

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS'
EXPERIENCES WITH COLLEGE READINESS

by

Rachel Joy Strang

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to understand how African American college students at mid-Atlantic 4-year public universities experience college readiness their freshman year. Using Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, this study has attempted to answer the central research question: How do African American students in mid-Atlantic 4-year institutions describe their college readiness experiences? Sub-questions sought to address the students' experiences moving in to their freshman year and continued through the stages of the transition theory. These questions explored how they were able to successfully transition into their second year based upon their individual situation, self, supports, and strategies, also known as the four S's of the transition theory. Purposeful, criterion, and snowball sampling were used to select 10-15 participants who were African American college students attending a mid-Atlantic 4-year university and had completed their freshman year. Data was collected through interviews, narratives, and focus groups. As this was a transcendental phenomenology, data was analyzed to determine textural and structural themes, which were combined to determine the essence of the phenomenon being experienced, which was college readiness. Through data analysis, 4 themes emerged: 1) identity; 2) self-management and college awareness; 3) engagement; and 4) relationships. These 4 themes informed the answers to the research questions. The resulting description of the essence of the phenomenon of African American students' experiences with college readiness can best be described as a journey of self-discovery.

Keywords: African American students, college readiness, first year experiences, transition theory

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my family. Their unconditional support and unwavering faith in me and as well as my abilities were an inspiration to persist through any and all challenges that I faced along this journey.

To my husband, Brice, I cannot express how grateful I am for your understanding and support during the many hours I spent in earning this degree, despite the extra responsibility it placed on you. Your encouragement and patience throughout the past few years have been so important to me. Thank you for listening to me when I get excited about things you are not interested in, and for pretending to be interested anyway. I love you so much.

To my parents, thank you for always setting an example of what it means to be a good person and a true follower of Christ. You are both an inspiration, and I can only hope to become half the person that either of you are.

I would also like to dedicate this work to TP. This work could not have been done without your support and persistence, and I do not know what I would have done without you. You are such a strong, determined, and inspiring young woman, and I cannot wait to follow your successes in your future. I am so thankful for you and your friendship, and I will never be able to repay you for all of your help.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to God. Without Him, this journey would have been impossible. Throughout the hours of frustration, insecurities, and successes, He proved to me that He is always there, and that He always has a plan.

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List of Abbreviations

ACCUPLACER (standardized test measure without defined acronym)

ACT (standardized test measure without defined acronym)

Advanced Placement (AP)

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)

Assessment of Scholastic Skills through Educational Testing (ASSET)

College Placement Tests (COMPASS)

Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC)

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

First Year Experience (FYE)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)

Historically Black Colleges (HBCs)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)

Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA)

Texas Success Initiative (TSI)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how African American college students in mid-Atlantic four-year universities experience college readiness. This opening chapter begins with a background to the problem, including the historical, social, and theoretical contexts to situate the issue of college readiness. The background helps to define and explain the problem of readiness and the lack of research, which is followed by the purpose statement. Also included in this chapter is the motivation driving this study, the significance of the study, and the research questions that this study attempted to answer. This chapter will conclude with definitions that are essential to understanding this study.

Background

In the past decade, the diversity of the student population in college has drastically increased (Atherton, 2014). College readiness is not a new concept and has been defined in multiple ways over time. There has been a somewhat recent demand for a broader definition of college readiness, which is supported by various theories. Additionally, a need exists for more qualitative research that includes the voices of students.

Historical Context

The College Board was formed in 1900 by leading universities in the United States to help standardize the admissions process for college acceptance (“About Us”, 2014). As a result of declining performance in education, the College Board developed the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in 1926 as a method to standardize expectations and measurements for students transitioning into college (“History of the SAT: A Timeline,” 2014). By 1959, the ACT was created to compete with the SAT and to provide a test that was based more on content rather than

cognitive reasoning (“ACT History,” 2018). Since inception of these exams, scores on the SAT and ACT have been the primary measure of determining college readiness (Cates & Schaeffe, 2011; Harvey, Slate, Moore, Barnes, & Martinez-Garcia, 2013; Melzer & Grant, 2016; Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015). Although these tests have been used to measure college readiness since 1926, college readiness has become defined as the ability to enroll in credit-bearing college courses without the need for remediation (Harvey et al., 2013).

Depending on the state and the institution, post-secondary schools use various ways to determine a student’s readiness to enroll in credit-bearing courses. Some states have widened their scope of determining readiness beyond the SAT and ACT through examination of multiple measures. For example, the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) requires students in Texas to be assessed for college readiness using one of the following assessments: ACCUPLACER, the Assessment of Scholastic Skills through Educational Testing (ASSET), College Placement Tests (COMPASS), or the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) (Abraham, Slate, Saxon, & Barnes, 2014). Students can be exempt from these assessments with qualifying scores on the ACT, SAT, or other approved tests. Other states and universities, such as the University of Maryland, use ACT scores, high school grade point averages (GPAs), SAT scores, or similar assessments to the ACCUPLACER (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Koch, Slate, & Moore, 2012; Kowski, 2013).

Although ACT scores, GPAs, SAT scores or other types of quantitative measurements are still the most commonplace method for determining college readiness, more recent research has called for new methods for determining college readiness through qualitative measures (An & Taylor, 2015; Barnes & Slate, 2015; Conley, 2007). In a report for the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC), Conley (2007) argued that college readiness should include a

broader range of indicators. Conley categorized college readiness into four domains that include both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. These domains include key cognitive strategies, key content knowledge, key transition knowledge and skills, and key learning skills and techniques. As the definition of college readiness has changed over time, the current study provides further support for a broader definition of college readiness.

Despite the existence of broader definitions for college readiness and the call for more research that is qualitative, college readiness is still primarily measured quantitatively. This is likely due to the fact that measuring Conley's (2007) four domains is challenging. Few tested measurements exist to determine validity of the domains.

Social Context

Using the measures that are available quantitatively through GPAs, SATs, ACTs, and other high stakes testing, research has demonstrated that many students are being accepted and enrolling in college and are not college ready, based on the need for remedial courses, college attrition rates, or other required support services (An & Taylor, 2015; Atherton, 2014; Cates & Shaefle, 2011; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Koch et al., 2012; Kowski, 2013). In fact, according to Porter and Polikoff (2012), more than two thirds of students who enroll in college following high school graduation are judged as not ready based upon their high school courses and reading skills.

Even more concerning is the growing achievement gap in relation to college readiness indicators between students of color who are underperforming compared to their white peers (Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015). The quantitative measures of college readiness have resulted in an achievement gap that has been documented throughout the literature (Abraham et al., 2014; Harvey et al., 2013; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Moon & Singh, 2015; Ozuna, Saenz, Ballysingh, &

Yamamura, 2016). Some of the research recognizes that other factors beyond test scores can impact a student's level of readiness. These factors can include socioeconomic status, social circumstances, motivation, behavior, and opportunities based on the high school's characteristics (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015).

However, the qualitative literature on college readiness experiences does not include the voice of students themselves. Although there is extensive literature about general college readiness (Atherton, 2014; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Huerta & Watt, 2015), indicators of college readiness (An & Taylor, 2015; Atherton, 2014; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Kowski, 2013; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Royster et al., 2015), and the achievement gap (Abraham et al., 2014; Cates & Shaefle, 2011; Harvey et al., 2013; Kugelmass & Ready, 2011; Niu & Tienda, 2013), much of this research focuses on the quantitative measures of readiness, including secondary school performance or scores on standardized testing. Using only school performance measures and test scores excludes the voice of students regarding their own understanding and experiences of college readiness.

Although qualitative research studies have examined the effectiveness of college readiness programs (Koch et al., 2012; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Vega et al., 2015), student perspectives of college remedial programs (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Hughes, Gibbons, & Mynatt, 2013), and adult perspectives of college readiness (Ozuna et al., 2016), limited research exists regarding students' general understanding and experiences in relation to college readiness. More specifically, no research exists giving a voice to African American college students who have transitioned from high school and completed their first year of college. The current study adds to the social context through providing students with a voice, and will enable students to

potentially help educational stakeholders better understand the process of developing students in the future who could be more college ready.

Theoretical Context

The changing definition of college readiness aligns with multiple theories that explain the need to define college readiness in measures that go beyond the quantitative realm. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory supports the idea of defining college readiness as both a social and cultural process (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010). Vygotsky's sociocultural approach to learning focuses on human construction of knowledge through experiences as an individual, as well as through a social process. This study continued to build on Vygotsky's theory that knowledge, or in this case, college readiness, is both a social and cultural process.

Additional theories such as Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory have also been used to support the idea that other factors, such as a student's context, can impact college readiness beyond academic performance and standardized test scores (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory suggests multiple, interrelated systems are at play in the process of human development. Microsystems are analyzed through this theory in order to understand how people's environment might impact their process of development (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). Microsystems include a child's family, school, peers, and other aspects specific to that child's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Niu and Tienda (2013) found that the school as a microsystem and its level of affluence can be used as a predictor for whether a student is likely to graduate from college within four years. Microsystems of Bronfenbrenner's theory are often interrelated and impact how a child develops.

Similar to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory is Tinto's (1993) retention theory, which focused on the relationship between the students and the post-secondary institution that they attend (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Ishitani, 2016). Tinto's theory examined the various attributes that students possess prior to entering college, which may impact whether they are able to successfully integrate into college (McDonald & Farrell, 2012).

A final theory often applied to college readiness is Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory. In this theory, students who have greater cultural capital are more likely to be successful than those with lower cultural capital. For example, a student who has two parents with a bachelor's degree has more cultural capital, and is therefore more likely to be successful (Atherton, 2014; McCoy, 2014). In Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, the ability to be successful is often beyond the control of the individual.

Each of these theories focuses on understanding college readiness beyond the single measure of academic performance, and includes multiple aspects that must be considered to determine college readiness. Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory is similar to these theories in that the four S's — situation, self, supports, and strategies— are all interrelated and impact how an individual copes during transition. In this study, the four S's were used as a lens to describe the college readiness experiences through the process of transitioning. This study built on the theoretical context of college readiness through an added understanding of college readiness as a transition process according to Schlossberg's transition theory.

Situation to Self

The motivation behind this study stemmed from my desire to understand African American students' experiences with the college readiness process. As a researcher and an educator, I approached this study from an ontological and epistemological view grounded in the

constructivism framework. This framework embraces the ontological assumption that there are multiple realities for participants (Creswell, 2013). Some students may perceive their first-year experiences in college different from their peers; however, it is still their reality. Even more specifically, I used the naturalist paradigm. In the naturalist paradigm, “social realities are social constructions, selected, built, and embellished by social actors and individuals from among situations, stimuli, and events available to them” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 26). The reality of college readiness was the social constructions of the participants in this study. My goal was to understand their experiences based on their unique situations and other stimuli available to the participants. In this study, I endeavored to describe the social reality of African American college students in relation to their college readiness experiences.

In understanding the process of becoming college ready, including information learned from the actual experiences of students is important to understand what they believe helped to make them college ready, or what they wished they knew before they began their freshman year. In my ontological view of education, schools exist to prepare students for their futures. According to Knight (2006), epistemology deals with questions regarding truth and knowledge. In order to understand college readiness in terms of truth and knowledge, researchers must go to the students directly. Researchers need to include the voices of students who have experienced the issue of college readiness to know what is working and what is not, which fits directly with an ontological and epistemological view grounded in the constructivist framework. One of the axiological dangers of education is focusing only on data by numbers. Although quantitative data is certainly important, qualitative data in the form of understanding the reality of students’ college readiness experiences is also important.

This research study provides myself and other educational stakeholders in secondary education a better understanding of how African American students experience college readiness. Educational stakeholders such as school administrators, teachers, parents, and students will benefit from this study as it provides specific information about what African American students experienced upon entering college after attending a public high school. Having more information about first year experiences will help administrators and teachers be able to make better decisions related to curricula. Parents and students who have more information about college readiness will also be able to make more informed decisions about college and how to prepare for college.

Problem Statement

The high number of students, particularly minority students, who are enrolling in college, yet who are not college ready, raises concerns that secondary schools are not adequately preparing students for college (Atherton, 2014; D'Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Kowski, 2013; Royster et al., 2015). With as many as two thirds of students entering college not college ready (Porter & Polikoff, 2012), many questions are raised in reference to how college readiness is determined, as well as the expectations set by secondary schools. When determining college readiness, most universities use SAT scores, ACT scores, and high school GPAs, with a particular focus on grades received in English and Mathematics courses (Abraham et al., 2014; Kowski, 2013). Other studies have found indicators as early as middle school (Royster et al., 2015), and included a definition of college readiness that is more abstract and focuses on skills and strategies rather than only numerical data (An & Taylor, 2015; Conley, 2012; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; McDonald & Farrell, 2012).

The problem is little qualitative research has been done that describes African American students' experiences of college readiness. Research has demonstrated programs such as dual enrollment and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) are implemented at the secondary level (An & Taylor, 2015; Huerta & Watt, 2015) and First Year Experience (FYE) programs at the post-secondary levels (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016; Hughes et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2012), all of which are intended to increase levels of college readiness. However, student perceptions of experiences are largely ignored unless the students are enrolled in a specific program such as dual enrollment or Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). Other research focuses on indicators of college readiness from a quantitative perspective or general college readiness from an educator's perspective (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Kowski, 2013; Royster et al., 2015). Additionally, although research has demonstrated that African American students are less likely to be ready for college according to quantitative measures such as standardized test scores and GPAs (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Vega et al., 2015), few qualitative studies have provided a voice to African American students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how African American college students in mid-Atlantic four-year universities experience college readiness. College readiness has generally been defined as a student's ability to enroll and succeed in a credit-bearing general education college course without the need for remediation (Harvey et al., 2013). As this study focused on African American college students' experiences through the process of transitioning into, through, and out of the first year of college, Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory provided the theoretical lens for research. This study has

added to the body of literature in understanding the experiences of African American students as they transition from high school to college and experience college readiness.

Significance of the Study

This transcendental phenomenological study has practical significance, empirical significance, and theoretical significance. Practical significance refers to how the results could potentially influence the field of education. Empirical significance refers to how this study builds on previous research, and theoretical significance refers to how this study builds upon a particular theory. Each of the different types of significances related to this study is detailed below.

Practical Significance

This transcendental phenomenology has practical significance for secondary educational stakeholders, including high school principals, teachers, board level administrators, parents, students, and higher education professionals and administrators. Principals, teachers, and administrators are all responsible for determining the curricula that will best prepare students for their futures. This study helps those stakeholders in planning curricula and strategies for preparing African American students to be more college ready, based on the experiences of those who have gone on to a four-year institution. Additionally, parents and students can learn through the experiences of other students and make more informed decisions regarding their education prior to enrolling in a four-year institution.

Empirical Significance

Empirically, this study builds on previous research through adding to the qualitative literature regarding college readiness. Previous research has focused on various aspects of college readiness such as subject specific academic readiness, social readiness, and dropout rates

(Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Kowski, 2013; Royster et al., 2015), and has demonstrated that African American students are generally less ready for college than their peers (Atherton, 2014; Cates & Shaeffe, 2011; Harvey et al., 2013; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Ozuna et al., 2016). This study builds on previous research and provides qualitative insight regarding the transition experiences of African American college students as they describe their own college readiness during their first year of college. Awareness and understanding of these experiences benefit secondary educational stakeholders as they make decisions regarding secondary education and the transition to college.

Theoretical Significance

Results of this study have theoretical significance using Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory. Schlossberg's transition theory provides a lens through which to view how students move in, through, and out of their college freshman year. Schlossberg's theory focuses on both the process of transitioning, as well as the four S's — situation, self, supports, and strategies — which impact how an individual transitions. Much of the literature supporting Schlossberg's transition theory only uses portions of the theory. For example, McCoy (2014) used the four S's in a study focusing on understanding first-generation college students of color transitions, but did not discuss the process of transitioning. In comparison, Rodriguez-Kiino (2013) discussed both aspects of Schlossberg's transition theory, but again only connected to the four S's in the findings. In a study that focused on supplemental instruction experiences of students, Eller (2016) used Schlossberg's transition theory in a more complete method by applying both the process of transitioning and the four S's. This study built on the literature through providing a more complete application of Schlossberg's transition theory to the field of education.

Research Questions

This transcendental phenomenology focused on the college readiness experiences of African American college students who completed their freshman year in the university setting and investigated the essence of these experiences through the lens of transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981, 2011). Data was collected directly from the participants in an attempt to get as close to participants as possible.

