where I was doing it so much, that it was just exhausting. Like I don't…eff it…there's going to be another White person in another class and I'll just have to have this conversation again..and then it just like made me nervous cuz there's people around me, and I don't know what these people around me are thinking, so let me go find "Black Land" again **(Transcript 7, Page 4, Lines 159-163)**.

Cali also referred to feeling like a Black representative. Her positions in prestigious

organizations prompted a fear of being perceived in certain ways. She felt a level of expectation

placed on her as a Black representative. In the excerpt below, Cali recounted how she constantly

"checked" herself to ensure she was meeting the assumed standard. This is what she had to say:

> …That's why I call it like a paranoia because, in a sense, I don't know if that's what the person would be thinking. I just know, in this fitting room, I'm going to take a second look. I may go up a pant size. Even if I'm personally comfortable with it, it's a way of– like I said, putting that barrier out there to ensure that everyone else is comfortable with it. There are these stereotypes there, so playing that sort of role **(Transcript 3, Page 9, Lines 261-266)**.

In the following scenario, Cali described how she received "pep talks" from her superiors

about maintaining a level of professionalism in certain scenarios. She internalized these

messages because she did not want to be stereotypically perceived. Cali said the following when

I asked her to describe her pep talks:

> Oh, a talk – "Hey, can I talk to you?" Just by our superior or by someone that may have been around. And it's like, "Oh, just make sure in certain settings that you're mindful of who's around you [and] how you're conducting yourself". So, that little pep talk to be professional. Or even a consequence that may not be as direct but it's kind of like that fear of being perceived as a particular person **(Transcript 3, Page 10, Lines 316-320)**.

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<u>Resilience: External Factors - Processing Situations</u>

The theme of processing situations emerged related to the concept of external factors.

Trish talked about the importance of reflection for her when processing negative situations. At

the end of every day, she thought about her experiences and considered how her day could have

gone differently. When I asked her how she processed situations, Trish took out a paper and pen

during the interview and wrote down her answer before speaking. In this scenario, she referred to

how she processed challenges dealing with race, gender, or academic ability. Trish had this to

say:

> So I put here, I will honestly…at the end of my day, I re-evaluate my day. And that's one of the scenarios that I would re-evaluate. "What just happened?" and I look at "How can I better understand that scenario?" Or, "what can I do next time to maybe make that a more effective scenario?" Or just looking at how, later on, if I were going to encounter that again, what could I do next time better? **(Transcript 12, Page 5, Lines 138-142)**

Cali had a different approach to the way she processed the situations she encountered at a

PWI. Cali discussed how she often questioned the motives of her success at a PWI. In the back

of her mind, she sometimes wondered if her inclusion in different events was due to her being

Black. She often measured her success against the success of White students. To reconcile the

feelings she has during these scenarios, Cali made a conscious effort to connect with student

organizations. She specifically sought out organizations with a focus on Black students and their

experiences. Cali had this to say:

> But at a predominantly White institution…you're often wondering, to be completely blunt about it, "was this level of success reached because of who I am or because of some other underlying cause? So is it because you needed to reach the minority quota? Or is it because you want to promote diversity? Is it because you want to show [that] not only the White students are doing this and that?" So, you find yourself always measuring your success against your white counterparts' success. So it's hard to just be confident in the fact that I have a 3.8 and I'm a great student **(Transcript 4, Page 10, Lines 293-300)**…And also, as far as my success, I think it's definitely [had an impact on] the path I chose to take with my success. So, I made a conscious effort to connect with those things that were Black and those things that were multicultural because at a predominantly

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White institution, like you're looking to connect in some way and have a genuine connection **(Transcript 4, Page 10, Lines 311-315)**.

Trish encountered issues related to her gender. She reflected on a time when she was belittled by a co-director within her student organization. Her way of processing this situation was by standing up for herself and voicing her opinions. Therefore, in processing situations, Trish decided to take a more active approach. This is Trish's story:

> Umm, I'm gonna go back to an experience I had with CAB (Campus Activities Board). It was me, along with, a male director- we were co-directors, and I found it very very hard. I think, coming from being a woman when I would stand up or when I would put my foot down, He would in a sense be like "relax. relaaax". And I'm just like "why are you telling me to relax? I'm doing the exact same things that you'd be doing." Umm, so I hated that. I hated the whole "relax". That was definitely an issue. umm, and me specifically, I think because I'm huge [on] woman's empowerment, [and I'm] a feminist, it's a little bit hard for me to kind of umm accept those gender biases and I clearly see them, but when I see them I put my foot down **(Transcript 11, Page 10, Lines 344-356)**.

Lastly, Yolanda summarized experiences she encountered related to her learning disability. Because of her disability, she encountered individuals who treated her differently. Therefore, one thing that helped her process these situations and feel better about herself was receiving compliments for a job well done. The following scenario demonstrated how Yolanda moved past the negative situations she encountered and embraced her difference as a tool for her success. She said the following:

> Trust me, people will treat you totally different when they think you're stupid. Trust me, usually there are people looking out for you, that'll notice things about you. But when people think you're stupid, they don't think of you. They don't care. Things that happen to you don't matter. They make it seem like it doesn't matter. They're just like "oh, it's just the stupid kid in the back". Like nobody cares what they think of you, when they think you're inadequate. I don't like that feeling. So, it kind of makes me--so I'm not gonna lie-- when people say [positive] things, it makes me feel better because for a long time I was told that I wasn't smart **(Transcript 17, Page 15, Lines 557-562)**.

<u>Resilience: External Factors - Background</u>

In addition to processing situations, some of the participants experienced pressure from their families to succeed. The theme of background emerged for the concept of external factors because cultural and family components contributed to the students' resilience but also to the challenges they face. Deon spoke about how she felt trapped by an immense pressure from her family to succeed, given that her brothers were not as high-achieving as she was. This is what she had to say:

> Yea...so it's like I feel like I'm letting them down if I don't do anything well. Or like, I don't know, like I'm pushing my brothers cuz like I can't be the only one. Like "you guys have to do it for yourselves, you know what I mean?" And it like stresses me out sometimes. Like, I'm graduating next semester and like applying to jobs and it's like so discouraging. My mom is like telling me "you're my first baby to graduate college", and my uncle is pushing for me to go to law school. And my brothers are like not doing well in school, and I'm like I need someone else to carry the load, like I can't do it all **(Transcript 5, Page 2, Lines 63-69)**.

Yolanda spoke about her challenges with relation to her culture. Her parents followed traditional Nigerian values in her home. Getting an education was an expectation in her family and Yolanda felt pressure to go to school. In the following scenario, Yolanda mentioned how her community would be displeased if she did not go to school. She described this scenario in the following way:

> And I know a lot of Africans, they are just in college. They don't know what they're doing but that's because it's just something of our environment that you just— it's like those have-to-do things. And that's what I have to do. So I knew I had to go because [of] my parents. People are going to look…like, in our community, are going to look at me weird [like] "Why aren't you going?" **(Transcript 15, Page 2, Lines47-52)**

Further, Trish discussed how she grew up with the expectation of being academically successful. Trish felt the pressure of being an independent, "fierce" woman. A woman who takes care of herself and knows her worth. This situation both contributed to Trish's resilience, as well as, challenged her to succeed. Here is her story:

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And in terms of success too- my mom…I think it's a Caribbean thing. They're always like, they want their daughters to be the lawyer, to be the doctor, to be all those things, so you had high expectations. Coming from a Caribbean family, my mom was talking about like I don't want you to- it's stereotypical-but I don't want you to be like the house mom or to just settle for being the cook because that happens a lot in Caribbean households. So, growing up she taught me the importance of being a fierce woman, and that was really instilled in my mind. Be a fierce woman. Be self-reliant. Be independent **(Transcript 11, Page 3, Lines 86-93)**.

Lastly, Trish described what a fierce woman was, saying:

If you wanna ask a question of what does that fierce woman look like, I would say "me". But I would say ummm, the fierce woman is: 1. she is self-reliant. 2. She is independent. Like we mentioned earlier, but 3. She allows herself to be at that table, you know. She makes sure to take the initiative…fierce woman at the conference, you know, although she might not have a question, she wants to make sure she is heard. You know, she's intelligent, educated **(Transcript 11, Page 11, Lines 386-394)**.

Sub-Question 5 Summary

Overall, when exploring the challenges high-achieving Black female students face related to their race, gender, and academic achievement, there were several concepts which were applicable. Their experiences contributed to the concept of an oppressive system within the Black Feminism construct, and external factors within the Resilience construct. When tying the findings to the conceptual framework, all of the aforementioned concepts surfaced as relating to the students' experiences of success.

Sub-Question 6 - Experiences Contributing to Persistence

Illustrated in table 14 below are the conceptual framework constructs and associated themes related to sub-question number six. Regarding Black Feminism, the concept of overcoming stereotypes was relevant, with the associated theme of background. Next, the construct of resources was relevant, with the theme of support. Also, the construct of protective factors was relevant, while acknowledging the theme of defining success. Lastly, within the construct of Persistence, it was important to recognize the concept of involvement as relevant.

The related theme was involvement. Commitment was another concept of Persistence which was relevant to this sub-question. The associated theme for commitment was support. Finally, motivation was an important concept of Persistence, and the relevant theme associated was motivation.

Table 14: Conceptual Framework Relation to Sub-Question 6

Sub Question	Black Feminism	Resilience	Persistence
Sub Question 6 What experiences contribute to the persistence of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution?	Overcoming Stereotypes *Theme-Background*	Resources *Theme-Support*	Involvement *Theme-Involvement*
		Protective Factors *Theme-Defining Success*	Commitment *Theme-Support*
			Motivation *Theme-Motivation*

Black Feminism: Overcoming Stereotypes - Background

The majority of the participants mentioned having experiences with overcoming stereotypes. One experience shared by many of the students was their academic background. Seven of the eight students described experiences participating in honors program, AP classes, and other high-achievement coursework. With a reputation of success prior to starting college, these Black female students defied negative stereotypes in college and persisted. Below are several excerpts from them describing their honors and related academic experiences.

Victoria said "okay, umm so ever since I was in the first grade, I've always been in honors. Umm, so from first grade up until my junior year, I either participated in honors, dual enrollment, AP…just gifted courses in general." **(Transcript 13, Page 1, Lines 8-10)**

Also, Trish commented on her experiences saying:

So, in high school, I maintained a really good GPA. Umm, I wanna say I was top 20% of my class, I think out of a class of 827 or around there. I was number 30, so academically I was doing good **(Transcript 11, Page 1, Lines 5-7)**. I wanna say I started AP junior and senior year, as well as, dual enrollment **(Transcript 11, Page 1, Lines 11-12)**.

Very similarly, Deon also had experiences with higher level coursework. This is what she

had to say:

And I remember right off the bat, they told me I needed to be in gifted classes. Umm, so yea I was in gifted classes the last half of my kindergarten. Like in kindergarten, then first and second grade, then umm I remember- I don't remember much about why- but because of my age they had me in both gifted and regular classes. I could tell the stark differences between the gifted and the regular classes. The regular class, you would like play with blocks and stuff, and like the gifted classes [they were] like "here's a worksheet." **(Transcript 5, Page 1, Lines 9-14)**

Sasha, as well, had experiences with higher level coursework. She said:

I was always top of my class in elementary school. I was in gifted. The first year I went to Catholic school I was chosen for gifted and then middle school when they separate people, I was in advanced. Then, in high school I took honors and AP classes. I was always like not average, not taking regular classes or top of my class in whatever degree **(Transcript 9, Page 1, Lines 23-27)**.

Cali commented saying that she did not pursue gifted courses because of the stigma

attached to those students. Instead, she took honors courses. She said:

I was never in gifted because I told my mom. I remember telling her like I don't want to be in gifted because I personally felt like a stigma attached to like the gifted kids, as far as, just like, "Oh, we're better than them sort of thing." So I never wanted to be a part of that group. So there were like team classes. And then once I got to middle school, it was more like, you know, just like taking a bunch of honors courses. I performed well, so like principal's honor roll, A's, a B here and there **(Transcript 3, Page 1, Lines 6-12)**.

Barbara was also an honor's student who had this to say:

Okay. So I guess, elementary school, I think, in the fourth grade they did the gifted testing. So I think fourth and fifth grade I started out in the gifted classes where you go out once a week to like a special group of students and like do puzzles or activities that are supposed to kind of engage you more. Because, I guess, being bored in class because I would get it and then the teacher would keep explaining it. So, that was kind of like the first thing where I was like, "Oh, you're an exceptional student." So after that I started in middle school – taking the honors classes, the gifted classes. High school, taking AP

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classes, taking honors classes. I don't think I ever took a standard class if I had the option to. And then I think I graduated high school with 30-something college credits **(Transcript 1, Page 1, Lines 4-14)**.