Central Research Question

How do African American students in mid-Atlantic four-year institutions describe their college readiness experiences? This central question was meant to understand how African American students who have completed their first year in college describe their readiness for their first year. According to standardized measures of college readiness, an achievement gap exists in both the secondary and post-secondary levels of education between minority students and their white peers (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; ACT, 2016; College Board, 2015). If the achievement gap continues from secondary to post-secondary, and has even been found to widen (Kugelmass & Ready, 2011), then more research was necessary to understand the experiences of African American college students. This question focused on the overall process of transition and was broken down into sub-questions that align with Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory. The theory uses three stages, and each of the sub-questions aligned with one of the stages in the transition process.

Sub-question One

How do participants describe their situation, self, supports, and strategies related to college readiness moving in to their freshman year? Using Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory, this question aimed at understanding participants' experiences of "moving in" to the

phenomenon. As students graduate from high school, they are moving in to the transition of becoming first-year college students. The experiences that took place prior to entering college helped to frame and understand each student as an individual and how each one coped with the transition. Each student's situation, self, supports, and strategies were what impacted their ability to transition (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Understanding participants' expectations prior to their experiences of college readiness was necessary in order to understand their experiences in the moving through phase.

Sub-question Two

How do participants describe their situation, self, supports, and strategies related to college readiness moving through their freshman year? This question was meant to continue understanding participants' experiences of "moving through" (Schlossberg, 1981, 2011) the phenomenon. As a result of the achievement gap, the students in many First-Year Experience (FYE) programs, which focus on helping students transition to college more easily, are minority students (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016). This study did not use students in post-secondary transitional help programs. This deliberate omission allowed this study to better understand the experiences of African American students without supplementary program assistance. In the moving through phase, the goal was to learn what students' experiences were as they progressed through the transition. Their situation, self, supports, and strategies learned from sub-question one were also revisited to determine if they changed, stayed the same, or continued to impact the transition as found in former studies (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013).

Sub-question Three

How do participants describe their situation, self, supports, and strategies related to college readiness moving out of their freshman year? This final sub-question sought to describe

the “moving out” phase of Schlossberg’s (1981, 2011) transition theory. Life is sometimes clearer after having experienced a phenomenon. Students who have completed their first year of college are more likely to persist to graduation (DeNicco, Harrington, & Fogg, 2015). As participants looked back on their first year of college, this question helped to understand what participants thought could have been done prior to entering college that would have better prepared them, and therefore made them more college ready.

Definitions

The terms that are listed below are essential for understanding this study. Each term is grounded in the theoretical framework, the research design, or the literature related to the topic.

1. *College readiness* – College readiness refers to a student’s ability to enroll and succeed in a credit-bearing general education college course without the need for remediation (Harvey et al., 2013).
2. *Moving in* – Moving in refers to the first stage of the transition process in which a person transitions to a new situation (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). For the purposes of this study, moving in refers to when students decide to go to college.
3. *Moving through* – This stage is established once a person “knows the ropes” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57). Although students may never know the ropes of their first year of college, if they persist and successfully complete their first year, they will have moved through the transition successfully. Therefore, for purposes of this study, moving through is considered to be first year college experiences.
4. *Moving out* – This is the final stage of transition. In this stage, a person moves to the next transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1989). For purposes of this study,

moving out was the stage that began once students completed a calendar year on campus at a four-year institution, and began moving into their second year.

5. *Transcendental phenomenology* – Transcendental phenomenology is a qualitative research method. In this research design, researchers are required to set aside any preconceived ideas related to the phenomenon in order “to be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 24).
6. *Transition* – A transition is any event or nonevent that changes relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg, 1981). The event or transition researched in this study focused on changing routines, assumptions, and roles as an African American student completes his or her first year of college.

Summary

The number of students who enroll in college who are required to take remedial courses and therefore designated as not being college ready is alarming (Harvey et al., 2013). Additionally, many of those students who are not college ready are African American students, demonstrating an achievement gap in college readiness between minority students and their white peers (Harvey et al., 2013; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Ozuna et al., 2016; Royster et al., 2015). If high schools are meant to prepare students for college, then students with a high school diploma should be college ready. The problem is many African American students who are enrolling in college are not college ready (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Harvey et al., 2013; Kugelmass & Ready, 2011; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Ozuna et al., 2016; Royster et al., 2015) and little qualitative research has been done that describes African American students’ experiences of

college readiness. This transcendental phenomenology helps to understand how African American students experience college readiness.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

People experience the same phenomenon in a myriad of ways. As one such phenomenon, college readiness has been studied from a multitude of perspectives and research has focused on a variety of issues related to college readiness. This chapter begins with an overview of the theoretical framework upon which this study was built, as well as an overview of current literature related to college readiness. This chapter analyzes what the current literature says about college readiness and identifies the gap in the literature that this study addresses. The literature regarding college readiness focused on defining college readiness through both standardized measures and more holistic measures, external factors that impact college readiness, and college readiness programs. Additionally, there is both a direct and indirect view of the achievement gap in the readiness of African American students and their white peers. This chapter concludes with a brief summary of the content and establishes the need for this study as a result of the gap in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

Much of the literature surrounding college readiness relates directly to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory, and Tinto's (1993) retention theory. These theories provide a foundation for understanding the concept of college readiness, predictors for students' success, and reasons why students do not persist through to graduation. However, these theories do not delve into the process aspect of college readiness in the same way that Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory does. Schlossberg's transition theory focuses on growth in stages, which is relatable to Piaget's cognitive development theory. Schlossberg's theory provides a model for understanding transitional experiences through the

various life stages. Schlossberg (1981) proposed multiple definitions for transition. The primary definition used states, “A transition can be said to occur if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (p. 5).

Another definition of transition discussed by Schlossberg (1981) is called a psychosocial transition that was proposed by Parkes (1971). In Parkes’s definition, transition refers to “the abandonment of one set of assumptions and the development of a fresh set to enable the individual to cope with the new altered life space” (p. 103). Parkes explained that psychosocial transitions have lasting effects and “take place over a relatively short period of time” and “affect large areas of the assumptive world” (p. 103). This definition fits college readiness experiences of African American students who completed their freshman year, as the experience is about a year, which is a short period of time. Additionally, students’ success or failure regarding their first year of college would certainly have lasting impacts on the path that their life could take.

Types of Transitions

Schlossberg’s (2011) transition theory refers to three different types of transitions: anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions, and nonevent transitions. Anticipated transitions include events such as entering college, getting married, or starting a first job. Unanticipated transitions include those that are unexpected and sometimes disruptive, such as a serious illness, job loss, or a surprise promotion. Nonevent transitions are “expected events that fail to occur” (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 159). Nonevent transitions could include events such as not receiving an expected promotion, or not being able to afford to retire.

The experience of college readiness could be considered an anticipated transition or a nonevent transition. Students with expectations of going to college who are able to successfully

transition through their first year to reach their second year would fall under the category of anticipated transition. Students who are not successful in completing their first year of college or in proceeding to their second year of college would fall in the category of nonevent transition, as it is unlikely that someone enters college with the expectation of being unsuccessful. African American college students at a four-year institution who have completed their freshman year will likely fall into the category of experiencing an anticipated transition, even if they experience unanticipated events. However, they could possibly fall into one of the other types of transition such as unanticipated transition or nonevent transition as well (Schlossberg, 2011).

Regardless of the type of transition that African American students experience, the experience of transitioning alters a person's life. As Schlossberg (2011) stated, "It is not the transition per se, that is critical, but how much it alters one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. This explains why even desired transitions are upsetting" (p. 159). Assuming that students have enrolled in college according to their own volition, entering their first year of college would be considered a desired transition experience. However, within that first year, there could be events that students experience that would be considered unanticipated transitions or nonevent transitions that impact their experiences regarding college readiness.

Transition Coping Strategies: The Four S's

Schlossberg (2011) characterized all types of transition by similar features, which are known as the four S's: situation, self, supports, and strategies. The four S's are the various features that make each transition unique. Situation refers to what else is going on in a person's life at the time of transition. If someone has more life stressors at the time of the transition, the situation will impact the transition process, and possibly even the type of transition. Schlossberg used the example of a new job transition to describe situation. Someone who is offered a new

job at the same time as serving as a caregiver for a parent is likely to be impacted by the situation, because the decision whether or not to take the job would certainly be impacted by the situation itself. Those who are offered a new job, who are not caregivers, may find themselves in an easier situation. Upon entering and transitioning through a student's first year of college, African American students are likely to find themselves in various situations that impact their college readiness experiences.

The second S, self, "refers to the person's inner strength for coping with the situation" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160). Attitude impacts how a person handles or copes with the transition. A person who is optimistic will be able to cope with the transition better than someone who is pessimistic. Students transitioning into college, who have a good attitude, could experience more success in coping with the transition than those who view the situation in a pessimistic manner.

The third S, supports, refers to the various supports that one has in the process of transitioning (Schlossberg, 2011). Supports can include organizations in which a person becomes involved, people who are surrounding a person in the form of family or friends, and any other support groups. For a student transitioning into college, these supports could include family support from home, friends with whom they enter college, friends they make upon entering college, or organizations in which they get involved through their first year.

The fourth and final S, strategies, is what a person chooses to do in order to adjust and adapt to the transition (Schlossberg, 2011). These strategies help people to reframe a situation in order to cope with the transition. Schlossberg (2011) used specific questions to help understand strategies. "Are there ways you might change the situation? If not, can you change the way you see the situation? How can you reduce your stress level?" (p. 161). These are all questions that

could be asked to determine how a person transitioning through college could use strategies to cope with their situation. However, since this study focused on students who have moved out of the transition process, these questions were best framed in the past tense in order to determine what strategies African American students used in order to cope with the transition.

In an analysis of transitioning from community college to a four-year university, Rodriguez-Kiino (2013) found that the four S's had a significant impact on participants' ability to persist following their transfer from community college. Rodriguez-Kiino focused the findings of persistence around Schlossberg's (2011) four S's, but did not include the transition process or types of transitions in her research. Rodriguez-Kiino found that students who persisted had particular personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources, which were tied to Schlossberg's idea of "self." Pre-professional fieldwork, finances, transfer guidance, and community college curricula were found to be linked with students' situations, while family members, community college counselors, community college faculty, and university support services were all supports for students to transition successfully. Finally, course taking patterns and transfer websites were strategies that students used in persisting at four-year institutions (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013).

In an additional study focusing on Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory at the collegiate level, Schiavone and Gentry (2014) examined challenges faced by veterans who transitioned to college. Similar to Rodriguez-Kiino's (2013) study, Schiavone and Gentry focused the research around the four S's. Their research found that veterans were impacted and/or challenged by the situation through specific triggers and timing for the transition to college, control, role change, and concurrent stress. Schlossberg's second S, self, in Schiavone and Gentry's study included challenges of psychological status, physical health, and outlook and self-efficacy. Supports were

also found to impact non-role-dependent transitional challenges such as friends and family, as well as role-dependent support through the military and the university. Lastly, strategies that veterans employed to handle challenges mostly included sarcasm or joking around. Overall, participants indicated that their assets as veterans included maturity and global awareness; however, their military experiences also included the liabilities of insomnia and difficulty developing social relationships, causing challenges to a successful transition. Similar to other college students transitioning into a new role, the veteran students' four S's as discussed by Schiavone and Gentry indicated that veterans face challenges that impact the success of the transition, which provides further theoretical support for the present study in that the four S's impact transitions into college.

Much of the research providing support for Schlossberg's (1981; 2011) transition theory focused on how the four S's impact transition (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Tovar & Simon, 2006; Wheeler, 2012). However, the process of transitioning must also be included in order to understand the experience itself. It is important to note that experiences go beyond the scope of the four S's, but the process of transitioning provides context for the four S's and helps to make sense of the transition as it relates to the experience. Although these studies may mention the stages of transition, the analyses fall short in that they only apply the theory in terms of the four S's, leaving out the context and stages of the transitions, which also could have had an impact on the four S's. The process of transitioning and the four S's should be intertwined in a way that one cannot be understood without the other.

The Transition Process

The process of transitioning consists of three stages: moving in, moving through, and moving out (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). The first stage of transitioning,

moving in, refers to when a person enters the new situation. In this stage, a person takes on new roles, relationships, routines, or assumptions (Anderson et al., 2012). For participants of this study, the moving in stage was when they decided to enroll in and attend a four-year university. They took on the new role of a college student, possibly developed new relationships, and developed new routines. This stage required them to “learn the ropes” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 56) of college readiness.

The moving through stage is the second stage of the transitioning process in which people experience a period of liminality and confront the issues associated with the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The moving through stage occurs once a person knows the ropes of the transition. Although it may be impossible to truly know the ropes of college readiness, students’ first year of college aligns with this stage of transition because it is the period in which students must figure out “how to balance their activities with other parts of their lives and how to feel supported and challenged during their new journey” (p. 57).

The final stage of the transition process is the moving out stage. In this stage, there is a role exit in which people experiencing the transition disengage from the roles, routines, and relationships (Anderson et al., 2012). Although participants did not disengage from the roles and routines of being a college student upon completing their first year of college, they were no longer first year college students experiencing the first-year stages of college readiness. The first year of the college readiness experience was the role that participants exited.

Research has also found that college retention is an issue and can be impacted by variables at either the high school level, once a student decides to go to college, or even once a student has entered college (DeNicco, Harrington, & Fogg, 2015; Rall, 2016; Tovar & Simon, 2006). DeNicco et al. (2015) found that first year students’ academic performance was the

strongest predictor of retention, thus successfully completing the transition into college. The present research study focused on students who have successfully completed the intended transition, or those who moved in, through, and out of their first year of college. Although Schlossberg (1981, 2011) discussed various types of transitions, including anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions, and nonevent transitions, the experiences that were explored in this study were considered anticipated transitions.

In a study using Schlossberg's transition theory, Rall (2016) focused on students who fell in the nonevent transition category. According to her literature research, Rall found that low-income and minority students who have been accepted to college and plan to attend college immediately following high school are more at risk for "summer melt" (Rall, 2016, p. 462). The phrase summer melt refers to students who do not successfully matriculate into college in the fall following their high school graduation. Rall found through qualitative research that students did not matriculate as a result of "financial struggles, failure to meet requirements, inability to obtain the classes wanted/needed, inadequate support, and unclear communication" (p. 469). This research provided an interesting perspective in that it uses the same theory, but focused on minority students in the nonevent transition into college, whereas the present study focused on African American students who have successfully transitioned through the completion of their first year.

Tovar and Simon (2006) found that minority students, specifically Latino students, comprise a significant portion of those who are placed on probation following their first semester at a community college. In this quantitative study that used Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, Tovar and Simon found that Latino students were more likely to have favorable impressions of their educators when compared to African American students. Both Latino

students and African American students expressed concern regarding their financial security as well as the desire to secure assistance in becoming successful academically through tutoring (Tovar & Simon, 2006). The results of this study further confirmed the impact of Schlossberg's (2011) four S's and the relevance of the transition theory with regard to successfully transitioning into college.

Entering a four-year institution is considered a transition according to the definition of transition from both Schlossberg (1981, 2011) and Parkes (1971). African American students who completed their first year of college and were still attending a four-year university already progressed through the three stages of transition. Upon deciding to enroll in a four-year institution, participants were in the moving in stage because they took on a new role. Their first-year college readiness experiences were considered the moving through stage because students learned how to adapt to the college readiness experience, which is the transition. Upon successfully completing their first year, participants were moving out of the experience of college readiness. If students successfully progressed to the second-year, they transitioned into a new experience and out of the first-year college readiness experience. Applying Schlossberg's transition theory to students' college readiness experiences has helped to further extend the theory.

Related Literature

Literature regarding college readiness is extensive. This section will provide a synthesis of the most recent literature regarding college readiness. The present study has been formulated based upon the gap that is revealed in the literature that follows. The most recent literature has focused on the varying measures of college readiness, including defining college readiness through standardized measures and more holistic measures. The literature has also focused on

external factors impacting college readiness, as well as college readiness programs at the secondary and post-secondary level. Additionally, the literature has provided evidence that adults have a significant impact on students' success, and that there is an achievement gap at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. This demonstrates that African Americans are less likely to be college ready according to the various measures of readiness. The literature did include both quantitative and qualitative studies; however, the literature has a gap in the inclusion of student voices and the study of first year experiences of African American college students attending four-year universities.