Lastly, Gina spoke about her experience with advanced courses, and she said:

> Yea, it was like an advanced program type thing. It was just a really good school. And it was also really cool cuz I also felt like I wasn't supposed to be there because they had to use like my sister's address. Like, it was just a lot going on. So yea, like...yea...smart people schools, I guess **(Transcript 7, Page 3, Lines 94-97)**.

Overall, seven of the eight students mentioned having experiences being in gifted and honors courses when they were growing up. Having a background of success and achievement helped to prepare them for the academic-related challenges they encountered in college. Their backgrounds also helped them defy negative stereotypes.

Resilience: Resources - Support

Regarding the construct of Resilience, individuals drew upon their resources in order to be successful (Gordan, 1995). Doing so helped to increase their competence and maturity. By utilizing resources, both external and internal, the participants felt successful. The theme of support emerged from the data to support this assertion. Support from family, friends, and mentors aided the participants' motivations to persist. For instance, Victoria commented on how her family supported her by saying: "So, just kind of having that family backing, as well as, that mentality of you need to finish what you start, that's why it's important to me." **(Transcript 17, Page 2, Lines 72-73)**

Similarly, Sasha admitted to the importance of having supportive people in her life, especially family. She also mentioned her reliance on God's direction for guidance. She said:

> People who say "I'm self-made or it was all me", like that is so wild because I just know how much I can't do on my own. And so, that's why it's obviously like supportive people, family, you know? And then also just God telling you, "Okay, this is what I want for you." **(Transcript 17, Page 12, Lines 347-350)**

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Barbara mentioned how she grew up in a very supportive household. Because of that

support, she only ever considered the possibility of success and never considered the alternative.

She said:

> I think I grew up in a very supportive environment that helped me to not even accept that I wouldn't go on to do great things, you know? That I would not finish high school. That wasn't something that was like- Of course I was going to finish high school because my mom and my grandma were telling me, "You're going to finish high school and then you're going to go to college." **(Transcript 1, Pages 2-3, Lines 65-70)**

Trish elaborated on her networks of support, as well. Specifically, she referred to people

she met during her collegiate career. She told a story of how she connected with individuals in

Washington, D.C. who were committed to helping her and supporting her during her journey.

Here is her story:

> Because even looking at my collegiate experience, I have had so many people support me. Umm, and I'm gonna use probably the example of being in Washington, D.C over the summer. Umm, I met with a lot of people for coffee, just different professionals from different careers. Primarily in politics and law and government. Umm, and the fact that they took the time to actually meet with me and give me those words of advice umm, that support really propelled me to succeed. Because one, I have them believing in me, and two I had them kind of in a sense creating that path for me **(Transcript 11, Pages 4-5, Lines 143-150)**.

Barbara further expounded on the theme of support by discussing peers she admired.

Prior to starting college, she did not look up to any Black girls her age. Also, when she started

college, she did not have the confidence to get engaged on campus. That changed when Barbara

encountered a student orientation leader who inspired her to do her best. Barbara said:

> I saw her and I was like, "Wow. She's a Black girl and she's up here speaking in front of all these students. She's probably super successful." She was talking about her experiences in college and I was like, "Wow, if she can do that, I can do it." And I actually became an O-Teamer just because I saw her and Jason, and I was like, "I can totally do that." So I think, for me, being successful in college would be living up to kind of those role models that I have had before me **(Transcript 1, Pages 4-5, Lines 126-131)**.

Much like the support of family, mentors, and peers, several of the participants commented on receiving necessary support from their friend groups. Cali commented, regarding the importance of expressing herself to her friends. She mentioned how simply talking about her issues to her friends helped her, even if it did not change her situation. Cali said:

> But it's something that you just have to– you hear it because people talk and you just– I don't know, I've learned to just – I take it in. I'm not going to ignore it (negative comments). That's one thing I don't do. I don't ignore it. Like, if that's the feeling I have, I'm going to find someone to talk to about it. When I walk out, I may have an answer or I may not have an answer, but I'm not going to ignore that, you know? I'm not going to allow someone to tell me not to think about it or to create this environment where I'm going to forget that **(Transcript 4, Page 12, Lines 375-384)**.

Lastly, Trish referred to the importance of genuine, mutual relationships when asked what helps her to persist. She said:

> Just being open to growth and learning. Plus, having genuine relationships with others. And when I say genuine relationship with others, it needs to be a mutually beneficial relationship where it's not "I'm just getting something out of you or you're just getting something out of me." It is mutually beneficial **(Transcript 12, Page 8, Lines 219-223)**.

Resilience: Protective Factors - Defining Success

Protective factors are a concept of Persistence that is relevant when considering sub-question number six. Defining success emerged as a relevant theme to this construct. Many of the participants discussed how they viewed success as being a continuous journey and do not limit it. Given this perspective, the students persisted in college because they felt there was always more for them to do and learn.

Victoria mentioned that she chose not to define success. She felt that by defining it, she was limiting it. She felt that success should and does look differently for every individual. She said "So, I don't define success. Um, solely based on I don't want to cap it because it is independently defined, differently." **(Transcript 17, Page 7, Lines 267-268)**

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She then continued and said the following, after answering my question regarding the important of success. Victoria said:

> I mean, it's extremely important depending on what sense you're talking about. So, I don't think that I ever want to really feel like successful. Why? Because sometimes I feel as though when people feel just really successful, it's like it stunts their growth. They become stagnant in that success **(Transcript 14, Page 9, Lines 250-253)**.

Sasha elaborated on how success was not a final destination. In turn, she mentioned how it was possible to have successes along the way. Sasha said:

> Success is not a need, you know? It's not a destination, I can't reach success. You might gain success while you keep going but I don't know if I can say once I am successful I will be this, you know? **(Transcript 9, Page 3, Lines 106-108)**

Cali, similarly, mentioned how perceiving success as a continuous passion helped her to build upon it every day. It constantly gave her something to strive for. Cali stated:

> For me, personally, it's something that is going to keep me going every day. It's something I can continue to strive for and build for like every day. It's a continuous passion. And again, it's those little affirmations along the way **(Transcript 4, Page 8, Lines 250-252)**.

Overall, by viewing success as a continuous entity instead of a destination, the participants allowed themselves room to persist, grow, and strive for more.

Persistence: Involvement - Involvement

What a student experiences and how they are involved on their campus plays a big role in whether they will continue and persist at an institution (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildrim, & Yonai, 2014). The theme most closely related to the construct of involvement was involvement. Many of the participants discussed the importance of their involvement in terms of their success. The participants viewed involvement in several ways. First, they equated involvement to success. Secondly, they considered the influence of involvement in the classroom. Lastly, they felt involvement was important because it helped them build connections.

Victoria discussed the importance of her involvement, as she mentioned her experience as a Career Peer Advisor (CPA). She critiqued resumes for other students and understood how important experiences and involvement were to education. Victoria said:

> If I was the type of person that came to [host university] and I was solely submerged into my books, I don't think I would be as successful as I am now being a CPA. So, I critique resumes and things of that nature and your education only goes into one little section. Everything else is volunteering experience, organization membership, collegiate involvement, professional experience, skills. Your resume is your experiences. I cannot go to and/or apply to any employer with just my education, and I learned that early on **(Transcript 13, Page 8, Lines 261-266)**.

Cali also elaborated on her experience with involvement in college. She mentioned how fulfilling her campus and community involvement was, despite the added stress. She then explained how her persistence in college was not solely about her classroom experiences. Cali said:

> So, in my undergrad experience, like those other stressors, those other involvements. Well, the other stressors came from my involvement. And so, I think that's where I've sort of measured my success. As far as…experiences I've been able to have, going places, meeting people, connecting other people to opportunities. So, I think that would be—so, if I had to say—I don't know. There is no direct answer but I will just say it's not just in my academics. That's all I can pretty much sum it up to **(Transcript 13, Page 8, Lines 261-266)**.

Barbara also spoke about how her academics in the classroom did not have nearly as much of an impact on her experiences and success as her involvement did. Barbara said:

> I think maybe more so than my academics. I think that my activities that have kind of built me up as the person that I am are the things that helped me with the academics. Less than the academics helping me mold into the person that I am. I think those experiences, O-Team being one of them, where I kind of came out of my shell and stepped up as a leader is one of the things that tipped me into saying like, "Oh, okay, I'm taking on this role and I want to be that role, in all of the things that I do." So I think that that's one of the things that tips me a little harder to pursue a little harder in my academics. So, I think outside of the classroom is a huge deal for making success in the classroom…
> **(Transcript 1, Page 7, Lines 210-219)**

Moreover, involvement proved to play a vital role in the way the participants defined and viewed success.

Persistence: Commitment - Support

Regarding the concept of Persistence, commitment is defined as a promise or pledge to complete college at a particular institution (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1990). A student's commitment to an institution is heavily influenced by the match or connection they feel to an institution. This sense of belonging is often built through support received while on campus. Gina mentioned how she had specific interests which she wanted to study, but she was not connected to individuals on campus who cared about what she cared about. So, she reached out to certain staff members who eventually became mentors. She went on further to say how she originally considered changing universities, but being at her PWI helped her to solidify her identity. Gina said:

> And so I just sought out people that did provide me with the information and did provide me with those books then those articles. Like (influential mentor) sends me articles every week. And he was giving me videos and taking me to [nearby historical city]... **(Transcript 7, Page 5, Lines 188-190)** I wanted to transfer, I wanted to go to Howard, I wanted to do a lot of things and it was just I realized that the effect that this place (host university) was having on me…was helping to crystallize my identity in a way that no other place could and so in the same way that I had respect for these experiences I had before, I realized I had to respect this experience **(Transcript 7, Page 5, Lines 203-206)**.

Sasha mentioned her faith as a means of support for her on her journey. She mentioned how she took direction from God and was successful because of His grace. Sasha had this to say:

> Like, I know, obviously, right, because I can't say "I don't know how". But I know it's like through God's grace. I mean, I know work hard but I can't say that I had it all mapped out and I just followed this plan and I got here. Like, definitely not. Definitely, I feel like a lot of times, I feel like I'm not even doing anything so **(Transcript 10, Page 10, Lines 298-301)**…I just try. If I say I want to do something. If I say, "Hey, this would be good for me, for school or this would be good for me in health or something." **(Transcript 10, Page 10, Lines 302-303)**

During the Sister Circle process, Yolanda mentioned how much it meant to her to have individuals whom she could reach out to who listened and "chilled" with her. This was helpful in college, after growing up in an environment where she often felt challenged and inadequate. Others in the Sister Circle nodded with understanding and empathy. Yolanda explained:

> So, I would say that in college, it was basically like finding that support system. Cuz at the end of the day, if you don't get...Not saying everything revolves around people, but your mood does change when people ask you like if you're down. People that like understand you and just listen to you. They don't have to talk, just listen to you. Just chill there for a while **(Transcript 17, Page 21, Lines 834-837).**

Sub-Question 6 Summary

Ultimately, having the support of others prompted these students to stay committed in their work at the university which, in turn, positively affects their persistence at their university.

<div align="center">Analysis Using Sister Circle Data</div>

The first part of this chapter outlined the findings from this study, providing evidence of the emergent themes. The findings section gave voice to the participants. It highlighted the verbatim transcriptions of their words to verify the individual stories of the participants. The following section provides an analysis of the collective voices of the participants and serves as a synthesis of the themes. This section specifically focuses on the Sister Circle data. This data was used as a focal point for the analysis because it highlighted the similarities of the participants' stories which are key for this phenomenological study. The synthesis is arranged by themes.

<div align="center">Support</div>

During the Sister Circle, the theme of support emerged as having an important role in the students' success. With resounding nods of agreement, Trish commented on the important role mentors play in her success in college. She grappled with the idea of feeling overwhelmed by what she described as others' expectations of her. She often feels like she is being placed on a

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pedestal because of her success. She feels a high sense of responsibility to others. Through her interactions with a mentor, she learned to distinguish between people believing in her and people having high expectations of her. Furthermore, because of the support she received from a mentor, Trish learned how to better frame the feedback she received from others which ultimately helped to put her success into perspective.

Conversely, Yolanda appreciates compliments from others regarding her success. She does not equate these comments to pressure about her performance. During the Sister Circle, she elaborated on the fact that she grew up with a learning disability; Dyslexia. Many of the people in her family and her peers did not understand her disability. This led to her feeling alienated and judged. With time, she learned how to better cope with her disability, once she got involved at school. Yolanda experienced years of hurt as a result of her diagnosis. Whereas Trish interpreted encouragement from others as pressure, Yolanda accepted it as support. Ultimately, both Trish and Yolanda understood support to be an important part of their story of success.

Additionally, both Trish and Victoria mentioned individuals outside of the institution who they feel are major supporters in their success. Trish referred to the support of her family. Trish's parents are Jamaican immigrants, who worked tirelessly to achieve their dreams. They encouraged their children to pursue an education. Trish commented about how her parents did whatever they had to do for her to succeed because they believed in her abilities to achieve. Similarly, Victoria referred to her boyfriend as a source of support for her. Like Trish's parents, Victoria's boyfriend believed in her and often saw potential in her that she did not see in herself. Because of his support and Trish's parents' support of her, they each felt validated in their success.

Overall, while the theme of support emerged in the participants' individual findings, it was also a resounding theme in the collective voices captured in the Sister Circle. The participants supported the ideas of one another, agreeing that support was a key component in their success. The students affirmed one another using head nods and minimal encouragers like "uh huh", "right", and "yes". This provided evidence to underscore the theme of support in the group setting.

Background

During the Sister Circle, the theme of background emerged. Participants mentioned how their upbringings and life before college played a role in their success. One unexpected discovery during the data collection process was the fact that six of the eight participants identified as having a cultural background other than African American. The remaining two participants did not specifically mention having a different cultural background during their interviews or during the Sister Circle. Cultural affiliation was mentioned during the Sister Circle as an important concept of the participants' success.

Sasha, Trish, and Yolanda all mentioned the impact their cultural identities have on their success in college. Sasha emphasized how, in her culture and especially within her family, school is a top priority. Not going to school was an irregular occurrence for her family. Therefore, at an early age, Sasha was raised to understand the importance of going to college and completing a degree. Additionally, Sasha mentioned a common value held within her culture. Given that her parents are immigrants, they feel it is a responsibility of the child to pay their parents back. Therefore, Sasha grew up with the understanding that, ultimately, the well-being of her parents were a big priority when considering success. Moreover, her Haitian culture influenced the way she views success.

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Similarly, Trish mentioned her parents being Jamaican immigrants. She elaborated that their immigrant status demanded that they work extra hard to achieve their goals. Because of their drive and motivation to succeed, they instilled excellence and determination into their children in their home. Trish attributed a lot of her success to her parents' encouragement and the examples they set for her.

Lastly, Yolanda, who is of Nigerian descent, grew up in a very traditional Nigerian household. She mentioned how a lot of the experiences and encounters she had with African American culture in college were very new to her. Many of the foods and the music associated with African American culture were foreign to her. Characteristic of her Nigerian upbringing was academic excellence. Yolanda mentioned how academic successes were celebrated in her family and going to college was expected. She recalled memories of family members praising younger relatives, not for graduating high school but for matriculating into college. Achievement and education were instilled into Yolanda even before she started college. Culture was an overall contributing experience to the success of many of the participants which was revealed during the Sister Circle.

Familial expectations also played a role in the background of many of the participants and their success. Deon, Barbara, and Sasha all mentioned growing up with the expectation to do well and how this often times equated to a pressure for them to succeed. Deon specifically elaborated further on this point when she emphasized the role she plays in her family. She is perceived as the one who is "going to make it". Therefore, her view of failure is completely influenced by her family and their expectation of her success. Moreover, encouragement to do well and the pressure to succeed influenced several of the students in the Sister Circle, in relation to their success. Though the pressure to succeed was mentioned, all of the aforementioned

students attested to also being encouraged by family for their capacity for success. Sasha mentioned how she was always viewed as someone who her family expected to do great things.

Defining Success

Within the theme of defining success, the participants mentioned several different concepts. How the students defined success had a direct effect on how they interpreted different success-related experiences. For instance, Barbara, Trish, and Cali all discussed how being successful became a part of their identities and who they are. Barbara felt her path had already been laid for her. She described the prospect of not going to college as an "existential crisis". Her identity is so closely tied to school and academic excellence that she would feel anxious and uncomfortable with the idea of not going. Trish agreed with Barbara's sentiment saying that she finds comfort in school because it's something she understands and has always understood. I also chimed in during this portion of the discussion to affirm their sentiments based on my own experiences. As a doctoral candidate, I explained to them that my comfort in school derives from the fact that I am a good student and have always been. This resonated with Trish because she felt the same way and could relate to that experience. Trish mentioned that despite everything else going on in her life, she relies on her ability to do well in school for peace and reassurance.

Cali also chimed in during this discussion. She mentioned how she felt her identity was shaped on her behalf by her mother and others. Cali always felt as though she did not have the option to be unsuccessful because she was often praised more than her siblings for being smart and excelling academically. Despite the pressure to succeed, Cali felt autonomous in her decision making because she embraced the identity which was shaped for her.

Additionally, Sasha mentioned how she internalized her success identity. Considering the magnitude of her success on campus enhanced her fear of failure. She developed a fear of

inadequacy, and discussed during the Sister Circle how she prefers to not win than to lose. Nods of affirmation filled the room from the other participants when she mentioned this. Barbara commented on the psychological nature of Sasha's dilemma labeling it "loss aversion".

Another concept of defining success that several participants commented on was the importance of having purpose. Deon, Victoria, Barbara, Trish, Yolanda and Cali all discussed how finding purpose in the work they do every day contributes to how they define success. Specifically, Deon commented on how vital it is to discover what she is meant to do in life. Clarifying that purpose and understanding the role it plays in her life contributes to how she defines success for herself. Very similarly, Victoria and Trish spoke about skills and talents which they called "gifts". They feel it is important to identify gifts within yourself for the purpose of using those gifts for the good of others. Barbara whole-heartedly agreed with the aforementioned statements when she also discussed the importance of feeling a sense of purpose. she feels most successful when she wakes up and feels a sense of purpose.

Further, during the Sister Circle, several participants discussed how their success is not defined by how much money they may potentially make. Trish, Cali, and Yolanda specifically referred to this concept. However, Trish noted that none of the participants in the Sister Circle attested to prioritizing money in their academic and professional endeavors. The students discussed the impact and opportunity to change lives, rather than monetary gain being their key focus. The Sister Circle assistant and I both agreed with the students' comments and chimed in with our own experiences to empower the students to share further.

Lastly, the students collectively defined success as not being an end result. Victoria, Barbara, Sasha, and Cali all spoke about their view of success as being continuous. They all

agreed that defining success as a destination instead of a process is limiting. They recognize and respect the importance of goal setting and use goals as a stepping stone for continued success.

Motivation

Within the theme of motivation, the students referred to several concepts which contribute to their success in college. When the Sister Circle assistant asked the group if they ever considered not going to college, by the vast majority of the group shared that they never imagined not going to college and finishing. Cali, Trish, Yolanda, Sasha, and Barbara all commented on how not going to college was never an option for them. Barbara even described the thought of not going to college as an existential crisis. She commented saying, "where would I go, if not to college?" Two contributions to this decision was the influence of their families their internal drives to excel. In contrast to Barbara, though Cali ultimately decided that she was definitely going to college, she did consider the alternative. She briefly thought about taking a more non-traditional route, which included not starting college right after high school. However, the influence of her family made her choose otherwise.

Additionally, several of the students commented on how their future endeavors motivate them to excel. Cali admitted that she has already set goals for herself for the future, so the actions she takes now will influence her later. Much like Cali, Victoria also spoke about her future family being a motivation for her. Her success is motivated by the life wishes to build for her future family and the legacy she wants to leave for her children.

Involvement

Within the theme of involvement, Trish spoke about how their engagement on campus and in the community was not understood by their peers. Trish commented on how she struggled when first entering college because she had a passion for service and could not find friends who

related to her interests. She felt isolated as a result of this. With time, Trish connected to like-minded individuals and was able to share her enthusiasm for involvement with her friends. Like Trish, Yolanda experienced a similar situation when talking to a friend about her desire to pursue graduate school. Her friend neglected to acknowledge the opportunity graduate school provides for Yolanda and, instead, focused on her collecting potential debt. Yolanda admitted that she focuses on her goals instead of letting negative feedback influence her decisions.

Also, both Cali and Sasha spoke about how their desire to get involved was based on their genuine attraction to opportunities. Both participants spoke about how their involvement takes up a lot of their time, but they allow it because of their desire to be engaged in those activities. Their engagement on campus adds value to their lives and contributes to their success. Cali further commented on the need to learn how to say no because of her high level of commitment to her involvement. They, ultimately, attribute a lot of their success to experiences and fulfillment gained from being involved.

Processing Situations

Within the theme of processing situations, the participants were asked about any challenges they face in college. Several of the students admitted to facing challenges in college. Cali mentioned that her biggest struggle which is slowing down. She mentioned that it is difficult for her to find time, because 14 or 15 hours of her day are usually occupied with classes and involvement. She processes this issue by understanding the importance of delegation and not feeling the need to always be present. She also works to find balance between her service to others and her service to herself. This was an overall challenge for Cali because she finds value and fulfillment in being engaged on campus.

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Barbara felt very similarly with her challenge. She admitted that a major "battle" she faces is narrowing down her involvement because she wants to participate in everything. She said life often moves too fast for her, so she has to learn how to slow down and make time for herself. She is also very concerned about doing better than her peers because she constantly compares her performance and success to others. With the latter scenario, Barbara admitted that she has to cope with her insecurities, which she is working to improve.

Lastly, Victoria mentioned her issue of enjoying her own company. There was a time where she never wanted to be by herself. She often filled her schedule from the start of the day until the end of the day so she did not have to be alone. She later identified this behavior as unhealthy. Eventually, she understood the importance of taking time away from the busy-ness of her life and reflecting on her experiences.

Overall, the participants in the Sister Circle recognized their challenges and processed those situations. Doing so assisted in their overall success in college.

<div align="center">Additional Perspective</div>

It should be noted that the assistant for the Sister Circle was a seasoned researcher and professor, who is a Black female. Her presence during the Sister Circle was vital. I am approximately one generation removed from the participants and the assistant is approximately three generations removed from them. Her presence and input added to the validity of the student experiences. The assistant related to many of the same experiences from the participants and she graduated from college almost 50 years ago. The relation between my experiences, the experiences of the participants, and the journey of the assistant all proved to be connected during the Sister Circle process. All contributions made the experience informative, enlightening, and enjoyable for all involved.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The central purpose of this study was to highlight the stories of high-achieving Black female students at predominantly White institutions. This population of students have been invisible in higher education literature. Sixteen individual interviews and a Sister Circle with eight participants were conducted which yielded six themes regarding the experiences contributing to their success at a PWI. The study gathered first-person perceptions and explored the experiences of high achieving Black female undergraduate students at a PWI. The study sought to understand their experiences with success through a qualitative lens. The emergent themes, in turn, captured the essence of their stories. This study utilized a three construct conceptual framework to analyze the data; Black Feminism, Resilience, and Persistence. All of these constructs were important in the analysis of the students' perspectives.

There was one over-arching research question guiding this study and six sub-questions:

1. Over-arching question: What are the lived experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution regarding their success in college?

   a. Sub-question 1: How do the pre-college experiences of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students contribute to essence of their success in college?

   b. Sub-question 2: How do experiences with negative stereotypes in college influence the success of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution?

   c. Sub-question 3: How do high-achieving Black female undergraduate students make sense of success?

d. Sub-question 4: What motivates high-achieving Black female undergraduate students to succeed at a predominantly White institution?

e. Sub-question 5: What challenges do high-achieving Black female undergraduate students face related to their race, gender, and academic achievement at a predominantly White institution?

f. Sub-question 6: What experiences contribute to the persistence of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution?

This study found that there were both pre-college and present college experiences which contributed to the participants' success. The emergent themes for this study included: (a) support, (b) motivation, (c) processing situations, (d) defining success, (e) student background, and (f) involvement. In this chapter I discuss how the conceptual framework of the study brought meaning to the major findings. The future implications of the study, and recommendations for those who support high-achieving Black female students will also be discussed.

Discussion

In the past, literature regarding Black students' experiences at PWIs has focused on their negative experiences in college. Specifically, the literature has highlighted students' experiences coping with race-related issues, pressure to conform, and feelings of isolation (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Harper, 2005). Black students' historical experiences at PWIs have contributed to them having lower academic achievement than their White counterparts. According to the literature, Black high-achieving students manage to overcome obstacles that caused many of their culturally similar classmates to fail (Dare & Nowicki, 2015). One resounding characteristic of high-achieving Black students is that they thrive when they have a supportive family (Banks, 2009). Also, influential mentors contribute to the success of the students (Strayhorn & Terrell,

2007). Lastly, Black high-achieving students often have a desire to overcome the stereotypes of their cultural population (Harper, 2005).

Given the focus of higher education literature on the deficits of Black students at PWIs, the present study aimed to focus on the opposite phenomena. This study highlighted the experiences that contributed to the success of high-achieving Black, female undergraduate students at a PWI. Though Black female students are an ever-growing population in higher education, they still lag in achievement behind their White counterparts (Banks, 2009). Black female undergraduate students face a number of unique challenges which are not experienced by other student populations. Despite their challenges, they are still expected to succeed. This study focuses on the stories of Black female students who, in fact, have succeeded in college and continue to thrive.