Measuring College Readiness

College readiness has been defined by the literature in multiple ways. Most definitions of college readiness have focused on quantitative measures such as SAT or ACT scores, high school GPAs, and courses taken in high school (Abraham, Slate, Saxon, & Barnes, 2014; Atherton, 2014; Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Harvey, Slate, Moore, Barnes, & Martinez-Garcia, 2013; Koch, Slate, & Moore, 2012; Kowski, 2013; Melzer & Grant, 2016; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015). Other studies defined college readiness through a student's ability to be successful as a result of particular characteristics, which included both situational characteristics, such as school features (Niu & Tienda, 2013), and individual characteristics, such as the ability to implement strategies in order to be successful (An & Taylor, 2015; Conley, 2007; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; McDonald & Farrell, 2012). Both definitions of college readiness focused on college readiness as a process.

Standardized measures of college readiness. When determining college readiness according to a standardized definition that is measured quantitatively, college readiness is an issue. As one of the quantitative measures of college readiness, it is important to understand

current trends of SAT scores. The current SAT consists of critical reading, mathematics, and writing. Writing was first implemented as part of the test in 2006. Since 2006, the mean scores of each section have been steadily declining (College Board, 2015). The other commonly used high stakes test, the ACT, has three sections, mathematics, reading, and science, and has also seen a decline in composite scores over the last five years (ACT, 2016). Although research uses students' SAT and ACT scores to determine levels of college readiness while students are in secondary school, there is limited research that follows students' college progress post-high school graduation. It seems as though these particular tests are used more for admissions, entrance, and placement purposes than as indicators of college readiness (Abraham et al., 2014; Atherton, 2014; Cates & Shaefle, 2011; Royster et al., 2015).

High school GPAs have also been used to measure college readiness. Though some research has found that GPAs could be an indicator of future success in college (Kowski, 2013; Niu & Tienda, 2013), Kowski (2013) reported that subject specific course GPAs are not good indicators of the ability to be successful in college level courses. Niu and Tienda's (2013) study examined six different variables that impact a student's college readiness level, including academic preparation. Although results of Niu and Tienda's study indicated that students with higher GPAs are more likely to persist in college, these students were also coming from more affluent schools, which was the focus of their study. With the inclusion of six different variables in the study, Niu and Tienda were not able to determine that GPAs or any of the other variables determined a student's level of readiness, because there were too many interdependent variables being studied. Kowski's study was able to confirm what Niu and Tienda's study could not. High school GPAs and the level of math courses taken were found to be good predictors of college success (Kowski, 2013). However, subject specific GPAs, specifically mathematics

GPA, were not found to be good predictors of college readiness or future success in math courses.

Holistic measures of college readiness. As one of the main proponents of a more holistic definition of college readiness, Conley (2007) provided a broader perspective of what it means to be college ready. In a report for the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC), Conley discussed four keys or dimensions to college and career readiness. These keys included cognitive strategies, content knowledge, learning skills and techniques, and transition knowledge and skills. Cognitive strategies include strategies for problem formulation, research, interpretation, communication, and precision and accuracy. Content knowledge includes structure of knowledge, technical knowledge and skills, challenge level, value, attribution, and effort. Learning skills and techniques includes ownership of learning and learning techniques. Transition knowledge and skills includes post-secondary awareness, post-secondary costs, matriculation, career awareness, role and identity, and self-advocacy (Conley, 2007). This definition provided a more holistic view that included both academic preparedness, which can be measured via standardized measures such as test scores and GPAs, as well as the other skill-based factors that influence college readiness.

Although Conley (2007) presented a holistic definition through a professional report rather than research, other researchers have conducted studies that both directly and indirectly confirmed the various aspects of the definition and their relation to college readiness (Atherton, 2014; D'Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Melzer & Grant, 2016; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015). Though some of these studies are quantitative in nature, all of them have gone beyond the standardized

quantitative definition of college readiness and fit more closely with Conley's holistic definition of college readiness.

Similar to Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) four S's as factors that are interdependent and impact the process of transitioning, Conley's (2007) definition of college readiness proposed the idea that multiple factors are interdependent and impact college readiness. Using the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 that followed students from 1988 to 2000, Gaertner and McClarty (2015) found that achievement, behavior, motivation, social engagement, family circumstances, and school characteristics were factors that potentially impact students' levels of college readiness. Although achievement was the strongest individual indicator of college readiness, motivation and behavior combined were stronger indicators of readiness. Behavior and motivation are intrinsic and personal characteristics that a student possesses or develops. Family circumstances and school characteristics were found to be the most unlikely indicators of college readiness (Atherton, 2014; Royster et al., 2015), which contradicts other research (Niu & Tienda, 2013).

Gaertner and McClarty's (2015) longitudinal study found that behavior and motivation were strong indicators of whether or not a student would be deemed college ready, which was similar to the results of D'Lima et al. (2014). In their study, D'Lima et al. found that college academic performance had a positive relationship with both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. These results indicated that motivation could be a contributing factor of college readiness. D'Lima et al. also found that self-efficacy impacts a student's level of college readiness, which was a trait of more prepared college students in a study conducted by Melzer and Grant (2016).

One of Conley's (2007) key strategies included ownership of learning and self-advocacy. Melzer and Grant's research (2016) confirmed these ideas. They found that underprepared

college students were not likely to seek guidance, but suggested that students who did seek guidance experienced higher levels of self-efficacy and were therefore more likely to experience college success. These results aligned directly with Conley's strategies of ownership of learning and self-advocacy.

Conley's (2007) dimension of college readiness, called transition knowledge and skills, includes a student's role and identity, which was supported by McDonald and Farrell's (2012) study. McDonald and Farrell conducted a qualitative grounded theory study to investigate students' perceptions of readiness at an Early College High School (ECHS). The ECHS experience gave students the identity of a college student before actually entering high school, which led to positive perceptions and self-efficacy for college success. Students in an ECHS could have started the transition phase of moving in before students in a traditional secondary school. Therefore, the participants of McDonald and Farrell's study represent a more unique case rather than the norm. However, participants' development of self-efficacy and positive identity perceptions is something that does not necessarily have to be unique to an ECHS and could be implemented in a traditional secondary school.

Students who are more college ready based upon a more holistic definition of readiness provided by Conley (2007) have been found to be more motivated (D'Lima et al., 2014; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015), and possess particular strategies such as time management (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Melzer & Grant, 2016). Motivation and strategies both fit with Conley's keys of transition knowledge and skills and learning skills and techniques. Additionally, each of these studies supported the need for a more holistic definition of college readiness. Although student voice was obtained in a single study (McDonald & Farrell, 2012), this study represented a unique

school situation and is not generalizable to a traditional secondary school. More research is needed in order to understand student perceptions of their experiences with college readiness.

External Factors Impacting College Readiness

In defining college readiness, Conley (2007) discussed the exclusion of factors that may impact college readiness that are beyond a student's control or cannot be taught in a school. Such factors include access to financial resources, parental support, and developing "peer networks that support postsecondary readiness" (p. 4). Although these factors might not be within a student's control and might not be able to be taught in a school, they still impact college readiness and the process of transitioning through the first year of college (Atherton, 2014; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Royster et al., 2015; Vega et al., 2015).

In a grounded theory study, Vega et al. (2015) focused on the support aspect of a program called Upward Bound. Upward Bound is a program that focuses on increasing students' academic success, and participants of the program are more likely to enroll in college than students in the same school who are not participating in the program. The need for support demonstrated in this study was also reinforced by Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory and the S factor of support that impacts the transition. As one of the few studies related to college readiness that included student voice, particularly the voice of African American students, the results of Vega et al.'s study is important as it guides the present study. Students cited support in the program and familial support as important to their academic success. For further analysis, Vega et al. suggested further research on the relationship between the "diverse forms of familial support provided to urban youth" (p. 65). The present study continued the analysis as it related to Schlossberg's transition theory and the factor of support in regard to college readiness.

Though Gaertner and McClarty's (2015) study found family circumstances and school characteristics as weak indicators of college readiness, Niu and Tienda (2013) found that students from more affluent schools were more likely to be successful in college through graduating on time or within four years. In comparison, students from areas that were lower in socioeconomic status were found to be less likely to persist through to completion or at least complete a bachelor's or professional degree on time. This provides support for the fact that socioeconomic status could serve as an external predictor of college persistence as well as college readiness. However, Niu and Tienda were not able to confirm their hypothesis of school characteristics as an impacting factor on its own, because they recognized the many other interdependent variables that could also impact persistence. For example, college characteristics, personal situations, and other variables could be factors that skewed the results of the study. These factors tie directly to the present study and Schlossberg's (2011) four S's of situation, self, supports, and strategies, as both the four S's and the factors studied by Niu and Tienda were found to be interdependent.

Similar studies found that students' college readiness is impacted by factors beyond their control. The level of parental education has been found to be a predictor of college success (Atherton, 2014; Royster et al., 2015). Studies have shown that students whose parents both have a bachelor's degree are more likely to be college ready than students whose parents do not (Atherton, 2014; Royster et al., 2015). The level of education for each parent was found to be a predictor of a student's ability to be deemed as college ready. For example, students who had only one parent with a post-secondary degree were less likely to be college ready according to their SAT scores and high school GPA than students who had two parents with a bachelor's degree (Atherton, 2014).

In a study focusing on parental influence on students' choices in college and career decision making, Workman (2015) found that students whose parents went to a particular university were likely to be positively influenced by parents in making their decisions with regard to where they would enroll and what major they might have. Since students did not have control over where their parents attended university, this would be an external factor influencing students. Parents are part of students' supports as it relates to Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory, and in this case, parents were considered to be a positive support. Additionally, since the students cited that their parents positively influenced their decision to attend college (Workman, 2015), it could be believed that the cultural capital of students' parents did indeed have an impact on student motivation and therefore success. However, further research would be necessary to determine if that is the case.

Although Conley (2007) argued that college readiness cannot be defined by external factors that cannot be taught by a school or are beyond a student's control, such as family circumstances, school characteristics, and external supports, these factors nevertheless impact college readiness. However, as Vega et al. (2015) stated, more study is needed to understand how diverse forms of family support impact student perceptions. Outside of Vega et al.'s study, limited research exists that includes the voice of students in regard to the impact of external factors on college readiness.

College Readiness Programs

As a result of the declining levels of college readiness, various programs have been implemented in a myriad of ways. Some programs exist at the secondary level and target individuals who demonstrate indicators of being less likely to be college ready (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Vega et al., 2015). Other programs work to provide

students with more exposure to the college atmosphere or college level courses (An & Taylor, 2015; McDonald & Farrell, 2012). Still others exist for students who are enrolled in college, either as additional support (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016), or as a method of remediation for students who enrolled in college but were not actually designated as being ready for college (Hughes, Gibbons, & Mynatt, 2013; Koch et al., 2012). Each of these programs works to assist students in becoming more college ready in some aspect.

Secondary programs. Various secondary programs exist at the middle and high school levels to target students who demonstrate early indicators of not being college ready. One such program, Upward Bound, targets “students from low-income backgrounds, underrepresented groups, and potential first-generation college students” (Vega et al., 2015, p. 56). Part of Conley’s (2007) keys to college readiness focuses on transition knowledge and skills as well as content knowledge, which is the focus of the Upward Bound program. Although the goal of the program is to provide students with academic instruction and increase awareness of post-secondary options, Vega et al. (2015) focused on student perceptions of the support received from the program. They found that participants believed the support provided from the program to be instrumental in helping them be successful in setting and achieving goals. This provides further backing for the idea that supports in the moving in stage of a transition would impact the success of the transition.

Congress created another similar program, GEAR UP, in 1998 (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011). The aim of this program was to provide cohorts of students with more cultural and social capital in an effort to increase college enrollment. Cates and Schaeffle (2011) found that the most beneficial aspects of this program were the advising hours received and the exposure to post-

secondary options in the form of college visits and college speakers. They also found that the age level of targeted students was important in student expectations for college attendance. For example, students who visited college campuses as early as sixth grade had a positive correlation for expected college attendance. Students who expected to go to college and received advising were better able to plan and create goals for attendance. These results support Conley's (2007) key for college readiness focusing on transition knowledge and skills, particularly the post-secondary awareness strategy.

A third secondary program, AVID, targets students who are academically average and mostly first-generation college students (Huerta & Watt, 2015). Graduates who had been enrolled in AVID, who were participants in Huerta and Watt's (2015) study, were more likely to persist beyond the first year of college than the national average. However, the study also found that students who enrolled in four-year institutions were more likely to graduate within six years than AVID graduates who were enrolled in a community college. Additionally, students who took more Advanced Placement (AP) courses and had higher GPAs were more likely to enroll in a four-year institution, and therefore be on track to graduate within six years. Three-fourths of the participants in Huerta and Watt's study were either African American or Hispanic, which are considered to be underrepresented groups in post-secondary education. Although Huerta and Watt did not make any recommendations for future research, understanding the experiences of the students at four-year institutions from their personal perspectives could help in providing more information for the field.

Secondary programs providing college experience. In order to increase students' opportunities and exposure to the college atmosphere, some schools provide students with access to programs that give students a level of college experience prior to entering college. One such

opportunity is provided through dual enrollment. Dual enrollment is defined as a “college course that high school students take and for which they receive college credit upon successful completion” (An & Taylor, 2015, p. 2). An and Taylor (2015) used Conley’s (2007) four keys to develop an instrument measuring the college readiness of students who had participated in dual enrollment in comparison to students who did not. They found that students enrolled in dual enrollment programs were more likely to be college ready in three of the four dimensions of college readiness according to Conley (An & Taylor, 2015). Key transition knowledge and skills was the only dimension that did not have a significant difference when comparing dual enrollment students to non-dual enrollment students. An and Taylor speculated that this was likely due to the fact that the specific courses taken by dual enrollment students did not include exclusive information about transition knowledge and skills that non-dual enrollment students would not have had in their secondary school experience. The results of this study indicated that those who enter college with college credit through a dual enrollment program might be more prepared to persist in a four-year institution. The results also indicated that those choosing to attend four-year institutions seem to be more prepared.

Another program that attempts to provide students with college exposure is the ECHS. According to McDonald and Farrell (2012), “Through a compressed time frame with integrated college curriculum, the ECHS provides underserved freshman through high school seniors a mixture of college courses taken concurrently with required high school courses” (p. 219). In their qualitative, grounded theory study, McDonald and Farrell found that students who had been through the ECHS felt that their experiences in the ECHS helped them acclimate more quickly to college-level work and begin establishing a college identity. These findings were consistent with Conley’s (2007) dimensions of college readiness to include cognitive strategies, content

knowledge, and transition knowledge and skills. Although McDonald and Farrell's study provided a voice to students, a limitation of the study was the impracticality for all students who are not college ready to attend an ECHS. This limitation contributes to the need for more research that includes student voices of those who have attended a school that represents a larger percentage of the general population who enroll in college.

Post-secondary programs. Though secondary programs help to support students who are in high school, post-secondary programs help provide students with support while they are enrolled in college. The programs include both support programs that are preemptive in helping students who may be enrolled but considered at-risk for not persisting (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Donaldson et al., 2016), while others are reactive in that they provide remediation for students who are enrolled and have already been designated as not college ready according to the various standardized measures of college readiness (Hughes et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2012; Tovar & Simon, 2006). In addition, many of the post-secondary programs and research regarding post-secondary programs take place primarily at community colleges (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Donaldson et al., 2016; Koch et al., 2012).

In an effort to increase the persistence of first-year college students, some post-secondary schools have started implementing First Year Experience (FYE) programs. In a study conducted by Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera (2016), the goal of a community college's FYE program was to serve "as a comprehensive program that aimed to improve student preparation, retention, and transfer for first-year students who placed into developmental courses" (p. 74). Participants in this particular FYE found their experiences in the program as a whole beneficial to their success rather than focusing on an individual aspect of the program that was more beneficial than others. Participants in the program had more access to support in the form of faculty advisors than their

non-FYE counterparts. Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera speculated that many students would benefit from more time and support from faculty advisors, but that most community colleges cannot provide the support because of insufficient funding. Regardless, this study continues to validate the idea that support impacts a student's ability to be successful in college.

Donaldson et al. (2016) referred to the support of an FYE program as intrusive advising. In a qualitative, single-case study design, Donaldson et al. studied student perceptions of intrusive advising at a community college. They found that students had both positive and negative perceptions of intrusive advising. Students reported that being required to participate in intrusive advising was both a positive aspect of the program as well as a limitation. Students stated that they would likely not have had motivation to seek out advising help or begin degree planning early without being part of the program. On the other hand, being required to participate also made some students initially feel as though they were participating for the benefit of the advisor rather than the student. However, in the end, all participants felt that the intrusive advising experience benefitted them.