The following section discusses the relation of each of the study's conceptual framework constructs to the study findings. The purpose of this section is to bring meaning to the participants' stories.

<center>Black Feminism</center>

Black Feminism as a construct of this study attested to how Black women continue to be an oppressed group in the United States (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; David, 1998, hooks, 1982). The over-arching purpose of Black feminism is to resist oppression in both practice and idea. This construct stated that Black women experienced intersecting oppressions in being both Black and female in America (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). In this study, many of the participants spoke of how they experienced oppression even before coming to college. They felt isolated in their honors, AP, and gifted classes because they were often one of the few Black people in these courses. Thus, they struggled between relating more closely to White culture or Black culture

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because White culture was most accessible to them. This finding is consistent with the literature. Strayhorn (2009) attested that high-achieving Black students do feel the pull of toggling between White identity and Black identity.

In contrast to the literature, Gina discussed how she always had a strong Black identity during her childhood and into college, despite being in majority white classes for most of her schooling. In her home, her parents always encouraged her to be proud of her Blackness and most of her role models were prominent Black female figures including Maya Angelou and Rosa Parks. Gina's upfront and enthusiastic discussion of her Black identity was not common among the other participants, particularly during their pre-college years. Thus, the encouragement she received in the home to appreciate and praise her Black identity resonated with her throughout her college years.

Some of the participants discussed feeling ostracized by other Black students during middle and high school. This finding was consistent with the literature which stated that high-achieving Black students often have to negotiate their racial, cultural, and individual identities in order to feel accepted (McGee, 2013). Once the participants entered the large public PWI, they joined organizations which supported their oppressive identities, so the participants were finally able to relate to other Black students. Many students joined cultural organizations like the Black Student Union, Black female empowerment organizations, and the Caribbean Student Association.

The construct of Black Feminism also discussed the fact that the position held by Black women in America is a reflection of a system of oppression designed to keep Black women in an assigned, subordinate place (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Davis, 1998, hooks, 1982). The Black Feminism construct mentioned that regardless of the prestige and success experienced by

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Black women, they are still challenged by the obstacles of overcoming stereotypes about them. The experiences of the Black women in this study attested to this concept of Black Feminism. Several students mentioned the unique pressures they experienced and felt as a Black woman in general in the United States, and especially on a predominantly White campus. They commented on how they felt Black women are not allowed to be multi-dimensional.

Several students expressed that they could not freely or simultaneously express multiple parts of their identity. For instance, one participant mentioned feeling oppressed because she was a scholar and an athlete. In a larger context, the participants mentioned feeling a sense of hesitancy when posting on their social media accounts. They approached each post with caution, completely relinquishing a freedom they felt their White counterparts exercised daily.

Additionally, these students mentioned a sense of paranoia they felt when they were in majority White settings. These feelings surface often because many of the students were members of prestigious, majority White organizations. They were conscious of how they dressed in professional situations which caused levels of discomfort if their clothes called attention to their bodies.

Further, when considering the construct of Black Feminism, the participants in this study discussed overcoming stereotypes. One resounding stereotype mentioned was the "angry Black woman" stereotype. The students felt stifled in their expression of emotions because they tried to defy the stereotype of being perceived as angry. This stereotype was specifically consistent with the literature. Banks (2009) mentioned the difficulties Black women faced in school when they wanted to express themselves in class and be heard. These situations were often anxiety-ridden because the students were concerned with how they would be perceived. They wanted to remain

approachable but felt they didn't have the freedom to express how they felt in different situations.

The participants mentioned stereotypes within the Black community as well. They felt as though Black women had to compete with Black men. The students commented on feeling the pressure of not being able to be straight forward with their feelings, while Black men could. A third stereotype they faced was that successful Black women don't get married. The students from the study who were in relationships were intentional about making their relationships known during the discussions in order to demonstrate the success of their committed relationships. This stereotype perpetuated the idea that Black women were limited in what they could achieve.

A fourth stereotype the students mentioned was how they learned at an early age not to become "another statistic". Therefore, these students were raised understanding that there were stereotypes about them as Black women. They also understood that, in order for them to be successful, they had to work against succumbing to Black female stereotypes.

Black female students feeling the need to defy stereotypes was consistent with the literature about Black women in college. Banks (2009) and Harper (2005) concluded that Black high-achieving students reported a desire to overcome stereotypes of their race.

During the study, the students referred to their success in comparison to their White counterparts. They felt that they had to do exceedingly well to compete with the recognition White students received at a PWI. This sense of oppression affirmed by the Black Feminism construct was expressed by multiple students during the data collection process. The students felt as though their successes came as a result of going above and beyond the call of duty.

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Finally, a principle of Black Feminism explained that regardless of age, social class, religion, and other identities, Black women often encountered restricting social practices which aimed to inhibit their success (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1982). This principle was especially apparent during the Sister Circle group process. The Sister Circle assistant identified as a Black woman who was a seasoned professional in the field of education. She was also three generations removed from the participants. Despite the difference in age and life experience, the Sister Circle assistant's experiences were relatable to the stories of the students. Also, the assistant mentioned how her experiences during her undergraduate years were similar to the participants. This demonstrated the lack of societal progression over time. This similarity affirmed the concept of Black Feminism.

This finding was also consistent with the literature about obstacles faced by Black female students in higher education. According to Winkle-Wagner (2015), Black female students coped with multiple, concurrent roles and identities which could be taxing. Black women, regardless of their achievements and accolades were still victims of an oppressive system.

In addition to the consistencies with the literature, there were several surprising findings in relation to Black Feminism, as well. Several of the participants mentioned their use of empathy for White people in negative situations. They mentioned how, when faced with racial or gender biased controversy, they often deferred to empathy and tried to understand the perspective of the other individual. Despite the multiple issues and situations mentioned throughout the data collection stage, many of the students described empathy as being one of the primary ways they process negative situations. Therefore, instead of responding hastily or as would be expected of anyone in a compromising situation, the students inquired about the individual's background and chose to educate them rather than persecute them.

Also, although the participants discussed many different stereotypes during the interviews and Sister Circle, many of them spoke in general terms about their stories. A number of the participants found it difficult to identify specific instances where they personally faced discrimination regarding their race, gender, or academic ability at the large public PWI. During the interviews, all students mentioned encountering negative stereotypes at some point during their collegiate journeys, but the stories were not without pause. This fact was surprising because the literature discusses the many issues high-achieving Black female students face at PWIs, so I expected the students to more readily discuss specific stories about their negative experiences.

There are several potential factors which affected their lack of personal stories. First, the majority of the participants had previous experiences in majority White settings. For instance, most of them went to majority White high schools or learned in majority White classrooms. Therefore, they less likely internalized negative situations over time. When faced with a potentially negative situation, they often chose to either empathize or avoid the conflict, overall. Additionally, the participants likely had a difficult time identifying specific negative experiences because they chose to prioritize their happiness and restructure their potentially negative feelings into tolerable feelings. Moreover, several of the students found it difficult to pinpoint specific negative circumstances in which they found themselves.

Overall, the identified principles of Black Feminism were applicable in relation to the participants' stories in this study.

<center>Resilience</center>

For the purposes of this study, resilience was defined as the ability to thrive, advance, and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances (Gordan, 1995). When considering the Resilience construct of the conceptual framework, it was important for me bracket my thoughts,

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feelings, and experiences. I did not want my own experiences to influence the way I interpreted the participants' experiences. I also made sure to keep the specific definition of resilience for this study in mind when analyzing the data. The adverse circumstances mentioned in the definition could be longstanding and chronic or severe and infrequent.

One of the principles emphasized in the construct of Resilience was the importance of drawing upon resources in order to thrive, mature, and increase competence (Gordan, 1995). According to Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009), the more resources possessed during times of stress, the better the chances were of successfully coping with difficulties. Also, the concept of protective factors was supported by the participants' use of resources. Protective factors were defined in relation to how they mitigated whether or not the effects of stress or conditions negatively affected an individual (Mak, Ng & Wong, 2011). Both of these principles were affirmed in the findings by the students' use of resources. Further elaboration is provided below.

Many of the students mentioned resources such as the support they received from others, including family, friends, and mentors. Several participants discussed how they sometimes felt out of place, discriminated against, and overall upset by their circumstances in college. Having the support of others helped to alleviate this stress. They mentioned how important it was to have close friends who empathized with them. Also, it was vital to have family as a resource to be nurturing and encouraging. This fact was consistent with the literature. Herbert (2002) attested that when family members recognized their student's abilities and encourage them early in life, the motivation to succeed for the students increased.

Considering family further, one finding which was surprising was the large role culture played in the students' successes. Six of the eight participants openly identified with a national

culture other than African American. All of the six students mentioned their culture being a crucial contributor to their achievement during childhood and into college. Many of the students related their cultural background to the stringent education-focused atmosphere of their childhood homes. For instance, several of the students identified as Caribbean and one student identified as Nigerian, and all of those students mentioned how important education was in their house growing up. The literature mentioned how great of an impact early academic encouragement had on students' confidence in their achievement and their overall will to succeed (Herbert, 2000). Thus, the students discussed how the culture of their parents and guardians influenced the way their guardians raised them, which ultimately influenced their respect for education. This respect continued into their college years. The emergence of culture as an important factor in the success of the participants affirmed by use of the term "Black" to describe the participants, rather than "African American" to account for any cultural differences among the participants.

Lastly, campus mentors were necessary resources for the participants to listen and advise. The necessity of mentorship was also consistent with the literature. Strayhorn and Terrell (2007) discussed how important mentorship was in the overall academic success of students of color in college. Banks (2009) discussed how it was important for Black female students to have allies on campus who identified students' issues and partook in their struggles with them. These could be friends, helpers, supporters, assistants, and partners. All of these resources helped high-achieving Black female students cope with the daily issues they faced.

Also, the concept of dispositional factors within the construct of Resilience was apparent in the outcomes of this study. Dispositional factors were defined as personal characteristics that were necessary to endure a process, and they pushed individuals to utilize strategies necessary to

overcome obstacles (Morales & Trotman, 2004). For this study, the participants mentioned dispositional factors as a contribution to their success. They attributed some of their motivation and strength to their own identities and their own drives to succeed. The participants reported a sense of ownership in their success. This finding was consistent with the literature regarding high-achieving Black students. Rodriguez (2001) described cross-culture identification as the recognition of a desired experience or identity and the determination to acquire it. The participants in the study identified with this classification because they advocated for themselves and shed the limitations of their environment in order to thrive.

Though the participants mentioned external factors as contributors as well, their own determination and identity was a large contributor to their definition of success. Some of the examples of dispositional factors mentioned in the literature were an internal locus of control, and a sense of purpose and future. An internal locus of control referenced the students' likelihood to attribute their success to their own determination and drive to achieve.

The participants expressed having an internal locus of control because they developed a level of certainty within themselves and a confidence in their abilities as students. These students viewed success largely as a result of their achievement identity. Many even perceived school and academics as being "easy".

The extent to which the participants internalized their achievement identity was surprising. The students tied their success directly to their identity. In other words, they did not consider success as a separate entity towards which they strived, because they felt they were wired to achieve. The students discussed feeling obligated to always "do more" and to never settle. To further illustrate the extent to which their achievement was tied to their identity, many of the participants did not consider themselves successful. This was surprising because the

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participants did not identify as successful, despite receiving constant praise from others for their achievements. Several of the participants mentioned the importance of remaining humble, and they did not want to appear boastful by mentioning their success and accolades. One potential reason for not identifying as successful is connected to the Black Feminism construct. Black Feminism outlines the role of Black women in America and how they are expected to remain submissive (Collins, 2000). Therefore, Black women are accustomed to suppressing extreme feelings of emotion including anger, excitement, and in this case, pride. Overall, these surprising findings emerged from the data and further contributed to the unique experiences of high-achieving Black female college students.

The participants discussed that many of their challenges consisted of balancing their involvement and other out-of-classroom activities. This finding was consistent with the literature regarding high-achieving Black students' definitions of success. According to Harper (2005), these students tended to define success more non-traditionally, considering their campus involvement and engagement as a dominant component for determining their success. Therefore, because involvement was a priority for these students, it was understandable that balancing their engagement responsibilities could be a challenge.

To expound upon the role of involvement, the degree to which their involvement was a priority for them was surprising. Every participant discussed the importance of campus involvement to their overall success in college. Many of the students even prioritized involvement over their classroom academics. The participants discussed how their achievement in the classroom was largely attributed to their desire to thrive in their involvement. Thus, their involvement and classroom achievement were directly connected. Also, several students even mentioned a noticeable increase in their grades from their first semester in college to later

semesters because they were more engaged and involved with campus and community culture. Overall, the participants equated their involvement to having a sense of belonging in college which is what contributed to their success in college.