Hughes et al. (2013) and Koch et al. (2012) both conducted studies related to reactive methods for enhancing students' levels of college readiness. Students who are designated as not being college ready are often required to enroll in remedial classes prior to enrolling in credit-bearing classes (Koch et al., 2012). In addition to the literature of student perceptions, Koch et al. conducted a phenomenological study of students enrolled in developmental classes. Students reported experiencing benefits from the developmental classes, even though they initially experienced negative feelings upon learning they would need to enroll in developmental classes. Additionally, the classes provided students a method for obtaining a better understanding of skills and strategies that work best for them as individual learners. The study was conducted at a

community college, and a major limitation is the use of only three participants. Koch et al. suggested that future research include a larger sample size. Although not suggested for future research by Koch et al., further research is needed to determine whether those students who are required to enroll in remedial courses are able to persist and transition through to their second year successfully and even further to reach graduation.

In another reactionary post-secondary program Tovar and Simon's (2006) study focused on students who had been placed on academic probation following their first semester at a community college. Students participating in the study were provided the opportunity to attend a probationary workshop where they learned of strategies to become more academically successful. Those who participated in the probationary workshop were more likely to persist than those who did not. Tovar and Simon's research provided evidence for the continued need of support at the collegiate level.

Each of these college readiness programs includes aspects of college readiness that Schlossberg (2011) and Conley (2007) discussed as an important part of transitioning and college readiness: support and transition knowledge and strategies. Students who received support were more likely to be college ready or become college ready through the support that they have received (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Donaldson et al., 2016; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Hughes et al., 2013; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Vega et al., 2015). Additionally, the programs discussed demonstrate that students who were either less likely to be college ready or already designated as not college ready were able to develop skills and strategies that enhanced their college readiness (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; An & Taylor, 2015; Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Donaldson et al., 2016; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Hughes et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2012; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Vega et al., 2015).

Adult Influences on Achievement

Although college readiness programs provide evidence for the organizational support aspect of one of Schlossberg's (2011) four S's, supports, research has also found specifically adult support in various forms has had a positive impact on student achievement as well as student motivations and desire to apply and enroll in college (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013; Rall, 2016; Vega et al., 2015, Workman, 2015). Some of the college readiness programs previously discussed included an aspect of adult support as part of the program; however, other studies have also demonstrated the importance of adult support in assisting students through a successful transition or for greater academic achievement.

Some research has used Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory as a lens to understand variance in academic success (Atherton, 2014; McCoy, 2014). However these studies focused mostly on the cultural capital of students' parents. Other research has found that support alone can have a positive impact on student success, regardless of the level of education a student's parents might have (Moon & Singh, 2015; Vega et al., 2015).

Human supports can be in the form of a parent, a teacher, a school counselor, a college advisor, or another adult who has had a positive impact in the life of the student. In a study researching the experiences of underrepresented students with school counselors, Dockery and McKelvey (2013) found school counselors who provided students with more information enhanced the support given by parents. For this reason, Dockery and McKelvey concluded that all students should be provided with college program information rather than only career information, which implied that college program information was only given to select students. Additionally, Dockery and McKelvey concluded that counselors needed to make an extra effort to include parents in the college readiness process. Minority students in Dockery and

McKelvey's study reported low expectations that counselors could help, which also demonstrated the importance of helping students establish professional adult relationships.

In Moon and Singh's (2015) study, the impact of support was evident in the theme salience of parental support, as well as the lack of support in the theme of achievement gap or resource gap. Participants cited parents as providing encouragement to continue working hard, even when it was challenging. On the other hand, participants who had little parental support described academic achievement as being more difficult because there was no one to advocate for them. Participants also believed that, because their school did not have as much funding as the schools of their white peers, their teachers were either not as qualified or were overwhelmed with larger class sizes. Although resources do not necessarily indicate human support, the availability of resources was perceived to have an impact on the ability of adults to provide the needed support. This limitation could be considered a potential lack of support in comparison to other studies that cited the importance of adult support at the secondary level (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Vega et al., 2015). However, more research would be necessary in order to confirm that students experienced a lack of adult support as a result of insufficient resources if they had attended a lower income school.

Many of the previously discussed secondary and post-secondary programs also included an element of adult support. For example, AVID students received additional academic and social support while they were enrolled (Huerta & Watt, 2015). Students in other programs such as Upward Bound found that support from both parents and program staff were key in their motivation (Vega et al., 2015). Although students reported that parents might not be able to help them with their high school academic course work, the examples they provided supplied students with emotional support. Emotional support from home combined with the academic support

provided by the Upward Bound staff were cited by participants as contributing factors for their academic success (Vega et al., 2015). In a third program, GEAR UP, the number of advising hours that a student received were found to have an impact on whether or not a student was college ready, providing more support for the fact that adult influence had a positive impact on college readiness (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011).

Adult support that may even be initially viewed as unwanted by the student has also reported positive benefits for student success (Donaldson et al., 2016). In the case of intrusive academic advising at a community college, students believed that required advising had a negative connotation, but also reported that they would likely not have sought help unless it was required. The support of the academic advisor helped students to develop a relationship in which an adult could provide individual support in making a plan for educational goals, increase student confidence, and instill help-seeking behaviors in the students. Although support may not always have been outwardly appreciated in this case, the benefits remained ubiquitous.

College Readiness Achievement Gap

When using SAT and ACT scores as measures of college readiness, an achievement gap between minority students and their white peers has existed and continues to exist (ACT, 2016; College Board, 2015). Specifically, African American students have consistently scored lower than their white peers on these standardized measures. Although much of the literature did not directly focus on the college readiness of African American students, an achievement gap was indicated according to the standardized measures in which African American students were less likely to be college ready than their white peers (Atherton, 2014; Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Harvey et al., 2013; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Ozuna, Saenz, Ballysingh, & Yamamura, 2016; Royster et al., 2015; Tovar & Simon, 2006; Vega et al., 2015). Many of the college readiness

programs target at-risk students, using GPAs as well as SAT and ACT scores as part of their selection criteria (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Vega et al., 2015). As a result of an achievement gap in the standardized measures of college readiness, many participants of the college readiness programs have been minority students.

Tovar and Simon (2006) conducted a study focusing on students who had been placed on probation following their first semester enrolled in a community college with a GPA below a 2.0 in their registered courses. In their study, 315 students were included in the sample, 39% of which were Latino, 18% Caucasian, 14% African American, 13% Asian/Asian American, and 16% who reported being from other ethnic groups. Out of all participants in the study, 82% were classified as a racial or ethnic minority, which means that 82% of the population placed on probation was a racial or ethnic minority, revealing an achievement gap.

Many of the students enrolled in college readiness programs at both the secondary and post-secondary levels have been minority students (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Vega et al., 2015). This enrollment indicates that minority students were more likely to not be college ready, and were therefore specifically targeted in an effort to close the achievement gap. For example, the Upward Bound program in Vega et al.'s (2015) study had 20 participants, 10 of whom were African American, two were biracial or multiracial, and eight were Latino. Similarly, in Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera's (2016) study, all 24 participants in their FYE program were minority students. In Cates and Schaeffle's (2011) study of the GEAR UP program, 70% were Latino students, and in Huerta and Watt's (2015) study of AVID students, 74% of participants were either African American or Hispanic. These programs focused on a wide variety of strategies that help make students college ready, including both academic and social/relational strategies. The fact that more minorities were enrolled in

these programs indicates that minority students were targeted in an effort to close the achievement gap. Additionally, the achievement gap that exists in high school as evidenced thus far has also led to minority races being underrepresented in higher education (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). Despite the implementation of these programs, the achievement gap that exists in high school persists in college, and has even been found to widen (Kugelmass & Ready, 2011).

On the other hand, secondary programs that have been focused more on academic rigor and are more likely mirroring college courses such as dual enrollment or advanced placement courses, have been primarily courses taken by white students (College Board, 2014). Although there has been a national decrease of the percentage of minority students taking advanced placement courses in comparison to the percentage of minority students in a particular graduating class, a significant difference still existed between minority students who receive a score of 3 or higher on the advanced placement exam versus the total number of minority students taking the exam. For example, 14.5% of the graduating student population in the United States in 2013 was African American; 9.2% of that 14.5% took an advanced placement course, but only 4.6% received a qualifying score (College Board, 2014).

Some individual states have been much closer in their respective percentages, while others have been much further apart. For instance, in Washington in 2013, 4.5% of the graduating student population was African American, and 3.3% took an advanced placement course. However, in South Carolina in 2013, 34.7% of the graduating population was African American, and only 15.7% took an advanced placement course (College Board, 2014). These statistics indicate that the percentage of students enrolling in higher-level courses in some states was drastically different than the percentage of the African American student population and in

comparison to their white peers enrolling in advanced placement courses. Students who take advanced placement courses are more likely to be college ready (Huerta & Watt, 2015). It could be understood that the secondary achievement gap persists to become a post-secondary achievement gap as a result of fewer African American students being enrolled in or receiving qualifying scores on advanced placement exams; however, further research would be necessary to confirm this implication.

The achievement gap that exists in high school also continues through college and has even been found to widen (Kugelmass & Ready, 2011). In a quantitative study with 35,000 college seniors, Kugelmass and Ready (2011) found that the achievement gap between African American students and their peers had grown wider since students entered college. White students as well as Hispanic students were found to have made significant academic gains individually and have also begun to close the achievement gap; however, the gains made by African American students were significantly lower. These results were somewhat conflicting with the results of Tovar and Simon (2006), which imply that the achievement gap between white and Hispanic students would be greater as a result of more students on probation. However, Tovar and Simon also found that Hispanic students were more likely to drop out following probation than their peers. In most cases, it was found that student and institutional characteristics did not make a significant difference, except in the case of Historically Black Colleges (HBCs), in which the inequalities were much smaller (Kugelmass & Ready, 2011). The results of this study indicate that African American students could have a more difficult time transitioning into the college lifestyle than their peers.

In a rare qualitative study that included the voices of African American adolescent students and their experiences with the achievement gap, Moon and Singh (2015) found five

themes of experience: 1) achievement gap or resource gap, 2) environmental obstacles related to academic achievement, 3) individual motivation and effort, 4) resiliency and persistence in the face of racism, and 5) salience of parental support. Participants felt that they did not have the same resources as their white peers, and that they also lacked social capital, living in more single-parent homes with lower family income. Additionally, participants thought that their white peers in other neighborhoods had better schools with more experienced teachers. Having an adult support, in the form of either a parent or a teacher, was also something that participants cited as having an impact on their success. Individual attitudes through resiliency and motivation were also cited as having an impact on students' academic success.

Although Moon and Singh (2015) used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as their theoretical lens, each of the five themes discovered in their research could be connected to Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory's four S's as potential influences on college readiness. However, further research would be needed to verify the connections between Schlossberg's transition theory and African American students' experiences with the achievement gap and college readiness.

Similar to one of the emerging themes in Moon and Singh's (2015) study, Pitre (2014) attributed the achievement gap to a resource or opportunity gap between minority races and their white peers. In coming to this conclusion, Pitre conducted a review of the literature, but did not conduct any original qualitative or quantitative research. However, Pitre proposed particular evidence-based strategies for helping to close the achievement gap that were based on the review of the literature. These strategies included developing meaningful learning experiences, increasing academic rigor, providing cultural connections, and ensuring a profound belief in students' capabilities. Some of these strategies have been proven to have an impact within the current review of the literature as well. For example, having someone who is an adult support

and believes in students has been proven to have an impact on students' academic success (Donaldson et al., 2016; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Moon and Singh, 2015; Vega et al., 2015).

Although some research included the voice of African American students (Moon & Singh, 2015; Vega et al., 2015), it is limited, particularly in regard to college readiness. If African American students are commonly identified as not being college ready, more research is needed about college readiness from their perspectives. African American students who are attending college at four-year universities and have completed their first year on campus have successfully completed the transition, obtained a perspective of their own college readiness experiences, and have helped to fill the gap of student voices of African Americans in the literature of college readiness.

Summary

Upon reviewing the literature, Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory provides a sharp lens through which college readiness experiences of African American students can be better understood. Although the literature has had multiple definitions of college readiness, even when using standardized measures, college readiness is a process that requires a holistic approach (Abraham et al., 2014; Atherton, 2014; Cates & Shaeffle, 2011; D'Lima et al., 2014; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Melzer & Grant, 2016; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Royster et al., 2015; Vega et al., 2015). As part of the holistic approach, it is also necessary to recognize the external factors that have been proven to impact college readiness (Atherton, 2014; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Royster et al., 2015; Vega et al., 2015).

Various college readiness programs have been implemented at different levels in an attempt increase students' levels of readiness (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; An & Taylor, 2015; Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Donaldson et al., 2016; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Hughes et al.,

2013; Koch et al., 2012; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Vega et al., 2015). An achievement gap has also been presented in the literature at both the secondary and post-secondary levels (Atherton, 2014; Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Harvey et al., 2013; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Ozuna et al., 2016; Royster et al., 2015; Vega et al., 2015). Many of the participants in college readiness programs were African American students, but limited research existed that included the voice of these students in regard to their college readiness experiences. The research that did provide African American students with a voice focused more on their experiences in the programs or on the achievement gap rather than on their general experiences with college readiness (Moon & Singh, 2015; Vega et al., 2015). This study helps to fill that gap through providing a voice to African American students at four-year universities in order to describe their college readiness experiences using Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory as a lens through which the experiences can be better understood.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how African American college students in mid-Atlantic four-year universities experience college readiness. Chapter Three of this study provides the research design and rationale, procedures, and method for analysis that were used in the execution of this study. Also included in this chapter are the plans and rationale for how participants were selected, how data was collected, and plans for ensuring the trustworthiness of this study. This chapter concludes with the ethical considerations that were relevant to the carrying out of this research.

Design

This qualitative study used a transcendental phenomenological design in an effort to describe the college readiness experiences of African American students attending four-year universities. Quantitative studies rely on statistical analysis and numerical data to analyze social reality in particular variables (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2015; Huerta & Watt, 2015), while qualitative research assumes “that social reality is constructed by the participants in it” (Gall et al., 2015, p. 15), and analyzes data through induction rather than statistics. A qualitative study was appropriate for this research because it aimed to understand the experiences of participants and presupposes that college-readiness experiences were social realities that have been constructed by African American college students. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research “includes the voices of participants” (p. 44), and the voices of participants were the focus of this study.

A phenomenology was most appropriate because the research aimed to understand the shared experiences of participants. “Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants

have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). A phenomenology aims to gain a deeper understanding of a particular lived experience (Koch, Slate, & Moore, 2012; Van Manen, 1997), whereas other qualitative research methods such as case studies focus on providing an in-depth understanding of a case, rather than understanding the experience itself (Creswell, 2013; Ozuna, Saenz, Ballysingh, & Yamamura, 2016). Similarly, grounded theory and ethnography were not appropriate choices for this study because they focus on developing a theory or examining a specific culture through qualitative research (Gall et al., 2015; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015). Therefore, as this study focused on the lived and shared experiences of participants, a phenomenological design was the most appropriate method of design to carry out the research.

Moustakas’s (1994) framework for transcendental phenomenology was used as the specific approach to this phenomenological study. Two methods are commonly used for phenomenological studies: hermeneutic and transcendental. Hermeneutic phenomenological studies focus more on interpretations of the meaning of the phenomenon, whereas transcendental phenomenological studies focus on describing the experiences. A transcendental phenomenological study attempts to perceive all data “freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994; p. 34). Hermeneutic phenomenological studies use personal insight in the research process, which is more appropriate if data cannot be perceived from a fresh perspective (Van Manen, 1997). Having never experienced what it is like to be an African American college student, it would be inappropriate for this researcher to interpret the experiences of African American college students, consequently making hermeneutic phenomenology an unsuitable option. However, as the researcher for this study has experienced college readiness, steps were taken to ensure that data was perceived from a fresh perspective.

In a transcendental phenomenological approach, Moustakas (1994) emphasized the importance of bracketing out any preconceived ideas regarding the research, which is called the *Epoche*. The *Epoche* is unique to a transcendental phenomenology. Bracketing experiences regarding college readiness was an essential part of this study in order to view the data in a manner that was not skewed towards any prejudgments or assumptions regarding participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this transcendental phenomenological study, including the Central Question (CQ) and Sub-questions (SQ):

CQ: How do African American students in mid-Atlantic four-year institutions describe their college readiness experiences?

SQ1: How do participants describe their situation, self, supports, and strategies related to college readiness moving in to their freshman year?

SQ2: How do participants describe their situation, self, supports, and strategies related to college readiness moving through their freshman year?

SQ3: How do participants describe their situation, self, supports, and strategies related to college readiness moving out of their freshman year?

Site

Four-year universities in Maryland and Virginia were the sites for this phenomenological study. Specifically, University of West and Lion University were used for this study.

Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of both the universities and participants.

As research shows the varying characteristics and experiences of students in community colleges and Historically Black Colleges (HBCs) (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Cooper & Hall, 2014;

Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Kowski, 2013; Slade, Eatmon, Staley, & Dixon, 2015), only four-year institutions that are not considered HBCs were used. Multiple universities were used in an attempt to obtain a wider pool of participants in similar settings, which provided a more general representation of African American college students at four-year institutions, and increased the transferability of the research findings. As a result of using multiple sites, school demographics such as student population, types of programs, and other characteristics were varied. However, both universities used in this study were considered to be Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

Additionally, multiple four-year institutions were used in an attempt to obtain a higher level of variation. Although Creswell (2013) suggested obtaining maximum variation for qualitative research, maximum variation is not appropriate for this study. Maximum variation focuses on diverse variations of individuals or sites, and this research study focused setting and participant selection based upon specific criteria. For example, if community colleges and HBCs were being used along with four-year institutions, maximum variation would be more appropriate. However, these particular types of institutions were purposefully excluded from this study because of their unique characteristics and the potential of those characteristics skewing the results of the study. Therefore, maximum variation as it relates to the setting would have been inappropriate for this particular study.

Participants

In beginning the selection process of participants and after obtaining IRB approval (Appendix A), personal acquaintances who are African American college students were contacted in order to begin snowball sampling. These personal contacts at the universities were second-year African American college students, but were not used as part of the study. The

contacts were used as seed starters to begin the snowball sampling process. Snowball sampling involves identifying cases of interest through other individuals. Snowball sampling was used as a method of gauging interest and identifying participants from “people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Creswell, 2013, p. 158). Using known college students was the most efficient ways to obtain participants (Wheeler, 2012). Contact information was obtained through known college students in order to personally invite students to participate. University departments, organizations, clubs, and student led groups were also contacted and asked to send an email to all potential participants who fit the criteria for this study. The email invitation that was used can be found in Appendix B. University-run departments and organizations included the admissions offices and multicultural centers of the universities participating. All of these methods for obtaining participants are meant to protect the sites from Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) violations, as they do not involve university personnel giving the researcher, any student information without the knowledge of potential participants.

A purposive sample with criterion and snowball sampling procedures were also used to obtain participants. According to Creswell (2013), criterion sampling is used in order to gain a perspective on “a time in the social life of the group, people representative of the culture-sharing group in terms of demographics” (p. 156). Students were required to meet each of the following criterion in order to participate in the study (McCoy, 2014). Participants had all completed at least one calendar year on campus at a four-year university, which was verified through each participant’s official or unofficial transcripts. Having completed one calendar year on campus and demonstrating current enrollment defined a student as one who had completed the freshman year transition. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 22. Additionally, participants had

to have attended a public high school. Each of these criteria established a particular group of students who would be more likely to have shared experiences and similar characteristics. After signing the informed consent form (Appendix C), characteristics were verified using a questionnaire (Appendix D).

Variation was obtained through using both male and female students. Though both male and female students were used, the number of participants was limited; therefore, an equal number of male and female students were not used. Additionally, outside of having attended a public high school, the location of the high school was not used as criterion for participant selection. Polkinghorne (1989) suggested that qualitative research use sample sizes that fall within the range of five to 25 for a phenomenological study. This research study used 13 participants; however, data saturation was attained within the first 10 interviews (Creswell, 2013). Saturation is achieved once additional data collection and analysis cease to provide any new understanding of the phenomenon (Gall et al., 2015).

Procedures

This study was conducted upon receiving approval from the institutional review board (IRB) from the research institution. The IRB approval letter can be found in Appendix A. Upon gaining IRB approval, the purposive sample was obtained using the snowball and criterion sampling procedures detailed in the previous section. IRB approval from the site universities was not required. An email invitation, which can be found in Appendix B, was sent from the researcher or seed starter to the potential participants at each respective university. Students were directed to contact the researcher if interested in participating in the study. This method of obtaining participants was chosen to avoid any potential FERPA violations. Since participants contacted the researcher, the university was not responsible or liable for disclosing any student

information. Participants obtained through snowball sampling of known college students were emailed directly by the researcher and invited to participate.

Those interested in participating were asked to sign an informed consent, which detailed the known risks and expected benefits of the study, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any point in time (Appendix C). The informed consent also included the steps that were taken to protect participants' identities, the data collection and analysis activities, and the intent to provide participants with information regarding research findings. These steps follow the suggested steps of Creswell (2013) for a phenomenological study.

A questionnaire and official or unofficial academic transcripts were used to ensure that participants met the selected criteria. Additionally, the questionnaire was used to obtain descriptive data of participants (Appendix D). The questionnaire was not used for purposes other than describing the participants. Transcripts were only used to verify whether a student had completed a calendar year on the campus of a four-year university.

When participants had signed informed consent forms, data was collected directly from the students in the form of open-ended interviews, narratives, and focus groups (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were conducted both in person and via phone interviews using interview questions presented in Appendix E. Data from narratives was collected using writing prompts presented in Appendix F. Questions used in the focus groups are presented in Appendix G. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. As suggested by Creswell (2013), data was regularly backed up using an external hard drive, and data collection continued until the themes were deemed saturated (Moustakas, 1994). More detailed information regarding the specific data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness of the study, and ethical considerations can be found in the following sections.

The Researcher's Role

As the human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) responsible for collecting data in this transcendental phenomenological study, bracketing previous personal experiences was essential in order to allow the data to speak for itself. Moustakas (1994) called bracketing the *Epoche*, or setting “aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas” (p. 85). As a first-year college student, I enrolled feeling prepared based upon my grades, standardized test scores, and motivation to do well. However, I quickly found out that I needed to adapt to my environment because I was not prepared for the transition. I attended a public high school and believed I was lacking many of the skills and strategies needed to be successful in college. I also currently work as a secondary social studies teacher in the public school setting in Maryland. This could have impacted my understanding of what I expected participants to have learned in their secondary school experience, which is why setting aside personal experiences was essential for this study. In order to fully understand the experiences of my participants, my personal experiences related to my own college readiness, as well as my current professional position were set aside in order to perceive the data from a fresh perspective (Moustakas, 1994).

I did not have a relationship with the participants prior to beginning this study. However, it was essential that personal experiences as an unprepared college student and a secondary public school teacher as well as potential shared experiences with participants be set aside in order to follow Moustakas's (1994) guidelines for the *Epoche*. Creswell (2013) explained that shared experiences with participants also have the potential to skew the data. In order to minimize skewing the data and in an effort to ensure that the data is being perceived with a fresh perspective, reflexive journaling was used throughout the data collection process (Ahern, 1999).

Reflexive journaling began as soon as IRB approval has been obtained, and a sample is included in Appendix I.

Data Collection

This qualitative study utilized a transcendental phenomenological research design in order to describe the college readiness experiences of African American college students. Data collection did not begin until IRB approval had been obtained from the research institution. Moustakas's (1994) guidelines for conducting a transcendental phenomenological study were followed closely. Upon obtaining IRB approval, participants were selected and verified through questionnaires and academic transcripts, which were only used to describe demographic characteristics of participants and ensure that they met the criteria for participating. Triangulation was used to increase the confirmability of the study. Triangulation involves using multiple sources of data collection to increase the soundness of the research findings (Gall et al., 2015). In this study, triangulation was established by collecting data from questionnaires, academic transcripts, interviews, narratives, and focus groups

The primary method of data collection was in-person or phone, open-ended interviews, narratives written by participants, and focus groups. Each piece of data was analyzed and triangulated to form themes and to ensure the study was credible and trustworthy (Creswell, 2013). Known college students who fit the criteria but were not participating in the study were used to pilot the interview questions and narrative writing prompt. Using these students in the study would have been unethical because they were former students of the researcher. Pilot testing assisted in refining and developing the research instruments, which were the interview questions and narrative prompt (Appendices E & F) (Creswell, 2013).

Interviews

The first method of data collection for this transcendental phenomenology was interviews. As Creswell (2013) stated, “For a phenomenological study, the process of collecting information involves primarily in-depth interviews” (p. 161). Interviews are used to “describe the meaning of the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced it” (Creswell, 2013, p. 161). Interviews were used as the first method of data collection to allow information obtained in the open-ended interviews to guide focus group interview questions. Open-ended interviews were used in order to obtain in-depth information regarding African American students’ college readiness experiences.

The interview questions were peer reviewed and piloted with former students prior to using them in the study (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2015). Pilot testing the interviews was conducted in order to establish additional safeguards that assisted in ensuring the data was objective (Gall et al., 2015, p. 118). Both pilot interviews and interviews that were included in this research study did not begin until IRB approval had been secured. The logistics of each interview depended on the location of the participants. Although it was intended that interviews be conducted face-to-face, Facetime, a video conferencing service provided for Apple users, or phone interviews were also used because of scheduling logistics. Before beginning each interview, reflexive journaling was used to ensure that previous experiences were bracketed before each point of data collection (Ahern, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). Each interview was also audio-recorded, and interview questions can be seen in Table 1.

Questions one through four were knowledge questions (Patton, 2015), and helped to break the ice at the start of the interview. These questions were intended to be non-threatening and establish a positive environment at the beginning of the interview (Patton, 2015). The

Table 1

Open-Ended Interview Questions

Questions

Opening Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself. Where did you grow up? How would your friends and family describe you as a person?
2. Why did you decide to go to college?
3. What made you choose your specific university?
4. What are your plans for the future after you obtain your bachelor's degree?

Questions Related to Situation, Self, Supports, and Strategies in the Moving In Stage

5. Describe your high school experience including academics, extracurricular activities, and memorable moments.
6. Describe your favorite teacher from high school. Why was he/she your favorite teacher?
7. Describe your family life during high school.
8. Describe how you felt after you graduated high school and prepared for your freshman year of college. What were your expectations?
9. What skills or strategies did you think would be necessary to be successful in college?
10. What important personal characteristics do you feel you possessed going into college?

Questions Related to Situation, Self, Supports, and Strategies in the Moving Through Stage

11. Describe your college experiences your freshman year.
12. Did you experience any challenges during your first year of college? If so, describe them.

13. Describe strategies or personal characteristics that you felt you possessed that positively impacted your first-year college experiences.
14. Describe strategies or personal characteristics that you felt you lacked that negatively impacted your first-year college experiences.
15. How were experiences in your first year impacted by any significant others, including family members and friends?

Questions Related to Situation, Self, Supports, & Strategies in the Moving Out Stage

16. How did your first year of college affect you? What changes do you associate with the experience?
17. How do you view your first year of college now? Was it a positive experience?
Negative?
18. What do you believe contributed the most to your decision to continue your education into your sophomore year?

Conclusion Questions

19. What advice would you give to students entering their first year of college?
 20. What do you wish you knew about college before you began your freshman year?
-

opening questions contributed to an understanding of various characteristics about each individual, while also allowing a better understanding of each participant's situation (Schlossberg, 1981, 2011) before moving in to the transition experience of college readiness.

Questions five through eighteen were driven by the phases of the transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981, 2011), which included moving into the first-year college experience, moving through the first-year college experience, and moving out of the first-year college experience.

Transition theory discusses three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevents (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002; Schlossberg, 2011). Questions five through eighteen helped to determine which type of transition defined participants' first year of college. Additionally, the four S's of the transition process, situation, self, support, and strategies, were all incorporated in the various stages of the interview questions. The lens of Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory was the force that drove the interview questions.

Questions five through ten were all related to moving in to the college experience. In the moving in stage of the transition process, the participants were taking on the new role of being a college student (Schlossberg, 1981). In this stage of the transition process, expectations of future experiences were being formed. Interview questions five through ten were created to obtain information regarding the four S's and the moving in phase of transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

Questions 11 through 15 were all related to the moving through stage of first year college experiences. In the moving through stage, participants knew the ropes of the experience through the various challenges and adaptations that happened during this stage (Anderson et al., 2012). Questions 11 through 15 were designed to obtain data in regard to the four S's as they related to the moving through stage of the college readiness experience.

Questions 16 through 18 were all related to the moving out stage of participants' first year college experiences. In this final stage of transition, individuals had completed the transition and began moving in to a new transition experience (Anderson et al., 2012). In this study, the first year of college had been completed, and students were transitioning into their second year of college. Questions 16 through 18 were designed to obtain information regarding what participants learned about the experience once they had completed the transition.

Questions 19 and 20 allowed the participants the opportunity to reflect on the overall experience of college readiness and add any other information that they wished. These questions were meant to be conclusion questions, and the information obtained helped describe the situation, self, supports, or strategies of any stage, depending on how participants responded. All interview questions were open-ended in order to obtain rich, thick descriptions of the participants' experiences of college readiness (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Narratives

Polkinghorne (1989) suggested that phenomenological researchers gather data outside of the scope of the research project's context. Additionally, Creswell (2013) suggested that researchers design "qualitative projects to include new and creative data collection methods" (p. 161). Along these lines, participants were asked to write a narrative, which was used to gain more detail about students' first year college experiences. Although narratives themselves are not new or creative, the prompt was meant to elicit a new and creative response from participants.

The prompt asked participants to find a meme, which is a humorous image or video that has been copied and spread by Internet users, a picture, a song, or a movie that most closely related to participants' college experiences in their first year. Participants were asked to find one meme, picture, song, or movie for each phase of the transition experience: before freshman year, or moving in; during freshman year, or moving through; and after freshman year, or moving out. For each item selected, the participants were asked to write a brief paragraph that explained why they felt the meme, picture, song, or movie was the best reflection of their college experiences during each of the stages of transition. The items chosen by participants were all considered outside of the project's context, which follows Polkinghorne's (1989) suggestion for

phenomenological research. However, participants themselves were asked to relate the selected item to the context of the study. Prompts were administered following the individual interviews. The items that participants selected were used to generate discussion during the focus groups.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were used to allow participants to interact with each other during the interview process (Gall et al., 2015). Focus groups were beneficial because interviewees have been through the same phenomenon, which was likely to produce better information (Creswell, 2013). Focus group interviews followed individual interviews and narratives to allow for placement of participants in particular focus groups and to provide information to guide the interview probing questions for the focus groups. Focus groups were determined based upon the site of participants. Participants who attended Lion University were placed in one focus group and participants who attended University of West were placed in another focus group. Online focus groups were used, which are commonly used for social research (Creswell, 2013). Although face-to-face is preferred, online was necessary because of distance and scheduling logistics for participants. Focus group questions can be found in Table 2.

Focus group questions were chosen to align with the individual interview questions while taking them a step further in order to obtain more in-depth data. Question one was meant to be an icebreaker and spur conversation about shared experiences among participants. Through this question, it was hoped that more information would be revealed about similar and different experiences about the transition process that was not revealed through individual interviews. The meme, song, or movie from the narratives was shown to other participants. Participants did not know who chose which meme, song, or movie, unless it was their own, and the personal writing responses of the narrative data collection were not included or shown in focus groups.

Table 2

Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

 Questions

1. Take a look at what other participants chose for the narratives. Which ones do you identify with and when do you think they fit your experiences?
 2. How can high schools better prepare students for college?
 3. What is the most important thing that incoming freshmen should know about entering college?
 4. What advice should be given to high school students who are considering enrolling in college?
 5. How can universities better support college students during their freshman year?
 6. What influences students the most in deciding to continue to their sophomore year?
 7. Is there anything else you would like to say about your first-year experiences?
-

Questions two through four were designed to obtain further information about participants' shared or varied experiences regarding the moving in stage of the transition (Schlossberg, 2011). These questions were meant to continue a conversation among focus group participants about what they believed was most or least important in preparing for college. Question four was also used with question five to obtain more detailed information about the moving through stage of the transition process (Schlossberg, 2011). These two questions focused on the actual experiences during the participants' first year. Question six was used to obtain further information about how students were able to successfully transition into their second year, as the literature detailed dropout rates to be highest during and following freshman

year (DeNicco, Harrington, & Fogg, 2015). Question seven was used as an exit question to give participants an opportunity to add anything else to the conversation. College students who were not participating in the study piloted focus group questions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted for this transcendental phenomenology following the guidelines provided by Moustakas (1994). Analysis procedures began with bracketing or the Epoche (Moustakas, 1994), which required reflexive journaling (Ahern, 1999). After bracketing, data was analyzed through a process called phenomenological reduction. Following the reduction process, the data was coded and clustered into themes. Themes were used to create textural descriptions. Imaginative variations were used to analyze possible meanings and structural qualities. Structural qualities were turned into structural themes. Structural themes were used to create a composite description, or essence, of the phenomenon being studied, and textural and structural descriptions were combined to form the description of African American students' descriptions of college readiness (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2015; Moustakas, 1994).