Another example of dispositional factors in relation to these students was a sense of purpose and future. When considering a definition of success, many of the students mentioned how important it was to have purpose. To the participants, success was not defined as a destination but as a continuous journey. A journey that required an individual to wake up every day and feel a sense of purpose to truly be successful.

Lastly and in addition to purpose, these students focused on their futures as a means of remaining motivated. By focusing on the future and feeling a sense of purpose, the participants were mentally prepared to face obstacles they encountered. They understood the goals and paths set before them, so they focused on those thoughts and used them as a way to refuel when times were tough. Overall, these students demonstrated resilience along their journeys.

Persistence

Persistence as a construct of the conceptual framework emphasized the importance of students being involved and engaged during their college experiences. Involvement encouraged them to continue in college until they graduated. For the purposes of this study, persistence was defined as a student's continuation behavior in a postsecondary education, which led to graduation (Arnold, 1999). When considering Tinto's Model of Student Retention (Tinto, 1975, 1987), it attested that students' persistence in college resulted from how they interacted with their educational environment. In other words, their involvement on campus and in the community ultimately determined if they persisted to graduation.

This testament was true for the participants in this study. Many of the students referred to the importance they placed on involvement. They viewed their involvement in three ways. First, they equated their involvement to success. Next, their involvement outside of the classroom directly impacted their involvement and performance in the classroom. Third, involvement was used as a way for them to connect with others.

The perception that many of the participants viewed success as continuous and not as a destination, was evidenced in the devotion they had to their campus and community activities. The participants said they always felt the need to "do more". Classroom academics often came secondary to their membership in student organizations, to their community service, and to other leadership opportunities on campus. The students' views of success in this regard were consistent with the literature. Harper (2005) mentioned that when students intentionally engaged in campus activities outside of the classroom, it assisted with their efforts towards creating meaningful academic experiences.

The participants emphasized the out-of-classroom experiences because they offered a level of satisfaction not attained in the classroom. For instance, many of the participants tied their involvement to feelings of freedom. A freedom to do what they wanted and say how they felt. A freedom they did not often experience in the classroom. The classroom was often an uncomfortable place for high-achieving Black female students depending on the discussion and the people present. Involvement also allowed the participants to explore different parts of themselves and encouraged them to find purpose.

Also, the participants mentioned how being involved directly influences their classroom experiences. Being involved reminded these students that their academic performance in the classroom was a priority. When they held leadership roles on campus, they were examples for

their peers, so their involvement placed a healthy pressure on them to perform well in the classroom. The participants did not want to be in leadership positions and have poor grades. Therefore, despite the attention and time given to involvement, classroom academics always remained a priority for them because of the direct correlation it had to their involvement.

Participants of the study even mentioned how their grades improved after they became involved. Involvement offered these students a sense of purpose. According to Tinto (1975, 1987), when a student's relationship with their environment was healthy, it had a direct effect on their persistence in school. In this study, the participants' interactions with their university environment encouraged them because their involvement offered them a sense of belonging at a PWI. This connection to the campus ultimately made them want to stay at the university.

Further, involvement offered the participants a level of connection to others: peers, administrators, and community partners. They appreciated being in spaces where they were able to collaborate and connect with other like-minded individuals. The participants placed a heavy emphasis on "the people". All of their involvement was pursued not just because of what it could do for them, but also for the impact they could have on others. Having a sense of belonging and connection, for them, was crucial and motivated them to continue.

Two other concepts which motivated the participants to persist in college were their intentions and motivations. All of the participants mentioned that they never imagined not going to college and graduating. Having the intention to stay in college played a large role in whether or not students actually finished. This finding was consistent with the literature of Tinto (1975, 1987) which highlighted the important impact student intention had on their overall persistence in school.

The participants also spoke about being motivated by their families to persist. Some were motivated by the encouragement of their families, while others were motivated by the pressure. Some grew up in homes where they were told from an early age that they could achieve and were expected to do so, but they had the autonomy to do as they wished. While others experienced the pressure of being "the one" in the family who would "make it" on behalf of everyone. Either way, family was a great motivating factor in their decisions to persist in school. This was also consistent with the literature. Fries-Britt (2002) and Hebert (2002) both discussed the important role of a supportive family in the success of high-achieving Black students. The earlier this support began in the life of the student, the more likely they were to achieve.

Another motivating factor for them was the future. The participants set goals for themselves and imagined their lives in the future. Whether those goals included families of their own, professional goals, or both, many of them focused on these aspirations and used them as a way to remain motivated. Students visualized themselves building the foundation for their future. Having this mindset made their journeys along the way more bearable. Not easier, but more bearable because they knew what awaited them in the future.

Lastly, these students were motivated by their own internal desire to succeed. These students understood what success was like and they valued hard work and attaining achievements for themselves. Seven of the eight participants mentioned that they attended honors, magnet, and AP programs throughout high school and middle school. This fact was consistent with the literature. Bonner (2001) attested that many high-achieving Black college students participated in honors programs prior to college. The skills gained during those years were often carried with them into college. Therefore, the participants internalized success as being a part of who they were. They did not know anything different from this perspective. They

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set their own high expectations for themselves, they had goals for how they wanted to leave their legacies, and they attributed their responsibilities to succeed to themselves and not to others. They valued and needed the support of family, friends, and mentors, but ultimately they understood that achievement was directly linked to themselves.

Overall, the construct of Persistence in the conceptual framework was very well evidenced in the students' stories. Students revealed what sustained their motivation in college and helped them to persist.

A major component of the success of the high-achieving Black female students in this study was the way they process situations. All three constructs of the conceptual framework could were evidenced in the way these students process situations. First, many of the participants expressed empathy in controversial situations. They talked about the importance of understanding the other person's perspective. They admitted that it was toxic to make assumptions about the backgrounds of other people. They felt it was important to consider a person's experiences when addressing situations and, as often as possible, use these situations as a way to educate others.

The students used this approach because they felt it was important to not judge someone and it was used as a way for them to maintain a conscious level of happiness. They fully understood the issues faced by their cultural population, and specifically Black women, but they chose to not let those potential obstacles be a hindrance for them. By choosing to be happy, these students displayed a level of resilience, defied stereotypes, and used their happiness as fuel to push forward. Moreover, these students were very reflective. They prioritized time to think about their actions and what went on around them. They did this in order to be conscious about their feelings and how they interacted with the world.

Lastly, it is relevant to note a surprising finding which emerged from the data. One of the participants suffers from a learning disability: Dyslexia. During the data collection processes, she discussed how difficult it was for her to excel academically during her pre-college years. She struggled to complete assignments in class and was ridiculed for her different learning style. This finding demonstrated that though the majority of the students in the study participated in honors and AP coursework, they all were not in similar programs. Therefore, it is possible to be a high-achieving Black female student in college and not have a record of academic success prior to college.

<div align="center">Connection of the Conceptual Framework Concepts</div>

All of the constructs related to the conceptual framework revealed a level of relevance in the experiences of the high-achieving Black female students in this study. The concepts of Black Feminism were applicable, the students demonstrated resilience, and the concepts within Persistence presented themselves in the findings and themes which emerged from the data. Figure 5 illustrates the interconnectedness of the three constructs and how their confluence influenced the phenomenon of the study: the success of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students.

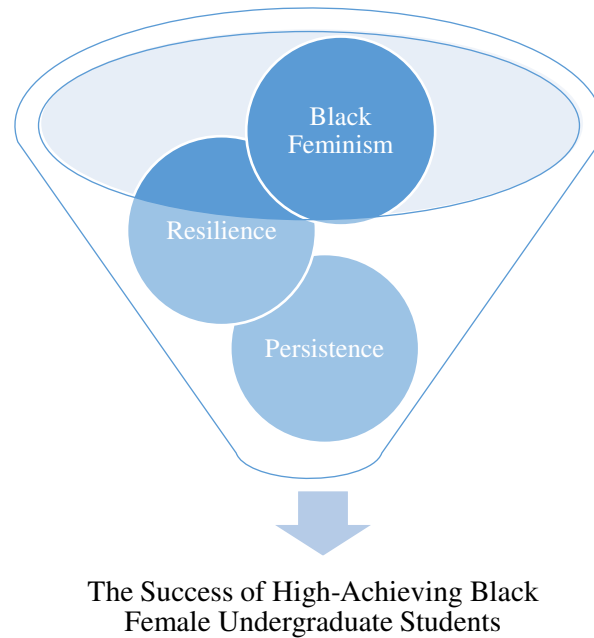The Success of High-Achieving Black
Female Undergraduate Students

Figure 5: Relation of the Conceptual Framework Concepts to the Phenomenon

Each of the constructs of the conceptual framework had an effect on the students' stories

of success. The conceptual framework in its entirety accurately guided the analysis of the

students' experiences in an intersectional manner. The sequence of the constructs in Figure 5 is

telling of how each construct affected one another. First, the concepts of Black Feminism

including multiple oppressive identities and experiences of oppression were all experiences faced

by the participants prior to and during college. Several of the participants mentioned experiences

of isolation and criticism in high school and during college related to being a Black woman.

Therefore, this construct was reported first in order to reflect its position in the overall

experience of high-achieving Black female students. The participants discussed how their

identities as Black women were salient to them which prioritized the Black Feminism construct

in their overall college experiences.

Resilience as a construct of the conceptual framework appropriately emerged second in

the sequence of constructs. The experiences of the Black female students in relation to Black

Feminism directly affected their experiences regarding resilience. Several of the participants discussed how their oppressive experiences ultimately encouraged them to overcome their negative situations. The participants mentioned how the concepts of dispositional factors and use of resources assisted them in conquering the obstacles they faced as a result of their identities. They spoke about learning to believe in and encourage themselves, and appreciating the support of others in their journey. Ultimately, because the participants' experiences with Black Feminism concepts affected their resilience in college, they were able to continue forward despite any aversive circumstances.

Finally, Persistence as a construct of the conceptual framework appropriately emerged last in the sequence of constructs. As a result of the students' resiliency, they successfully persisted towards graduation. Several of the participants discussed how their continuance and commitment to graduate was due to the resiliency they built within themselves over time. The experiences they overcame in college and the lessons they learned as a result of their difficulties attributed greatly to the reasons why they continued forward in their educational journeys.

Moreover, the inclusion of the three conceptual framework constructs was appropriate for this study. The connection between each of the constructs ultimately supported the phenomenon of success for the high-achieving Black female students in the study.

<center>Limitations/Delimitations</center>

There were several limitations to this study. First, the study was limited to the experiences of eight participants. Though the study included two individual interviews with each participant and a Sister Circle, the collected data only told stories from the perspective of this specific group of students. Therefore, the themes which emerged and the answers to the research questions were only explored from the lens of the participants. While these findings began to

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provide a picture of this population, these findings were not generalizable beyond the scope of these specific participants.

Another limitation of this study was the increased possibility of researcher's bias. Though bracketing (Moustakas, 1994) strategies were used to protect the integrity of the data, it was not possible to completely set aside the assumptions, interpretations, and experiences I brought to the topic. It is important to note that the researcher's influence always plays a role in qualitative research, given the research is used as the instrument. Therefore, to combat this fact, I took measures to ensure my own thoughts and experiences were not an influence on the data. For instance, I provided a summary of my experience and potential bias in the Positionality section of this dissertation. Also, I used inter-rater reliability to have the data coded by another researcher. This researcher was also involved in the analysis procedures of the study. The remaining trustworthiness and validation strategies were outlined in the Methodology chapter of this dissertation.

An additional limitation for this study was the number of participants. The study only included students who were affiliated with a leadership development program. There were additional specifications for participants including the students having at least 60 credit hours and attending the host PWI since their freshman year. The purpose of setting these requirements was to gather a group of students who fit the criteria for participation and who could articulate their experience with the phenomenon under study. Doing so did exclude students who were not involved in leadership development programs or had other non-PWI experiences. Despite these facts, the findings of the study could still be applicable and transferable (Creswell, 2014) to similar student populations.

Implications and Recommendations

Recommendations: Black Female Students

For Black female students, high-achieving or otherwise, this study provides unique insight into what contributes to the success of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students. It elucidates some common experiences amongst the participants. As discussed in this study, many of the students found solace in mentors and other influential professionals and professors on their campus. While the "fit" of the mentor with the student proved to be very important, having those individuals on campus was key. Therefore, mentorship plays an important role in the overall success of Black female students.

Additionally, it was important for the students to seek meaningful friendships. The participants in this study found groups of individuals they could relate to and share stories with. This is vital to the overall experience of high-achieving Black female students because these students need a place to be themselves. Being a Black female student at a PWI can be accompanied by a number of challenges including isolation, challenges to their intelligence, pressure to succeed, and racial discrimination (Harper, 2005; Strayhorn, 2009). Having a supportive and empathetic friend group at a PWI encourages high-achieving Black female students to express themselves. Finding support in a strong friend group, or strong relatable group is key because it lends Black female students the freedom to share common experiences with other women who are from the same cultural group or who understand their perspectives.