In the first step of analyzing the data, Moustakas (1994) emphasizes the Epoche. Epoche required any preconceived ideas about college readiness, participants, and any other information relevant to this study to be set aside. Moustakas (1994) stated that the Epoche must be done through "systematic efforts" (p. 22). Epoche was done through a process called reflexive journaling (Ahern, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). According to Ahern (1999), reflexivity "involves the realization that researchers are part of the social world that they study" (p. 408). The process of reflexive journaling involved preparation, action, evaluation, and systematic feedback (Ahern, 1999). Through writing out preconceived ideas, the phenomenon was better understood on its

own, rather than through prejudgments made about the phenomenon. This process began during the data collection process and continued throughout the research study.

Following Epoche, phenomenological reduction was used to analyze each type and piece of data that was collected (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction was a process in which interview transcriptions, focus group transcriptions, and narratives were read repetitively in order to describe the data's textural qualities (Moustakas, 1994). In the phenomenological reduction process, repetition was necessary to perceive the data fresh and for the first time, multiple times (Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenological reduction process was also the point in which the textural qualities emerged (Moustakas, 1994). During each reading of each piece of data from interviews, focus groups, and narratives, coding was used to make notations of significant statements (Creswell, 2013). ATLAS.ti was used to track the significant statements and to memo. Memoing allowed the researcher to keep track and reflect on the data. ATLAS.ti assisted in the next step of the process, which is called horizontalization. ATLAS.ti is a piece of qualitative software that assists in counting word occurrences, various similar phrases, and other mechanical aspects of qualitative analysis. Although the software did not and could not be used to interpret the data, it assisted in the research process through potential mitigation of human error.

Upon obtaining the textural qualities through phenomenological reduction, the process that Moustakas (1994) referred to as horizontalization was completed. Horizontalization involved creating themes using the textural qualities found in the phenomenological reduction process. Statements that were unrelated to the purpose of this study were removed from the data analysis prior to creating themes (Moustakas, 1994). It is often easy to become distracted by data that is

interesting, yet unrelated to the research questions upon which the study was focused (Creswell, 2013). This demonstrates the importance of removing data that was unrelated from the data analysis. When themes were established, they were used to describe the experiences of African American college students (Moustakas, 1994).

Following the establishment of the themes, imaginative variation was used to further describe the experiences of African American college students (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation is how researchers attempt to create meaning from the data itself. As Moustakas (1994) said, imaginative variation “is to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions” (p. 100). Imaginative variation was used to create structural descriptions of the experience, which was the “how” of “what” students had experienced, or the underlying factors that contributed to the experience. The steps to imaginative variation included:

1. Systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings;
2. Recognizing the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon;
3. Considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others;
4. Searching for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of a structural description of the phenomenon. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 101)

Structural themes that emerged through the process of imaginative variation were used in the next step to describe the “essence” of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The essence of the experience or phenomenon was central to the process of imaginative variation and transcendental phenomenology. The process of imaginative variation assisted me as the researcher in determining the aspects of the experience that were essential in order for the phenomenon to take place (Moustakas, 1994).

The final step of the data analysis process involved integrating the structural and textural themes together in order to have a more complete description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The holistic description of the phenomenon is what Moustakas (1994) called the “essence” of the phenomenon, which focuses on the universal findings that would be transferable to other similar situations. Although the essence of any phenomenon will never be completely exhausted or transferable, the combination of the textural and structural descriptions and themes were a representation of the experiences of African American college students.

Trustworthiness

A major part of the validity of a qualitative study is establishing trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study ensured trustworthiness through establishing credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability. Each aspect of establishing trustworthiness was equally important for increasing the validity of the findings.

Credibility

Credibility is the extent to which the findings are transferable between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2013). Credibility was obtained through prolonged engagement with participants; triangulation; peer review; rich, thick description; and member checking.

Prolonged engagement requires the researcher to build trust with participants, learn their culture, and check for misinformation (Creswell, 2013, p. 250). Prolonged engagement was essential to the credibility of this study, as a white woman conducted the study, and participants were African Americans. The researcher attempted to build a relationship of trust with participants, learn their culture, and check for misinformation through both a peer reviewer and through member checking. Prolonged engagement took place through the interview process, including both individual interviews and focus group interviews. Spending extended amounts of time with participants enhanced the credibility of the study.

Triangulation was also used to obtain credibility. Triangulation requires the researcher to collect data from multiple sources (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which this study completed through interviews, focus groups, and narratives. Obtaining data from multiple sources establishes credibility through the various data sources validating each other (Wheeler, 2012).

Peer review was used to provide external checks to the research process. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the peer reviewer questions the researcher to ensure research processes and findings are honest and accurate interpretations of the experiences. The peer reviewer checked the researcher's process to ensure that Moustakas's (1994) framework for a transcendental phenomenology had been followed.

Rich, thick description requires the researcher to provide detailed information regarding the findings (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2015; Moustakas, 1994). Rich, thick description provided details and support for the credibility of the themes that emerged during the data analysis phase. Extensive detail was necessary for credibility to demonstrate support for the themes that were interpreted through analysis of the research findings (Moustakas, 1994).

Finally, member checking was used to shift the validity of the findings from the researcher to participants as participants read the findings and confirmed the researcher's interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the research process, the researcher kept a profile for each participant. The profile included transcriptions of their individual interviews, narratives, and focus group transcriptions. Member checking occurred in two separate instances, following individual interviews, and following data analysis. In the second instance of member checking, participants were given the opportunity to read the results of the study following the analysis phase. This allowed participants the chance to voice concerns about misinterpreted data, and therefore enhanced the credibility of the study.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability are the extent to which the results of the study are determined to be valid (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability and confirmability were obtained through developing rich, thick descriptions of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Member checks were also used to obtain dependability and confirmability. Member checks shifted the validity from the researcher to the participants through having participants confirm the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, reflexive journaling further increased the dependability and confirmability of this study. Reflexive journaling was a crucial part of ensuring dependability as it was part of the process of ensuring that previous experiences remained bracketed in order to obtain a fresh perspective (Ahern, 1999; Moustakas, 1994).

Transferability

When data had been collected and analyzed, transferability was created through establishing rich, thick descriptions of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Since data collection

continued until saturation was achieved (Moustakas, 1994), the findings can be transferable to other settings and participants who share characteristics and meet the criterion of this study. As a result of obtaining data saturation, the results should be transferable to other African American students at four-year institutions who have graduated from a public high school.

Ethical Considerations

There were multiple ethical considerations throughout the course of this research study. The first ethical consideration was obtaining IRB approval from the research institution. After IRB approval was obtained, all participants who had been selected for the study completed an informed consent form. The consent forms detailed the voluntary nature of participating in the study, as well as participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Privacy of the participants was protected through the use of pseudonyms during the research process (Gall et al., 2015). Pseudonyms were also used for university and high school names. All data was kept confidential through using password-protected computers, and no more than three computers were used to store data. Any hard copy data has been stored in a locked file cabinet, and will remain for a period of three years. In order to avoid "using" participants, participants were debriefed of the outcomes of the study as a way of giving back for their participation (Creswell, 2013).

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how African American college students in mid-Atlantic four-year universities experience college readiness. This chapter has presented the plan and rationale for the research design and approach. This chapter has also detailed the procedures that were used to conduct this study, beginning with IRB approval. Sampling procedures for the setting and participants, methods for

data collection, methods for data analysis, and steps taken to ensure trustworthiness have also been discussed in this chapter. To conclude the chapter, ethical considerations were detailed, including steps that were taken to protect identities of participants and methods to protect any data that was collected as part of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to understand the college readiness experiences of African American students at a four-year university. This chapter introduces the students who agreed to participate in the study; however, pseudonyms that reflect the demographic of participants have been used to protect their identity. Results of the data analysis in the form of themes as answers to the research questions that are the focus of this study are also included. This chapter concludes with a summary of the study results, composite textural and structural descriptions of the college readiness experiences of African American students attending four-year institutions, and a description of the essence of African American students' college readiness experiences for students who continued their college education beyond their first year.

Participants

This study was conducted with the help of 13 participants who successfully transitioned through their freshman year of college. All of the participants attended a public high school, were enrolled in a four-year institution at the time of participation, and had completed at least one calendar year on campus at a four-year institution. In an effort to truly and accurately represent a portrait of participants as individuals, quotes used in this chapter are quoted verbatim from participants, including any errors in spelling and grammar.

Amaya

A junior attending Lion University, Amaya hopes to become a nurse after obtaining her bachelor's degree. Her family would describe her as a shy, introverted individual who is also hardworking, determined, respectful, and a follower of Christ. As an introvert, Amaya struggled

during grade school as well as throughout her freshman year in college. After being bullied in grade school, she felt she was forced to get to know herself and what it would take for her to be successful in high school. Despite having a sense of who she was as an individual before her freshman year, she experienced many challenges during her freshman year. Throughout her freshman year, Amaya struggled in developing friendships and performing at the academic level that she expected of herself. Notwithstanding these challenges, she was able to overcome them as a result of her determination, her belief in the importance of education, and her faith.

Athena

Confident, well spoken, thoughtful, and motivated are a few words that best describe Athena. As a young college senior at University of West, 20-year-old Athena plans to attend law school after graduating in May, and hopes to eventually become a judge. One of the reasons that Athena went to college was because her career requires a degree; however, she also stated that she wanted to go to college. According to Athena, “I always liked academics. I find that academics is where I thrive, so I knew that graduating from high school wouldn’t really do anything for me if I stopped.”

In describing her high school experiences, Athena further emphasized her academic drive and motivation to do well. While in high school, she participated in a myriad of different extracurricular activities, including band, various honor societies, and tennis. Her involvement in various organizations continued to be important during her experiences at University of West. During her freshman year, Athena felt as though she was not involved enough, which impacted her experiences. In future years, she became more involved and more connected to the campus, which she believed helped her successfully transition through the overall college experience.

Camille

Camille is an easy going and easy to talk to senior attending Lion University with expectations of graduating in a few short months with a psychology degree. Throughout high school and college, she has maintained a close relationship with her family, which has impacted her college experiences. She described her mother as having an influential role in both deciding to go to college and in her decision to continue her college education beyond her freshman year. When asked why she decided to go to college she stated, “At the end of the day, I had no choice.”

Developing relationships with people has never been an issue for Camille; however, her relationships and involvement in many different activities impacted her academic performance during her freshman year at Lion University. She often chose social activities over academics, which caused her academic performance to suffer during her freshman year. However, as Camille described herself as a decent student with the natural ability to get good grades, she was able to get good grades in high school and college, without having to work hard. Although she did not have to work hard to get good grades, time management was a bigger challenge for her in college than it was in high school.

Faye

Easy going, hardworking, helpful and a self-described go-getter, Faye is currently a sophomore on a pre-med track at University of West with hopes to eventually become a pediatrician. Despite having completed multiple Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses during high school, Faye felt that she did not have to work hard in high school, which resulted in her having to adapt to the rigorous level of college work. Going to college felt like a new adventure for Faye; however, the challenges that she faced throughout the year left her

feeling relieved when it was over. In dealing with these challenges, organizational involvement was a positive part of her college experiences. As a freshman, being involved in organizations for both social and professional reasons provided Faye with an outlet for stress, and helped her adapt to the rigorous level of college courses and reduced her feeling of being overwhelmed.

Hasanati

Born and raised as a first generation American citizen, Hasanati came from a Nigerian family who has traveled back and forth from Nigeria throughout her lifetime. As part of being the first-born as well as the first generation raised in the United States, Hasanati had to grow up quickly and had a lot of expectations for herself and from her family. When she graduates, she is considering working with the Peace Corps, and eventually plans to attend medical school to become an obstetrician or a gynecologist.

Hasanati's freshman year experiences were challenging as a result of lacking time management skills and because of the expectations placed on her by others. Although her GPA does not fit the expectation for her desired profession, Hasanati cited being determined to work towards her goals anyway. Despite being advised to consider other career paths, Hasanati completed her freshman year even more determined to reach her goals as a result of others doubting her ability to accomplish the goals she has set for herself.

Jaleel

An only child who was raised by a single mother, Jaleel is currently a junior at Lion University. Jaleel's mother has had a considerable influence on his life that has continued into his college experiences. He described her as being a scholarly woman who is also domineering in his life and decision making processes. Although he wanted to go to college, Jaleel stated that

his mother would not have allowed him any other option. When asked what made him decide to continue his college experience beyond his freshman year, Jaleel said:

I had to. Mom expected that I had to. My mom is a little extra, but we should have more like her. My senior year in high school she made me sign a contract about all of the requirements I had to do while I was here in college since she was paying for it.

Although Jaleel faced multiple challenges during his freshman year of college, he described the year as a positive experience without any hesitation, stating that he would not have learned as much if he had not faced those challenges. Jaleel felt as though he had not developed the necessary social skills to really find a friend group, which resulted in him not finding people he could identify with until his sophomore year. However, as a result of these challenges, Jaleel felt that he was able to gain a stronger sense of who he is as an individual, and what he needed to do in order to be successful.

Julian

Julian described himself as an extrovert and a joyful person who entered college without expectations because, “by me expecting, then it would kind of make me, leave me vulnerable to like mistakes. So I was just open to anything, but I didn’t really have any expectations.” Despite not having any expectations himself, Julian’s family expected him to go to college and complete his degree, just as the rest of his family had. Although being an outgoing individual helped Julian adjust to a new environment, he struggled to balance both the social and academic aspects of his freshman year experience. When asked to describe his college experiences his freshman year, Julian stated:

Um, there was a lot of partying. Um, yeah, there was a lot of partying. I didn’t really do what I had to do. Pertaining to like my academics and that means I should have, but I

just didn't. Um, socially it was great. I felt like, I feel like you have to have a balance between social and academic and I didn't have that so as my social whatever came higher, academics became lower.

As someone who is used to getting good grades and determined to accomplish what he sets out to do, Julian was disappointed in his academic performance his freshman year. However, he focused his reasons for a low level of performance on choices and priorities, knowing he was capable of performing better.

Kayla

Having attended a predominantly white high school in a suburb of New York City, Kayla chose to attend University of West because of its diversity. She believed her experiences attending a predominantly white high school helped her during her freshman year at University of West.

I know personally that I'm used to like not having that many people who I'd be like in my grade there was only like five or six other black people in my grade, and like one of my friends that she went to school with, like literally there was like one person who wasn't black in her school. So she feels like very uncomfortable here [University of West].

Despite having attended a predominantly white high school, Kayla related to the struggle of finding people whom she could identify with on a campus that she expected to be more diverse. Becoming involved in organizations helped her with this sense of belonging.

Kayla described herself as a procrastinator in high school who had to learn quickly in college that procrastination would be her downfall. Despite having participated in extracurricular activities in high school, Kayla felt that she still needed to develop time

management and focus on not procrastinating upon entering college. She spent her freshman year having to readjust her expectations of college to fit the reality of her experiences, which primarily involved procrastination, rigorous coursework, and time management.

Octavia

Soft-spoken and very shy, Octavia is currently a sophomore at University of West and plans to attend graduate school to attain her Master's in Public Health. During her freshman year, Octavia felt that she had to get to know herself better as an individual, which helped her become more grounded in her goals and her aspirations. When asked to describe her experiences freshman year, Octavia reported:

I learned a lot about myself, like what my interests are, how I interact with people that are not like me because I went to [high school] and it was predominantly African American, so it's like this was like almost a culture shock type thing. So that was good. Um, yeah, learned about me.

One of Octavia's biggest challenges her freshman year was time management and learning how to balance everything. Her family schedule during high school guided her time management abilities, and having the freedom of a college freshman presented a challenge of balancing her social life, academic life, and personal care.

Olivia

Outgoing, independent, confident, and business-minded, Olivia attends University of West and is majoring in international business. She is already running her own hairstyling business while also enrolled in school full time. Olivia chose University of West for its diversity and rigorous academic reputation, which was important to her as she described herself as a star student. Despite entering college feeling confident and as though she had the necessary skills to

be successful, Olivia had to adapt herself to the experience. When asked about changes that she associated with her freshman year experience, Olivia noted, “I matured more and I already thought I was mature. I definitely matured more.” Additionally, Olivia felt that she was prepared for college. She cited knowing that time management and self-awareness would be important for success, and felt that she had these characteristics upon entering college.

Throughout her freshman year, Olivia experienced challenges that were unexpected for someone who entered college feeling confident and self-aware. She suffered from depression during her freshman year, which she believed was a result of feeling academically stressed. Finding friends who could support and motivate her through the challenges she experienced, along with her personal determination and family support contributed to her overcoming the challenges she faced in order to successfully transition into her sophomore year.