Lastly, according to the findings of the study, it is important for Black female students to self-reflect. Reflecting on experiences often offered the participants a powerful perspective regarding negative situations. Many of the participants mentioned how they took time at the end of each day or after individual experiences to consider the magnitude of the situation and

evaluate their response. Doing so increased their confidence in decision making and served as learning opportunities for future negative or unpleasant occurrences. Therefore, it is important for Black female students to self-reflect about their college experiences and consider the role their actions play in their overall success.

<p align="center">Recommendations: Higher Education Practitioners</p>

For higher education practitioners working with Black female undergraduate students, this study provides insight that may help shape support strategies for Black female students. This information is pertinent not just to personnel who oversee diversity and multicultural initiatives, but to anyone who works with Black female students. The study participants appreciated sharing spaces with other Black women. These unique spaces allowed them to express their frustrations, excitement, and overall experiences in college. During this study, the participants expressed how much they enjoyed and needed to be a part of the Sister Circle group process. By participating in the Sister Circle, the students shared in a discussion that they rarely have. They had the opportunity to discuss their successes and challenges with individuals who could directly relate to them.

Given these results, higher education practitioners should consider using Sister Circles as a way to create safe spaces for Black female students. Originating in the field of Counseling and Psychology, Sister Circles were created as a means for Black women to express their feelings amongst themselves in a space that specifically catered to their needs (Dorsey, 2000; Johnson, 2011; Gaston, Porter, & Thomas, 2007; Harley, 2002; Neal-Barrett, Stadulis, Payne, Crosby, Mitchell, Williams, & Williams-Costa, 2011). In much of the same way as it was originally intended, the students in this study greatly benefited from having an intentional and freeing space available to them. Therefore, higher education practitioners, and all who assist in the

development of Black female students, should consider facilitating Sister Circles to create channels of support among students and for students.

Please note that, for this study, all concrete principles salient to Sister Circles were utilized in order to properly facilitate the group. For instance, at the beginning of the Sister Circle, students were briefed on the liberty they had to express themselves freely, including using any characteristic language of Black women. Also, the facilitator and facilitator's assistant were both Black women, which felt added to the effectiveness of the group process. During the Sister Circle, students often agreed with our statements and commented on the similarities between all of us in the group.

Overall, it is important for high-achieving Black female students to feel supported. As practitioners, it is vital to take the time to listen to these students' stories and be intentional about creating spaces for them.

Recommendations: Institutions

For higher education institutions, this study provides insight that may help with the recruitment and retention of Black female students. First, the high-achieving Black female students in this study mentioned enjoying spaces where they could share time with like-minded individuals: other Black women. They enjoyed having a space (the Sister Circle) outside of their sororities and other organizations with alternative missions. Therefore, institutions should consider creating mentorship programming initiatives specifically for Black female students. These programs should support their involvement initiatives on campus and employ individuals who can connect these students to campus resources. These support programs and relatable individuals are important to include because, according to Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009), engagement outside of the classroom highlights the importance of

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community-related opportunities in order to develop relationships with supportive adults. Also, all of the study's participants mentioned the important role engagement and involvement played in their experiences. They further mentioned how vital it was to have mentors and other supportive staff and faculty on campus who could assist them during their journeys. Therefore, prioritizing involvement and staff commitment could serve as an, overall, effective programming strategy. These programs should invite students during their freshman year, because some of the participants mentioned how their academic success in the classroom was positively affected once they got involved.

Moreover, if Black female students are involved from beginning in their freshman year and are surrounded by other Black women, they may feel supported much sooner in their college careers. Also, many of the high-achieving Black female students in the study entered college having only or mostly shared classrooms with White people. Many of them were not used to seeing Black students in leadership inside or outside of the classroom. So, with these programs, recruiting students their freshman year is key, because they can become inspired and motivated by the success of other Black female students on campus. This experience can trigger their involvement, as they travel through their college journeys with a cohort of other Black female students.

Also evidenced in the Sister Circle of the study was the fact that despite generational differences, the facilitator and facilitator's assistant were able to relate to the participants' stories. Therefore, it is important for institutions to recruit Black female staff and faculty to assist with Black female representation at the administrative level. Many Black female staff and faculty face a lot of the same issues the high-achieving students faced in their experiences.

During the inter-rater reliability process of this study, I analyzed the study themes with a research partner who identified as a Black female tenured faculty member. When exploring the data, she noticed a number of parallels in the experiences of the students and her work as a faculty member. Hence, recruiting Black female faculty and other professionals can play a key role in the success of Black female undergraduate students. Not only does mentorship matter to them, but also representation matters.

Implications for Future Research

There are several implications for future research:

(1)   My study was limited to eight participants, and though there were two interviews per participant and a Sister Circle, I believe a much larger sample could prove even more powerful. The larger sample should focus on the same student population: high-achieving Black female students. Also, many of the students were alumnae of the same student leadership development program, so this could have influenced their lens given that they were in this program for their first and second year of college. Ideally, the newer, larger sample would encompass students from all over campus who participate in various student organizations. Including students from various leadership and membership capacities across the campus could provide insight from a variety of perspectives.

(2)   Another implication for future research is considering the parents' or guardians' perspectives of their student's success. Many of the students in the study mentioned their family being a large motivator for them. Participants mentioned growing up in households where education was prioritized and they were encouraged to excel. Therefore, exploring the perspectives of the guardians could provide further insight into how these students were raised and the strategies and experiences parents implemented in the home.

(3)   A third implication is to consider conducting a similar study for high-achieving Black female professionals at a university. During the data analysis and Sister Circle processes, associated high-achieving Black females (the facilitator's assistant, outside researcher, and myself) talked about the parallels of the students' experiences to our own. Exploring the experiences of Black female professionals could provide insight into how they can best be supported which can trickle down to the support of future Black female professionals.

(4)   A fourth implication is to conduct a comparative study of high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at HBCUs and high-achieving Black female undergraduate students at PWIs. The purpose of this comparison would be to gauge the differences and similarities in the needs of Black female students at each type of institution. This initiative could provide a holistic picture of the experiences contributing to the success of these students. Experiences that could be assessed may include support networks in college, the role of involvement in student success, and challenges faced and how those challenges are processed.

(5)   A fifth implication is to conduct a longitudinal study of the participants in the current study in order to explore their perceptions of success at that time. Their perceptions in the longitudinal study can be compared to their perceptions during their original interview. During the data collection and data analysis processes, many of the participants discussed their identity being tied to their achievement while in school. This future initiative could consider how the participants define success when they are no longer students at a university.

(6)   A sixth implication is to conduct a study which specifically explores the effect of high-achieving Black female students' cultural background on their success. Even more specifically, it would be useful to explore the differences between their cultural backgrounds and how those differences affect their success. During the current study, several of the participants

mentioned the influence their cultural upbringing had on their view of success and achievement. Exploring the influence of cultural identity on high-achieving Black female students could provide insight into how cultural experiences can have an effect on students' achievement.

(7)   Lastly, a seventh implication is to conduct a comparative study of high-achieving Black females and high-achieving Black males. Many of the participants in the study mentioned how they feel Black men do not experience the same types of pressure they do. Therefore, a comparative study could provide insight into Black students' experiences as a whole. Doing so would examine the gender differences between high-achieving Black female students and their male counterparts.

<div align="center">Researcher's Reflection</div>

I undertook this research study with the certainty that the voices and stories of the students matter and that hearing them would provide unique and powerful insight for practitioners, institutions, and students navigating this journey. Along the journey of this study, the topic of my research was met with positive feedback. Black women, practitioners, and other faculty commented on the necessity of defying the deficit perspective of Black college students in the literature. They were pleased about my exploring the students' successes, instead. Receiving this feedback encouraged me during the dissertation process. It made telling the stories of the participants more vital because their stories have been missing from the literature.

To note, I was surprised during the analysis process that more spiritual references were not used by the students when discussing their success. Literature discusses the important role of the Black church, thus I thought more students would have mentioned it. I indicate this point, with a full understanding that the occasion of both the interviews and the Sister Circle may not have called for that type of sharing from the students. I did not specifically ask the students about

their spiritual beliefs and how they contributed to their success. The students also may not have felt comfortable mentioning religion and spirituality during the interview. Therefore, mentioning the surprise of the limited mention of spirituality does not equate to the students not acknowledging it as important. Overall, this was merely an observation but surprising, nonetheless.

Also, one of the most powerful pieces of the data collection process was the Sister Circle. I had never participated in a Sister Circle before, but it was an amazing time to see Black, high-achieving, female students surrounding a table and encouraging one another with their stories. I very occasionally chimed in to encourage and empower the students to share, but the conversation happened among themselves. The students fed off of one another and kept the conversation strong for approximately two hours. Sitting back and listening to them was an amazingly eye-opening experience for me, for as they told their own stories, they told mine as well. They each truly appreciated sharing the room with other like-minded Black women. I was very happy to be able to provide that space for them.

Though it was a beautiful experience to write this dissertation, taking this journey was not at all an easy one. It truly takes a village to write a dissertation. Family, friends, colleagues, and other influential individuals all assisted me in their own ways. There were times when I felt lost, confused, exhausted, and unconfident. The amount of encouragement I received along this time demonstrated to me that this research and journey was not just for me. This journey was for everyone who believed in me. This journey was for my family who finally get to see one of us get a doctorate, while I hope to just be the first and not the last. This journey was for every Black female student in college who has ever doubted her abilities, or who has ever tried to hide her intelligence. I can only hope that this journey has truly served as a representation for all of them.

There were long hours of data collection and even longer hours of analysis which made the road arduous, but as I became intimate with the data it made the journey worth it. Giving voice to a student population that has been neglected in the research empowered me to be thorough in my approach and celebrate these women in their successes.

This study is the beginning of what, I hope, to be a long road of unfolding, where the stories of high-achieving Black women will continue to be told.

APPENDIX A: EMAIL ANNOUNCEMENT

Date

Greetings,

Two days from now you will receive an email request to participate in a research study here at [Host Institution]. I am exploring the experiences of Black female juniors and seniors who have been successful in college.

I am writing in advance because we have found that many people like to know ahead of time that they will be contacted. This study is important because it will highlight stories of triumph in order to, ultimately, help provide an understanding of the needs of Black undergraduate women who need support.

I hope you will read the forthcoming email and consider my invitation carefully, positively, and enthusiastically. It is only with the generous help of individuals like you that our research can be successful. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Whitney Watkins
Doctoral Student- College of Education, [Host Institution]
Graduate Assistant for the [Leadership Development Program]

APPENDIX B: EMAIL INVITATION TO STUDENT PARTICIPANTS SELECTED

FOR INTERVIEWS/SISTER CIRCLE GROUP PROCESS

Date

Greetings,

My name is Whitney Watkins and I am a doctoral student in the College of Education here at [Host Institution]. As a part of my research, I want to learn more about the experiences of Black undergraduate female students who have been successful in their college studies. I have a special investment in these women because I lived the life of an academically successful Black undergraduate female student. Much of the literature regarding Black students in college highlights negative aspects, such as reasons why Black students do not go to college and reasons why they drop out. I feel exploring my particular area of research is very important because I believe it is crucial to tell the stories of young Black women who persist in their academic excellence. It is my hope that by highlighting stories of triumph, my research can help serve the needs of other Black undergraduate women who need the support.

Requirements
This study is being conducted under the supervision of my major professor, Dr. [Dissertation Chairperson]. You are invited to participate in the study if you meet the following requirements:
- At least 18 years old
- Self-identified Black female student at UCF
- At least a third year Junior or Senior student status (at least 60 credit hours completed)
- Have been enrolled at [host institution] since freshman year (did not transfer from another institution)
- Have at least a 3.0 cumulative grade point average
- Have membership with a student leadership development program (defined as an organization which assists with the development and growth of students' leadership skill building).

The Fine Print
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked questions related to your success in college. The questions will focus on the contributing experiences which have led to and helped you maintain your excellence in school. The study involves two, thirty to forty-five-minute one on one interviews and one, two hour group process with other qualifying participants. All of the sessions will be scheduled according to the convenience of the participants. If you wish to participate in the study and meet all criteria, please send an email of interest to Whitney Watkins at whitney.watkins@ucf.edu.

As an incentive for participating in this study, snacks will be provided during each interview and for the group process. Your participation will help develop a body of literature which will contribute to a better understanding of your experience. Ultimately, this study will respect the stories of Black female undergraduate students, highlighting their journeys of success in college.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw and stop participating in the study at any time. You will not be penalized in any way if you withdraw and no longer wish to participate in the study. There are no major anticipated risks from participating in this study.

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All information shared will be confidential and no identifying information will be included in the final report. Once the study is complete, all IP addresses will be deleted and interview and group data will be erased after five years. Recordings from the interviews and group process will be deleted once the transcription process is complete. The results of this study will appear in an electronic database in the Library and may be presented at professional conferences or seminars or published in a journal. However, your identity will remain completely confidential.

I hope you will consider participating. This research is vital to the field of higher education and your story deserves to be told. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at whitney.watkins@ucf.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration!
Whitney Watkins

APPENDIX C: EMAIL REMINDER

Date

Greetings,

About a week ago, I sent an email requesting the participation of qualifying students in a research study here at [Host Institution]. To date, we are still in need of participants.

The responses of students who have already participated revealed a wide variety of stories, highlighting experiences which have helped them be successful. Many students described experiences, both positive and negative, related to the contributing experiences of their success. We feel the results of this study will be incredibly useful for administrators and others who play a role in college student success.

I am writing again because of the importance of your participation, which will assist with creating a holistic picture of student stories. We hope that if you qualify, you do choose to participate.

Please let me know if you have any questions by emailing me at whitney.watkins@ucf.edu.

Sincerely,
Whitney Watkins
Doctoral Student- College of Education, [Host Institution]
Graduate Assistant for the [Leadership Development Program]

APPENDIX D: CONFIRMATION OF PARTICIPATION

Date

Greetings,

This email is to confirm your participation in the study which will explore the experiences of Black female juniors and seniors who have been successful in college. Your involvement is truly appreciated and is vital to this research.

In order to best accommodate every participant, I would appreciate it if you could take a look at the following meeting dates/times and let me know all of the options that work for you for the first and second interview dates. If none of these options work for you, please let me know that as well.

Monday, February 6th at 5pm
Wednesday, February 8th at 9am
Thursday, February 9th at 2:30pm
Tuesday, February 14th at 9am
Wednesday, February 15th at 3:30pm
Friday, February 17th at 5pm

I will then follow-up with you through email to confirm the date and time of the interviews and will discuss the group process date/time in another email. The location of the interviews and group process will be the classroom of the [interview/group process location]. If this location is does not work for you, please let me know and we will adjust the meeting place, accordingly. Please respond no later than (insert date and time) to provide ample time for me to notify you.

Thank you so much, again, for agreeing to participate in this important study. I appreciate your time, and if you have any questions please feel free to contact me at whitney.watkins@ucf.edu.

Sincerely,
Whitney Watkins
Doctoral Student- College of Education, [Host Institution]
Graduate Assistant for the [Leadership Development Program]
Whitney.watkins@ucf.edu
305-923-2389

APPENDIX E: SUMMARY OF EXPLANATION FOR EXEMPT RESEARCH

EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Title of Project: **Exploring the Contributing Experiences of the Success of High-Achieving Black Female Students at a Predominantly White Institution**

Principal Investigator: **Whitney Watkins**

Faculty Supervisor: **[Dissertation Chairperson]**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences that contribute to the success of Black female undergraduate students at a predominantly White institution. The ultimate objective of this study is capture the essence of these students' experiences. Additionally, an objective is to present recommendations to administrators and other pertinent staff to assist lower performing Black female undergraduate students with the support they need.

You will be asked to participate in two individual interviews, each of which will last 30-45 minutes. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in one group process, which will last approximately two hours. The study interviews and group process will take place in the [interview/group process location].

During the interviews, you will be asked a series of questions related to your experiences before college which have contributed to your success, challenges faced while in college, and your motivation to succeed while in college. The second interview will happen within one week of the first interview and the only responsibilities of you as a participant are showing up to each interview and group process, as well as, answering the proposed questions.

During the group process, you will be asked a series of questions amongst a group of approximately six to eight additional participants. The group process will last approximately two hours and your only responsibilities will be showing up for the group process and answer the proposed questions. You do not have to answer every question or complete every task. You will not lose any benefits if you skip questions or tasks.

. The culmination of all of these events is not expected to span past three weeks. Again, each interview will take 30-45 minutes and the group process will last approximately two hours. Every interview and the group process will be conducted according to the convenience of the participants, outside of their class time.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.

Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem: If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact Whitney Watkins, Graduate Student, Higher Education and Policy Studies, College of Education and Human Performance, (305) 923-2389 or Dr. Kathleen King, Faculty Supervisor, College of Education and Human Performance at (407) 823-4751 or by email at Kathleen.king@ucf.edu

IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: Research at the [host institution] involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional

Review Board (IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, [Host Institution], Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901.

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW ONE PROTOCOL

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study on Black female students' success in college. The interview will take approximately 30-45minutes, and it will be audio-recorded.

The interview questions will focus on different aspects of your experience as a Black female student. The focus will be on your pre-college experiences, challenges you have faced while in college, and what has motivates you to be successful in college. Therefore, I encourage you to be as honest as possible and consider this an opportunity to tell your story.

Your identity will not be revealed in the final report. Details about the study, confidentiality, etc. are outlined in this explanation of the research. Please take some time now to read through the form and indicate if you are willing to participate in this interview. *Provide summary of research and adequate time to read it…*

Before we get started with the interview, do you have any questions?

Okay, I'm going to turn on the recorder and we'll get started. *Begin the interview…*

1. Tell me about your academic experience prior to college.

2. Think about your experiences in college so far. Would you share with me any experiences you might have had with Black female student stereotypes?

3a. Complete this sentence for me: "When I have reached success in college, I will have…"
3b. What does success look like for you?
3c. So, how would you define success?
3d. Much of the literature lists different attributes that contribute to success. What would be on your list?

4. What motivates you to succeed?

5a. Please describe any challenges you have encountered while in college related to your race, gender, and academic achievement.
5b. What approaches have you taken to address these challenges?

6. What has kept you going in college up until this point?

Conclusion and Wrap-Up:

This is the end of the interview. Thank you so much for your participation and for sharing your experiences and perspectives.

I will be following up with you via email within the next couple of months to provide an opportunity for you to confirm if I have accurately interpreted and described the experiences and reflections you shared in the interview.

Is this the best email at which to reach you then? *Recite email address…*

Please feel free to contact me via email if you have any questions.

Again, thank you for your assistance and enjoy the rest of your day!

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW TWO PROTOCOL

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study on Black female students' success in college. The interview will take approximately 30-45minutes, and it will be audio-recorded.

The interview questions will focus on different aspects of your experience as a Black female student. The focus will be on your pre-college experiences, challenges you have faced while in college, and what has motivates you to be successful in college. Therefore, I encourage you to be as honest as possible and consider this an opportunity to tell your story.

Your identity will not be revealed in the final report. Details about the study, confidentiality, etc. are outlined in this explanation of the research. Please take some time now to read through the form and indicate if you are willing to participate in this interview. *Provide summary of research and adequate time to read it…*

Before we get started with the interview, do you have any questions?

Okay, I'm going to turn on the recorder and we'll get started. *Begin the interview…*

1. Tell me about your upbringing.

2. Based on your experiences with stereotypes at the university, how have you processed these experiences?

3. What experiences have contributed to your definition of success?

4. How important is it for you to succeed? Why?

5. Do you believe your experience with success would be different if you attended an institution which was not predominantly White?

Conclusion and Wrap-Up:

This is the end of the interview. Thank you so much for your participation and for sharing your experiences and perspectives.

I will be following up with you via email within the next couple of months to provide an opportunity for you to confirm if I have accurately interpreted and described the experiences and reflections you shared in the interview.

Is this the best email at which to reach you then? *Recite email address…*

Please feel free to contact me via email if you have any questions.

Again, thank you for your assistance and enjoy the rest of your day!

APPENDIX H: GROUP PROCESS PROTOCOL

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study on Black female students' success in college. The group process will take approximately two hours, and it will be audio-recorded.

The group process questions will focus on different aspects of your experience as Black female students. The focus will be on challenges you have faced, and what has motivates you to be successful in college. Therefore, I encourage you to be as honest as possible and consider this an opportunity to tell your story among others who identify similarly to you.

Your identity will not be revealed in the final report. Details about the study, confidentiality, etc. are outlined in this explanation of the research. Please take some time now to read through the form and indicate if you are willing to participate in this process. *Provide summary of research and adequate time to read it…*

Before we get started with the group process, do any of you have any questions?

Okay, I'm going to turn on the recorder and we'll get started. *Begin the group process…*

1. Think about your experiences in college so far. Please tell me about any experiences you might have had with Black female stereotypes.

2a. Complete this sentence for me: "When I have reached success in college, I will have…"
2b. How would you define success?

3. What motivates you to succeed?

4a. Please describe any challenges you have encountered while in college related to your race, gender, and academic achievement.
4b. What approaches have you taken to address these challenges?

5. What has contributed to your persistence in college up until this point?

Conclusion and Wrap-Up:

This is the end of the group process. Thank you so much for your participation and for sharing your experiences and perspectives.

I will be following up with you all via email within the next couple of months to provide an opportunity for you to confirm if I have accurately interpreted and described the experiences and reflections you shared in the group process.

Is this the best email at which to reach you then? *Pass around separate documents to each person to confirm email…*

Please feel free to contact me via email if you have any questions.

Again, thank you all for your assistance and enjoy the rest of your day!

APPENDIX I: THANK YOU EMAIL FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Date

Greetings,

You are receiving this email because you recently participated in interviews for my research study regarding exploring the stories of successful Black female undergraduate students. Thank you for your participation in the study. I am grateful for your willingness to contribute to the research efforts, and kindly send this follow-up message in recognition of you as a participant.

Your honest responses revealed a rich story which will help give depth to the results of this study. We feel the results of this study will be incredibly useful for administrators and others who play a role in college student success.

As a reminder, your identity will be kept anonymous when this information is shared. If you would like a copy of the findings from the study, or a full copy of the dissertation, a copy will be made available to you.

Please let me know if you have any questions by emailing me at whitney.watkins@ucf.edu.

With gratitude,
Whitney Watkins
Doctoral Student- College of Education, [Host Institution]
Graduate Assistant for the [leadership development program]

APPENDIX J: THANK YOU EMAIL FOR SISTER CIRCLE GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Date

Greetings,

You are receiving this email because you recently participated a group process for my research study regarding exploring the stories of successful Black female undergraduate students. Thank you for your participation in the study. I am grateful for your willingness to contribute to the research efforts, and kindly send this follow-up message in recognition of you as a participant.

Your honest responses revealed a rich story which will help give depth to the results of this study. We feel the results of this study will be incredibly useful for administrators and others who play a role in college student success.

As a reminder, your identity will be kept anonymous when this information is shared. If you would like a copy of the findings from the study, or a full copy of the dissertation, a copy will be made available to you.

Please let me know if you have any questions by emailing me at whitney.watkins@ucf.edu.

With gratitude,
Whitney Watkins
Doctoral Student- College of Education, [host institution]
Graduate Assistant for the [leadership development program]

APPENDIX K: EXAMPLE OF A LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

CRITERIA

I have received your [program] admission and understand the following obligations:

[program] Requirements:

- I will notify the [program] Office of any changes regarding my status as a student at the [University] and/or in the [program].
- I will maintain an overall **3.0 overall cumulative GPA** and will complete 24 credit hours each academic year.
- I will register for and satisfactorily complete all [program] courses **with a B average** or better in my [program] courses during the two-year program.
- I will participate in the defined number of co-curricular leadership events, as defined by the program, each semester.
- I will complete the hours of community service specified in my [program] class each semester while in the program.
- I will attend [program event] **5pm-9pm on the first Friday of the Fall semester (tba)** and attend a [program] workshop in spring 2014.
- I will remain in good standing with the [program] by fulfilling the above program obligations.
- I understand that I will need to apply to the 2nd year of the [program] in spring 2014.
- I understand that I must be in good standing with the University and comply with all responsibilities of the Golden Rule and I give the Office of Student Conduct permission to release information about violations to the [program].

Fellowship Obligations

- The total dollar amount of my fellowship is as follows: $400 [program] Fellowship each year you are a member of the [program] ($200 during the fall semester and $200 during the spring semester).
- **I understand that I will receive this amount at the end of each semester only if I am in good standing with the program and have fulfilled all program obligations as listed above.***
- The scholarship is non-deferrable. I must enroll at [University] during the fall 2013 semester.
  It is highly suggested that you submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid Form. Should I receive need-based aid, this scholarship plus other aid cannot exceed my total need as defined by the free federal form. Also, my total aid package, including all scholarships cannot exceed the cost of attendance. The [University] reserves the right to adjust this scholarship to comply with the above University policy.

PLEASE CHECK THE APPROPRIATE BOX, COMPLETE AND RETURN THIS

FORM BY THE DEADLINE DATE STATED IN THE ATTACHED AWARD LETTER.