Sade

Immersed in the arts, Sade plans to move to Hollywood upon graduation from University of West to pursue a career in acting. Sade’s mom influenced both her drive and determination through setting an example for her throughout high school. In describing her mom’s influence, Sade recounted:

She always instilled that in me to be the best at everything I do because especially as a black woman of color I have to be the best. I have to be better than the best to be on the same level of everyone else.

Sade’s high school was predominantly African American, and attending University of West was a culture shock for her that caused her to grow as an individual. She described feeling apprehensive of white people going into her freshman year, and told her friends not to bring

white friends around her. However, she stated that as she moved through her freshman year she changed.

That's the attitude that I had originally, but my friend [Tiannah], she had a lot of white friends. She just tried to convince me, 'Like not everyone is like that and you'll see.' And it helped me to like you know to reach out too, but not even reach out, but to give people a chance. And the [theatre] department is mostly you know white students and I just thought I was isolating myself originally. But now like all of my friends are basically white. So I feel like that helped me a lot because I would never have opened up if I had not heard that from her. I was very stuck in my ways. I'm not even going to lie to you.

Tia

Active and involved in many organizations on campus, Tia is a sophomore at University of West. She attended a Middle College High School that was relatively new at the time and lacked many extracurricular activities. However, she chose to find ways to get involved in activities and organizations in surrounding schools including theatre programs, a modeling team, and a dance team. When asked how her friends and family would describe her, Tia stated:

I would say caring, um, and I can be, trying to find the best way to say this. Um, when it comes to like things that I'm involved in, I can be very um, focused but like overly focused on it. Like I want to make sure I'm doing it right.

Although not her first choice, Tia decided to attend University of West without touring the campus. Upon beginning her freshman year, Tia made the most of her experience through becoming involved in a multitude of organizations and activities on campus her freshman year, including running in a pageant and traveling with a poetry team. As a result of becoming

involved in numerous things, Tia felt that some of her biggest challenges during her freshman year were balancing all of her various roles while also getting enough sleep. Additionally, she described herself as stubborn, and she refused to give up involvement, despite the impact that it had on her life both academically and physically.

Trey

Trey loves people and is passionate about serving others through non-profit organizations. When asked to describe himself or how family and friends would describe him. Trey noted, “They usually always say that I just love people and I enjoy making people alive and I was very driven in what I did.” His career goals involve working for a Fortune 500 company, though as evidence of his love for people, he hopes to focus his time on non-profit organizations. In fact, Trey has already started a non-profit organization with the purpose of helping victims of sexual assault, rape, and domestic violence.

Trey attributed his freshman year success to his outgoing, people-loving personality and his personal drive and determination to reach his goals. Although he struggled with time management and balancing his various responsibilities freshman year, the friends he made as a result of his outgoing personality had a significant impact on his ability to enjoy his freshman year.

The 13 participants of the present study have been introduced in this section. Through the individual interview process, narrative prompts, and focus group interviews, the participants were viewed as persons with both experiences that were individually unique while also similar to each other. In describing their freshman year, participants were thoughtful as well as nostalgic. Everyone felt they had grown as an individual as a result of their freshman year experiences, citing a feeling of accomplishment throughout the various methods of data collection. The

subsequent section brings together the results that followed participants through the process of a successful transition into a four-year university.

Results

The research questions were developed with the purpose of the study, theoretical framework, and transcendental phenomenological process in mind. Data analysis occurred through the lens of the research questions, which focused on the theoretical framework, utilizing the three stages of the transition theory. Data analysis revealed four primary themes, with ten sub themes. The four primary themes include 1) identity; 2) self-management and college awareness; 3) engagement; and 4) relationships. Each of these primary themes included two to three sub-themes, which can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Themes and Sub-Themes of College Readiness

Identity	Personal Characteristics
	Self-Awareness
	Culture Shock or Someone Like Me
Self-Management and College Awareness	Time Management and Balance
	Personal Care
	College Level Work
Engagement	Organizational Involvement
	Utilizing Resources
Relationships	Family
	Friends

Identity

Personal characteristics were the first aspects of identity that emerged through each interview as participants were asked to describe themselves in the initial questions. This theme

also emerged throughout other interview question responses and the other methods of data collection. The other two sub-themes, self-awareness and culture shock or someone like me, emerged through participants' descriptions of their experiences and their personal situations.

Personal characteristics. Each of the participants, regardless of their year in school has a plan in place for their future and cited particular personal characteristics as reasons why they have been able to successfully transition beyond their freshman year. Although having an outgoing personality was a characteristic mentioned by Trey, Tia, and Faye as something that helped them to be successful in feeling connected to campus during their freshman year, determination and motivation were the most frequently cited characteristics impacting participants' success.

Determination. All 13 participants described themselves as determined in some aspects of their lives. Some described themselves as determined individuals in general. When asked to describe themselves in the initial interview, Tia, Trey, Athena, Amaya, Julian, and Olivia all stated that they were determined individuals and continued to demonstrate this characteristic when describing their experiences and why they decided to continue their college education. In describing his reasons for continuing his college education, Trey stated, "I think it just comes down to my personal, like drive to be successful. I want to be the best that I can be."

Although Camille, Hasanati, Jaleel, Kayla, Octavia, Sade, and Faye did not specifically describe themselves as determined, they all described specific events that provide evidence of their determination. For example, although Camille initially cited family expectations as a major reason for deciding to go to college, she also demonstrated determination in describing why she decided to continue on to her sophomore year. As she stated, "I never went in with the mindset that I wasn't going to go back, that I was going to quit. I've always had the mindset that, you

know, that I start and so I'm going to finish." Similarly, Olivia stated that she continued onto her second year because of her:

zeal to keep going on. Like I don't want to ever like stop. You know? Like I don't want, I don't want something to limit me. Like I don't, I don't like limitations, so I know I'm going to graduate so I had to. I was going to keep going through sophomore year.

As individuals who really struggled in their freshman year, Amaya and Sade both cited determination as their reason for continuing into sophomore year despite having major doubts during their freshman year experiences. As Amaya stated:

So that, that's what's been keeping me. My determination. My drive. Knowing how important education is and just what I want to do in the next few years to come. So that's what, that's what, um, has really been keeping me going.

Although Sade considered not returning to University of West for her sophomore year as a result of feeling like she did not belong, she decided to stay as a result of her determination. As she stated:

So I was like, I'll just stay one more year. I'll keep pushing through and I feel like me being able to do that just shows how strong I really am as a person. If I would have left, that would have been me quitting, and I can't quit at anything.

Other similar characteristics mentioned by participants included their hardworking natures. As Faye stated:

I am a very helpful person and, and nice, um, also hardworking, like if they have a problem or like difficult it needs to be said, like I think they would describe me as a go-getter or like somebody's going to like finish all the tasks that I had.

Motivation. Although motivated by many different things, seven of the participants cited motivation as a personal characteristic through their experiences. Tia is motivated to get a college education because, “Just having a high school diploma isn’t enough to really get to what I’m trying to get to.” Olivia and Amaya were both motivated by their mother’s influence in their lives and the desire to make them proud. As Amaya said in reference to challenges that she faced, “Knowing that I had like I had to make my mom proud ... kind of helped me through.” Athena’s high school friends, with whom she kept in touch through college, motivated her to continue performing her best. As she said of her high school friends, “We also motivated each other to make sure that we’re keeping on track and doing what we’re supposed to do.”

Self-awareness. Throughout the data collection process, the idea self-awareness or knowing yourself and staying true to who you are became a significant sub-theme that was not necessarily tied to any particular stage of the transition process or any particular situation; however, it was even more evident in participants’ descriptions about their freshman year experiences, the challenges they faced, and how they changed as a result of freshman year. In describing why he was excited to go to college, Trey stated, “I was excited for it, and I was at this point where I just wanted to like discover myself.” He also would advise future students to not “be afraid of change and to discover who you are and like hold true to that.”

Sade, Olivia, and Athena mentioned the importance of having self-awareness with regard to their success and their futures. In regard to personal characteristics that she had prior to entering college, Sade explained:

Well I think as a theater major well me declaring that as my major I had to know that that is exactly what I wanted to do and I had to make sure that that was my passion because you know that’s not really something that everybody majors in.

Olivia also cited her self-awareness as a reason for her success in her freshman year. In regard to strategies that she thought she would need before she got to college, she remarked:

Just knowing yourself, like that has helped me a lot because a lot of people when they come to college they don't know themselves so they, they lose themselves as so many people get on academic probation and all this stuff. And I've never experienced that because I came in, like I said, more confident than most people did.

However, despite being confident, Olivia still had to develop more acute self-awareness. During her freshman year, she suffered from depression as a result of academic stress and not being used to being alone. After getting through that challenge, "I got to learn some more about myself that I did not know before coming here, um, that sometimes I do need to be alone and now like, I like being alone."

In another example of developing a more acute sense of self-awareness, Trey felt like freshman year forced him to become more mature. As he stated, "Freshman year helped me realize that I wasn't as grown as I thought I was." A big part of this change was a result of being financially independent. This feeling was also echoed in the meme that he chose to describe his experiences during his freshman year, which can be seen in Figure 1.

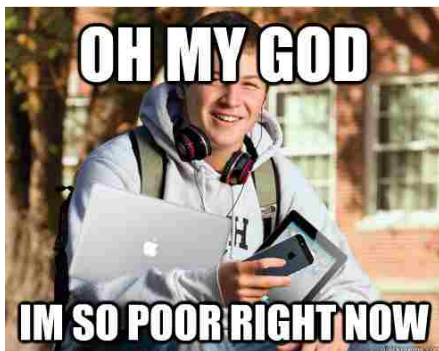


Figure 1. Trey's meme for his experiences during his freshman year.

Hasanati discussed the challenges that others expected her to face in college; however, she indicated that her self-awareness and knowledge of herself was more accurate than what others saw. Many of her high school peers thought that she would “wild out” at college because she did not attend parties in high school, and Hasanati said, “I was actually low key scared that I might do that, but I was just thinking like, I don’t think, like I was like I know myself, who I am.” In another instance, Hasanati discussed the doubt that she felt from faculty members at her university regarding her career choice in medicine because she does not have a 3.5 GPA; however, she stated that she knows herself and her passions, and she knows herself well enough to not let the doubt of others affect her career choices.

Camille had to get to know herself and learn to give herself the credit that she deserves. When asked what changes she associated with her experiences during her freshman year, she replied, “My freshman year taught me that um, I have more potential than I give myself credit for because sometimes you know, like you just know you don't want to praise yourself too much.”

Through Amaya’s challenging first year, she had to learn more self-awareness as well. Even though she felt that her experience being bullied in middle school had helped her really develop a sense of herself, the challenges she faced during her first year put her self-awareness to the test, even in regard to time management skills. In discussing her struggles with time management, Amaya stated, “I just feel like it also comes down to you as a person and really knowing, fully like understanding who you are.”

Culture shock or someone like me. Both University of West and Lion University are Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). Participants at both universities discussed the impact of being African American at a PWI, even though none of the interview questions, focus group

questions, or narrative prompt mentioned or asked about participants' experiences regarding race or specifically attending a PWI. Some participants stated that it was a good thing because it made them stronger as individuals, while others cited it as a reason for some of their challenges during their freshman year.

Amaya and Sade both described a difficult roommate situation during their freshman year. Amaya was placed in a triple room with two other roommates, and she often felt excluded and out of place. She struggled to identify with her roommates and indicated:

I would be in the room and I would feel so uncomfortable because I'm feeling like, you know, like I don't match up to a certain standard to even be included or something. And then socially on campus, that's how I would feel ... And so I didn't really identify with a lot of people. And so going through my, my freshman year until second semester, I was just, um, I was pretty much like doing it all alone. I had no friends.

In describing her living situation and how it impacted her, Sade said:

I had a roommate who was ... I wouldn't call her a racist but she was pretty ignorant to the black, to the black race. And she didn't know a lot of things. She was just pretty rude about things. She would like say a lot of slick comments about me being black, and that was really hard to like come home and deal with every day. It gave me a lot of anxiety my freshman year. I felt like I didn't really belong, you know at this school, because of course there's not a lot of black people here anyway.

Sade's narrative responses also focused on the culture shock that she faced upon entering University of West. Three of Sade's memes that she chose to describe her freshman year experiences related to her struggle with culture shock. The first one can be seen in Figure 2. Sade described why this meme fit her experience:

To this day, as a sophomore, often times I do regret choosing to attend a PWI, but I also feel that attending a PWI has given me perseverance and has taught me how to communicate effectively with people outside of the African American community.

In reference to memes that other participants chose and they could identify with, Jaleel also identified with Figure 2 because, “I got some flack from my family about going to an evangelical school in [city of Lion University] when I’m a black man.”

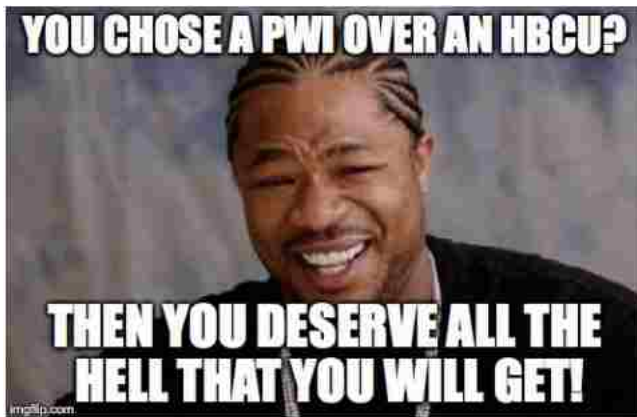


Figure 2. Sade’s meme for her before/during freshman year experience.

Sade’s second meme can be seen in Figure 3. Sade described why this meme fit her experience:

I remember crying in my first freshman dorm about how I felt like my friends and I were the only black people at my school. Eventually however, I found the Black Student Union, and to this day, I only attend BSU events and have become acquainted with people who do the same. In a campus where, in all of my classes I’m always one out of at most two black students in my class, I feel that it is necessary to surround myself with black students. It gives me a sense of being at home and reminds me that I’m not alone with all I go through and experience being a black student on campus.

Another of Sade's narrative choices used a meme with the caption, "I don't belong here. Not in this atmosphere." This meme was one that Kayla could also identify with, even though she grew up in an area that was predominantly white and had discussed being used to being one of only a few other black students.

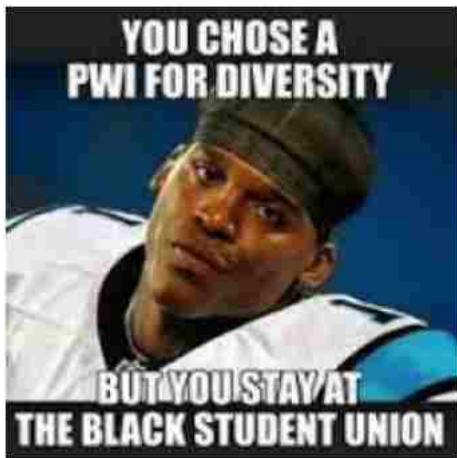


Figure 3. Sade's meme for her during freshman year experience.

Jaleel also really struggled with the culture shock of attending a PWI, and had difficulty identifying with his peers and finding a group of friends. When describing his freshman year experiences, Jaleel indicated that his experiences were "a little lonely because [Lion University] is predominantly white ... It's like mostly, so just finding my niche within that." His narratives also reflected this struggle in the songs that he chose to represent his experiences. Jaleel chose the song "Walls" by Snoh Aalegra. One of the lyrics of the song reflects his experiences of being lonely and not being able to identify with anyone: "I gotta stand up and fight on my own, I will be all alone in the end." Jaleel described why this song fit his experiences:

Not only did I close myself off from people but sometimes I closed myself off from myself because I had to find someone new within myself to handle these new issues. My old self could not be successful in this new environment so I had to rediscover myself.

Other participants also cited experiencing a culture shock upon attending their chosen universities. As Faye indicated:

Also like where I lived was like predominantly African American area, like even my high school was predominantly African American. So coming to school, like coming to a PWI and where it's like vast diversity, like there's so many different cultures and people was a big shock to me because I lived in [participant's home city] like half my life and I didn't really go out of that range so that was also like a big, like shock for me too.

Similarly, Octavia grew up in a predominantly African American community. Octavia described her freshman year experiences:

I met a lot of new people. I learned a lot about myself, like what my interests are, how I interact with people that are not like me because I went to [participant's high school] and it was predominantly African American, so it's like this was like almost a culture shock type thing. So that was good.