Please check only one box.

☐   This is my declaration that I accept this acceptance into the [program] and this fellowship. I will complete these obligations and I will attend [University] and enter the [program] in fall 2013. ***I am also enclosing the $125.00 student organization activity fee (made out to [program]) and I understand that this fee is non-refundable.***

☐   This is to inform you that I will not be accepting the [program] offer of acceptance.

☐   This is to inform you that I will **not be attending [University]** and therefore decline this offer of acceptance.

_____   _____

Signature of Recipient   Student Number of Recipient

_____   _____

Printed Name of Recipient   Date

*Good Standing means that I meet all of the [program] requirements listed above.

APPENDIX L: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Whitney Priscilla Watkins**

Date: **February 06, 2017**

Dear Researcher:

On 02/06/2017, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Project Title:	EXPLORING THE CONTRIBUTING EXPERIENCES OF THE SUCCESS OF HIGH-ACHIEVING BLACK FEMALE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION
Investigator:	Whitney Priscilla Watkins
IRB Number:	SBE-16-12837
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.
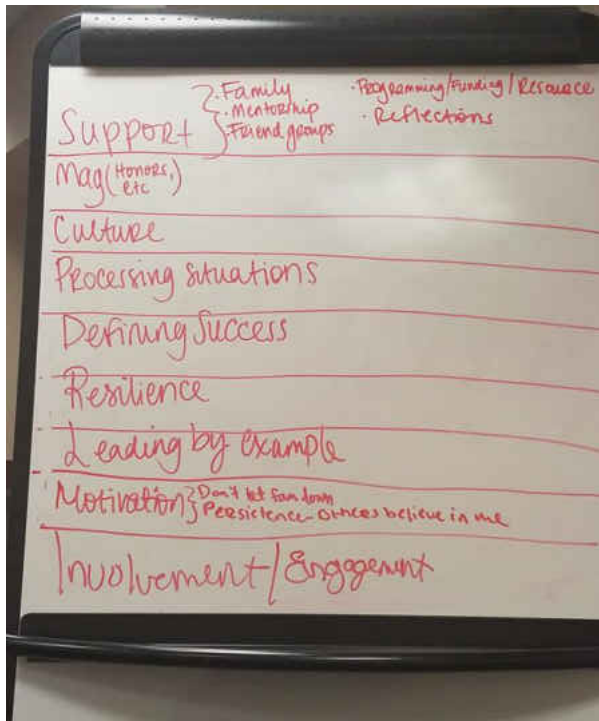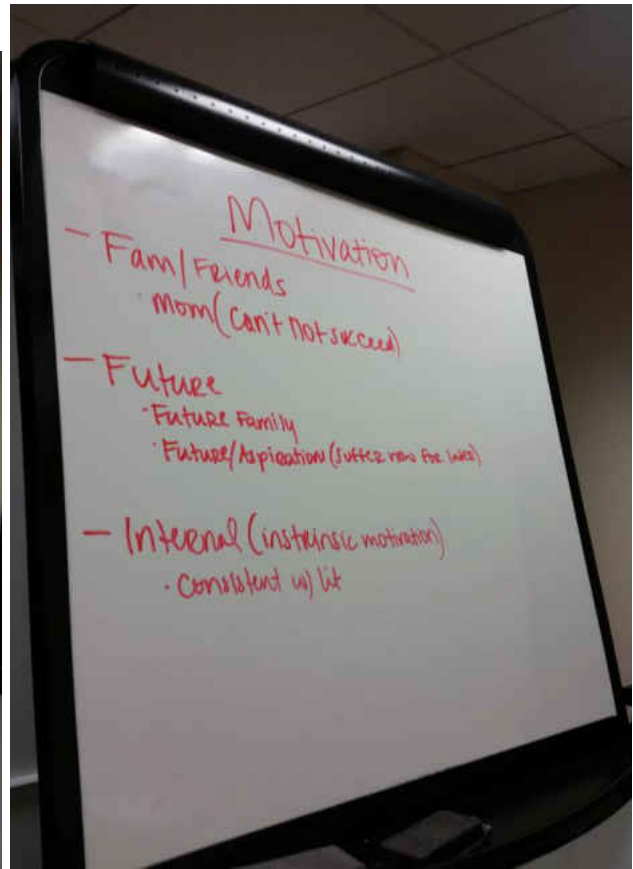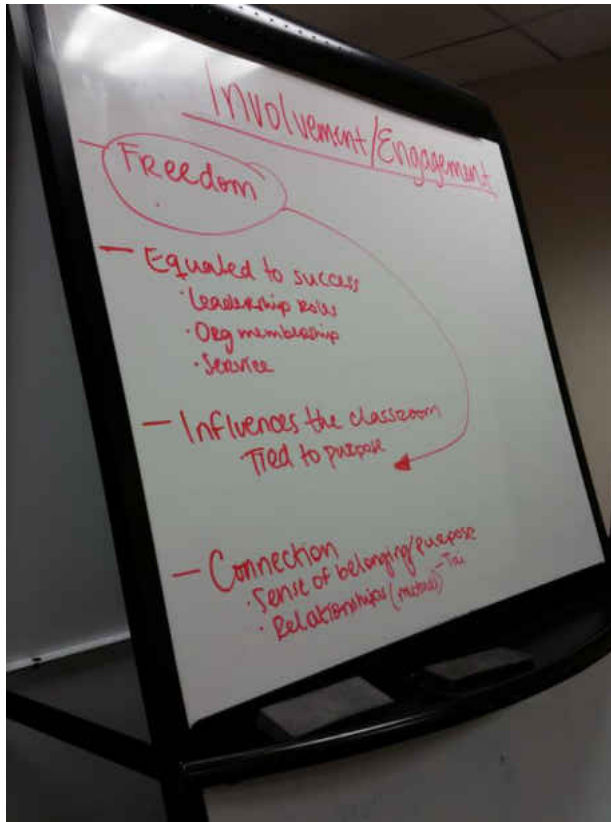
On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:
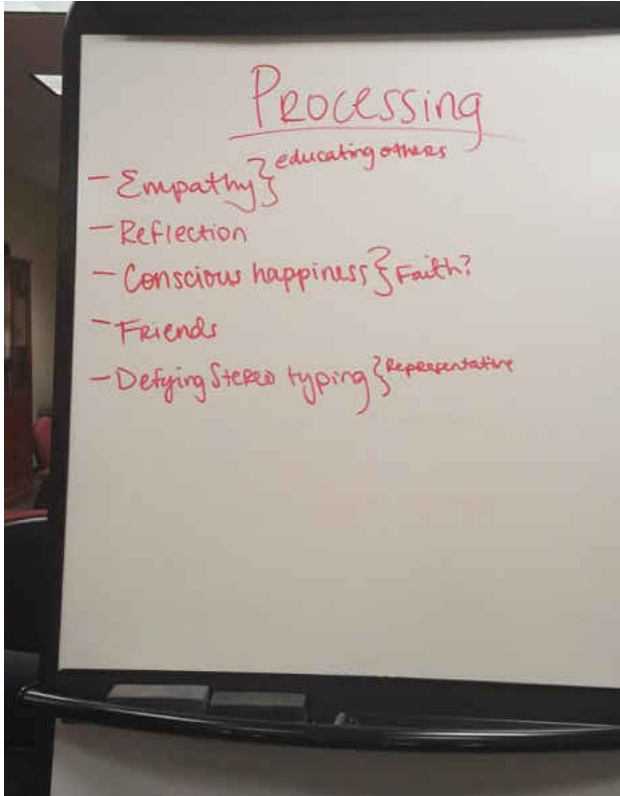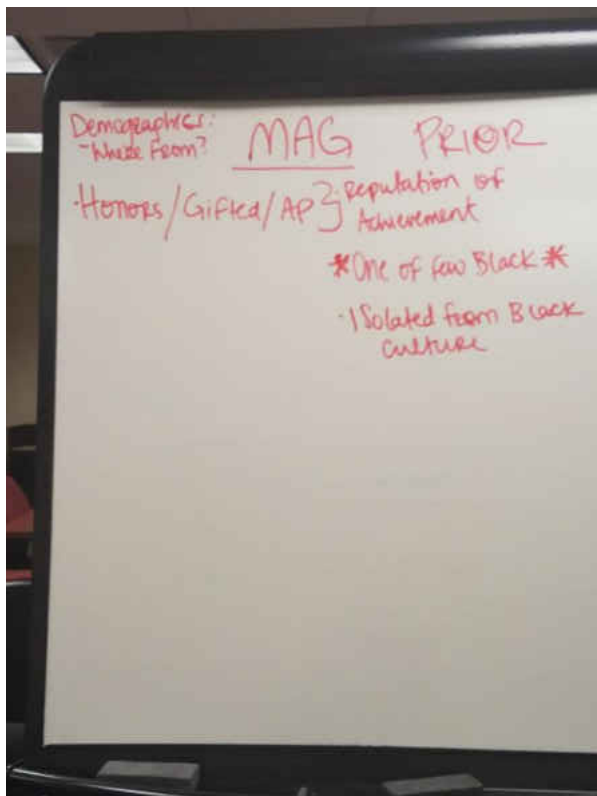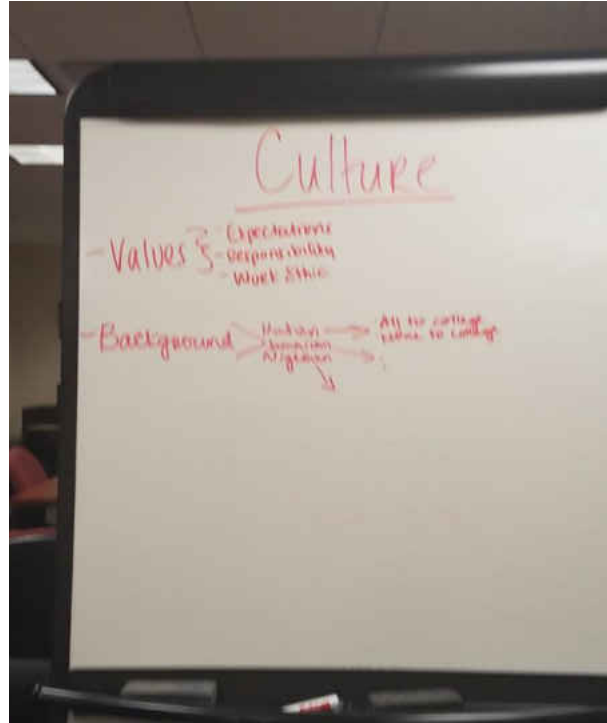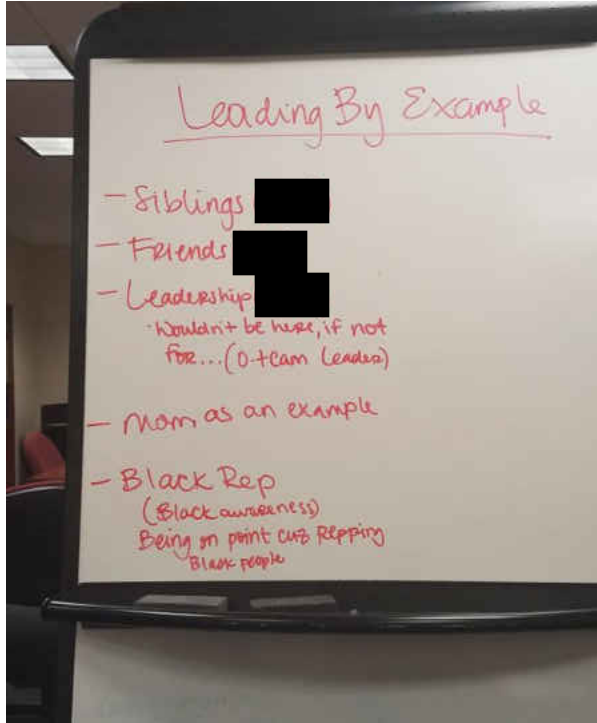
Signature applied by Gillian Amy Mary Morien on 02/06/2017 05:28:00 PM EST

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX M: PHOTOS OF THE STUDY'S THEME DEVELOPMENT

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Leading By Example

- Siblings ██
- Friends ██
- Leadership
  - Wouldn't be here, if not for...(O-team Leader)

- Mom as an example

- Black Rep
  - (Black awareness)
  - Being on point cuz Repping Black people

Culture

- Values { Expectations
  - Responsibility
  - Work Ethic

- Background } Haitian → All to college related to college
  - Jamaican
  - Nigerian

Demographics:
"Where from?" MAG PRIOR

Honors/Gifted/AP } Reputation of Achievement

One of few Black

· Isolated from Black culture

Processing

educating others
- Empathy }
- Reflection
- Conscious happiness } Faith?
- Friends
- Defying Stereo typing } Representative

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