Self-Management and College Awareness

The theme of self-management and college awareness encompasses skills, strategies, and knowledge that participants described relating to their college readiness experiences. The sub-themes include skills such as time management and the ability to balance the many responsibilities of a college student. Another sub-theme that emerged relating to self-management was personal care. Personal care is a sub-theme of self-management rather than identity because participants who discussed personal care discussed it as a challenge related to time management and the struggle of balancing their various activities and responsibilities. The last sub-theme of self-management and college awareness focuses on the rigorous level and amount of work that participants cited as being a major part of their freshman year experiences.

Time management and balance. Time management and balance were the most frequently discussed strategies relating to participants' freshman year experiences. This sub-theme was discussed by 12 of the 13 participants throughout the interviews, narratives, and focus group interviews. Jaleel was the only participant who did not mention time management as a challenge; however, he was also one of the few participants who did not get involved with many on campus opportunities during his freshman year. For the other 12 participants, time management and the ability to balance everything was the most commonly stated challenge. Additionally, for those who felt that they had a positive experience, time management was cited as a reason for being able to create a positive experience.

Amaya, Faye, Kayla, Olivia, and Trey all knew that time management would be necessary to be successful in college and felt that they had some level of the skill before entering college, but each had to learn better time management skills during freshman year. Knowing that he would need to have good time management skills going into college, Trey stated:

I knew it was a lot more freedom for me and I will be making a lot of my own decisions. And I knew based off of past experiences I knew that if I didn't have a system, it would not go well.

Amaya also knew she needed time management but had to learn better time management when she got to college. Amaya reflected on her freshman year:

I had to learn. Um, time management. Like I always thought, you know, I did it in high school. I used to do soccer. I would come home and do homework, but the college level work, it's a different level from high school. It's like more fast-paced and more information is being thrown at you. And so time management requires way more than it does in high-school. Setting up your schedule, right? That you study, you have enough

time to study. You don't feel like you're cramming or if someone wants to hang out, you have to also make friends and you don't get the full college experience so that you keep your sanity and not just academics and academics and just made kind of other important things. So I feel like I'm, as far as time management was concerned, I definitely needed to master that more.

Amaya's narrative also reflected her struggle with time management. The meme that she chose can be seen in Figure 4. Amaya described why this meme fit her freshman year experience:

This meme sums up my first semester of college fairly well. This is because, I was drowning in all of the assignments, trying to keep up with deadlines, trying have a social life, and maintaining healthy habits. The meme depicts how I felt trying to accomplish all of that.



This is fine, everything's fine.

Figure 4. Amaya's meme for her during freshman year experience.

Similarly, Faye stated her time management skills as something that became enhanced as a result of freshman year. Faye referenced the changes she associated with freshman year:

Coming to college really like set in stone a way for me to set up a time management schedule and a schedule for my day. Like I would write down what I had to do today and

as I do it, I check it off that way it's like, ok, I accomplished this today, I accomplished that today. That's something that really helped me freshman year and that I use this year. Kayla was able to learn specifically what time management strategy worked for her through writing everything down. Kayla discussed why she needed to take time management more seriously:

Especially like from like the grade that I got my first year I was like, yeah, it's time for me to like, I have like, now in my room I have a, like a dry erase calendar on my wall, which I didn't have before. So like I'm writing more stuff down. I'm writing down like what assignments are due, so, and I feel like it's more tedious, but at the same time like it's going to make a difference if it's on my wall, it's in my phone, it's like everywhere, so I know what I have to do.

In addition, Olivia felt that she had really good time management skills prior to coming to college. However, as a result of owning her own business, being a full time student, and working full time, she still mentioned time management as a struggle, "I had time management, but it wasn't to this extent. Coming to college has definitely helped my time management a lot."

Camille, Hasanati, Julian, Octavia, and Tia indicated that time management was a skill that they lacked during their freshman year as well. In regard to those skills that she lacked, Camille indicated, "I think time management was a big, like just balancing, like knowing when, knowing when to tell people no to do like extracurricular activities, and telling myself to do something for myself that I needed." She continued to discuss time management as one of her major challenges freshman year in trying to balance her various responsibilities. Likewise, Hasanati cited time management as a skill that she knew would be necessary to be successful, but also as a major challenge in her freshman year. Hasanati elaborated on the time management

skill that she lacked in her freshman year, “That I didn’t get at all when I was in high school.” This continued to be a challenge for her throughout freshman year as she stated, “So I had to like discipline myself, to not, to prioritize what I need to do first. And do the second thing and the third thing later on, and have time for that too.”

Similarly, although Tia felt that it was important to become involved in many different organizations, she had to learn to prioritize and balance her various responsibilities as well. As she said in regard to being involved in many different organizations:

My freshman year I struggled kind of like with balancing the different stuff that I was in. A lot of people would tell me that, ‘You’re involved in too much, maybe you should cut back.’ Um, but I’m kind of stubborn, so I still stayed in everything I did, and still added more things on. So I think that made things definitely difficult.

Julian and Trey also felt that they had never learned time management skills, which they both said impacted their grades negatively. In reference to challenges he faced during his freshman year, Julian responded, “Maybe, um like with my academics, I fell short just because I didn’t really have the time management skills that would have provided me to like do great in my classes.” Likewise, regarding his challenges during his freshman year, Trey said:

I think academic wise it was difficult. Not in regards to like, the level of difficulty, but just like the discipline that I talked about, like being able to balance, having fun with friends and actually doing homework, because you get here and it’s like ‘Oh man, I have a week to do this.’ Right. And then next thing you know, you have two hours to do it before midnight.

In reference to the challenges that she faced in her freshman year, Octavia discussed time management as the key to her success once she was able to overcome the challenge.

My biggest challenge honestly was um, time management and prioritizing because I did have so much fun my freshman year and like I met so many new people and it was kind of hard for me to balance like making sure I still did good in school. Then like also wanting to make the most of my college experience. So that was kind of hard like the first semester. But when the second semester came around, I kind of like fixed it.

Personal care. College provided a new level of freedom and independence that participants were not used to experiencing, which impacted the personal care for Faye, Hasanati, Olivia, Octavia, Sade, Tia, Athena, Amaya, and Camille. Many routines they had been used to being dictated for them in their home life during high school now fell on them, and these participants let personal care take a back seat to the various opportunities presented to them. Octavia described how the lack of structure impacted her healthy eating habits and knowing when to eat, because her mom had always made those decisions at home. Lack of sleep was also a part of the freshman year experience that many participants were able to identify with, which can be seen in Figures 5 and 6.

Figure 5 was one of the images used in the first focus group interview question, and it was also the one that other participants most commonly identified with in describing their freshman year experiences. Faye described Figure 5 fitting her experience because she realized “there wasn’t enough hours in the day,” which was also echoed in her interview.

Oh, I’m staying up later than usual, because like in high school maybe like the latest I’ll ever stay up is, maybe like 12 or one am, but like here, like sometimes, I’m up until like three. Or like midterms my freshman year I stayed in the library until like four or five trying to get all of my work done and study.

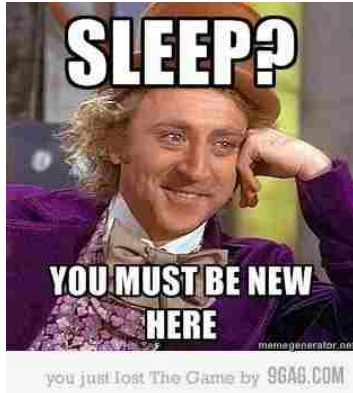


Figure 5. Faye’s meme for her during freshman year experience.

Rather than citing academics as the reasons for lack of sleep, Camille and Tia both described the reason for their lack of sleep as a result of the various social and organizational activities and not wanting to miss out on anything. In describing why Figure 6 fit her experience, Camille said:

During freshman year, I never got any sleep. I had the opportunities to do so, but instead I decided to participate in many activities and not get any sleep. It was nice and fun, but I suffered in the classroom for not receiving enough sleep the night before. I used to fall asleep so much, and that was not a smart or wise thing to do.

Similarly, Tia stated that her lack of sleep also caused her to struggle academically. As she stated, “I was involved in a lot of things. Granted that took a toll on me, like, um, with like sleep, and it made things like academics harder because I was doing so many different things.” Sade echoed the impact of organizational involvement on her health. “I was really awful, getting sick from the dancing too, because I couldn’t find time to eat because you know going from, my rehearsals were from 6 pm to 12 am.” Finding time to eat was also an issue for Amaya as she stated, “You choose when you’re going to eat; something that I probably did once a day my freshman year, which was not good.”

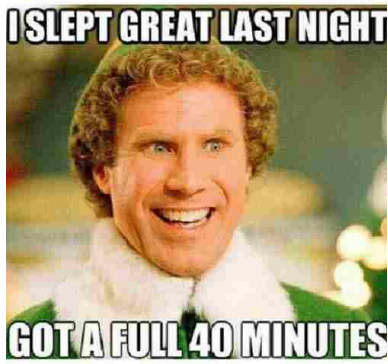


Figure 6. Camille's meme for her during freshman year experience

College level work. The amount of work and rigor of college courses was a sub-theme that emerged as something that Faye, Hasanati, Julian, Kayla, Octavia, Olivia, Tia, Athena, Amaya, Trey, and Camille either did not expect at all, or did not realize the level of rigor in college courses prior to entering their freshman year. Trey cited “adjusting to the difference in academics” as his biggest challenge freshman year. Even though Athena took many AP courses and Tia entered college with an associate’s degree, both stated that they wished they knew how academically difficult college would be. Many participants, including Camille, Octavia, and Kayla described frustration with being able to get good grades in high school without having to work for them, and realizing throughout freshman year that was not going to be the case in college. For example, in describing what she wished she knew before going to college, Camille said, “How much work it’s going to be. Because like in my high school, when I say we did not do that much work, we did not do that much work.” Similarly, Octavia said:

I wish like, you knew, I had to put in more work because like in high school I got good grades. I didn’t put in as much work. So I was thinking ok, I could do the same here.

But like if I knew like coming straight into college, it's going to be harder. I mean I knew

it was going to be hard, but I thought it was the kind of thing where people just say that and it's not really true.

Kayla's perception of what she would have to do in college was also formed based on her high school experiences. In multiple instances, she cited the many opportunities in high school that she had to "flip my grades" through extra credit or as a result of the many different assignments. In an example describing her high school experience, she explained that she was usually able to procrastinate and get through most of the grading term with a low course grade, but at the end of the grading term, she could make up work or do extra credit to bring her grades up. She cited this as a reason she was not prepared for her freshman year academically, because she did not understand how different the grading system would be in comparison to her high school grading system.

Engagement

Although participants frequently cited extracurricular activities as a challenge in regard to time management, the participants who were involved in various organizations during their freshman year cited having more positive experiences than those who were not involved in organizations on campus. Similarly, those who used the resources that were available to them also cited having positive experiences. Participants who said they did not utilize their resources or get involved on campus realized how important both aspects of college engagement were to having a positive experience, and therefore became more involved as the year progressed or as they moved into their sophomore year. These themes emerged as participants described their challenges as well as explained why their experiences were either positive or negative.

Organizational involvement. All 13 participants' freshman year experiences were impacted by being involved in organizations either on or off campus, or by choosing to not be

involved in organizations. Although some participants' involvement in organizations hurt their academic performance, being involved contributed to their overall experiences positively. For example, Sade and Tia both discussed the toll that being involved took on their academics as well as their personal care. However, as Tia stated, "Every time I'd think about freshman year, I think about how fun it was just because I was willing to get involved in as many things as possible." Although Athena and Kayla described themselves as somewhat involved during their freshman year, they both explained that they became more involved following their freshman year. For instance, Athena stated, "I don't think I did enough my freshman year." Although she did not feel that she struggled academically, she described herself as a "home body" and felt that her first year she could have become more involved.

Participants also described organizations as a way to feel like they belonged to the campus, even though they were attending PWIs. Sade's meme selection demonstrated her involvement in the Black Student Union, which can be seen in Figure 3. Her involvement in the Black Student Union helped her connect with more people with whom she could identify. Likewise, Kayla felt that being more involved has helped to make University of West feel like home. Kayla explained about her current involvement having completed her freshman year:

I have executive board positions on some of like the clubs that I'm doing, and stuff like that. It's kind of like, I like it because it kind of makes my school feel like smaller, and especially like our community feels smaller kind of because like I'm starting to actually recognize way more people. Like I actually walk around campus like saying hi to people that, you know, kind of seems like it's just some little thing. It was like I saw you here I saw you there like. So I think it's just making like my campus feel more like, oh, like yeah, I go here.

In describing his challenges to find people he identified with during his freshman year, Jaleel stated that he felt detached from everything else on campus. For his narrative selection describing his freshman year experience, the song he selected, “Walls” by Snoh Aalegra, described his experience as a result of his isolation from his peers and organizations on campus. Despite this struggle, Jaleel did mention his campus’s multicultural center and its positive impact on his freshman year experiences. He explained that because of his involvement in the multicultural center, his freshman year was made easier because they provided him with a mentor who helped him adapt to his new environment.

Utilizing resources. Using the various resources available to students on campus or through their peers was a sub-theme that emerged through participants’ descriptions of challenges as well as what they wished they knew before beginning their freshman year. Amaya, Athena, Hasanati, Faye, Kayla, Olivia, and Tia felt that knowing how to use the resources available to them was something that they had to learn through their freshman year experiences. For example, having made it through a difficult experience in her freshman year, Amaya stated that she is now “asking questions, I’m going to my professors.” Similarly, Athena wished that she knew “the effort it would take to foster that same relationship with her professors” comparing her relationships with her professors to her relationships with the faculty and staff at her high school. Faye also learned that getting to know her professors better helped her academically, especially in classes that were larger. Similarly, Olivia also wished that going into college she knew the importance of getting to know her professors. As she explained:

Knowing how to talk to your professors and in the midst of a 200, 300 people class. Um, just knowing that, how to not get lost in the midst of so many people. I really wish I

knew that because these classes are huge, and you can definitely feel like no one even notices you if you don't know how to talk.

Using resources available beyond getting to know college professors was also cited as important for academic success. University of West provides a resource that Faye called guided study sessions, which helped her experience more success academically. These sessions are optional and involve a smaller group study environment with a teacher's assistant who prepares questions for students to answer in the session. Students work through the questions and have more opportunities to ask questions than they would in a bigger lecture style class, which helped her in a subject that was particularly challenging for her.

Tia also mentioned the importance of utilizing the available resources in order to be successful. In regard to what she had to learn when she got to University of West, Tia stated:

I would also say utilizing the resources given to you are very important because, um, we're told about having office hours, TAs, um, tutoring, different things like that, but a lot of times because I do it too, we kind of complain like, 'Oh, this class is really hard,' and different things like that, but we don't utilize the resources that are given to us.

Additionally, one of the changes that she associated with her freshman year is her ability to talk to professors in order to improve her academic performance.

Some of the participants had older siblings or friends who began attending college before they did, and wished that they had used them more as a resource and talked to them more about the academic aspect of college before their freshman year. For example, Athena stated, "I don't think I really spoke to my sister about how her college life was like academically. I knew like the outside stuff. But the academic stuff, I don't think I talked to her about that." Similarly, Kayla's older sister began attending college before Kayla's freshman year, and Kayla stated, "I

kind of wished like I reached out or like, I asked my sister more questions because I was actually, I was just talking to her about like, oh where'd you go out last weekend?" Octavia believed that current college students have the ability to help future students understand more of what college is really like. She stated:

I think like most of the time when we're talked to about college it was from like older people. So like I didn't really take what they were saying to heart, which is bad now, but if I had like, people that were in college already or currently in college and they were telling me I would probably understand more. Like for my younger brother, he's a senior in high school. So like, I try to tell him this is how it really is.

Relationships

Overall, relationships had a major impact on participants' freshman year experiences. Though all participants except for Amaya and Jaleel were impacted positively by relationships that were formed prior to or during freshman year, relationships also impacted participants negatively. Additionally, relationships frequently played a role in participants' decision-making process throughout all stages of the transitional experience. These relationships mostly included relationships with family members as well as friends that participants made either before attending college or upon entering their freshman year.

Family. Although participants wanted a college education, in deciding whether or not to attend college or continue onto their sophomore year, Camille, Jaleel, Julian, Olivia, and Hasanati cited not having a choice because their parents had already made the decision for them or expected them to get a college education. When asked why she chose to go to college, Camille stated, "Well I didn't have a choice. My mother told me that I had to go to college." In her narrative response related to after her freshman year, Camille also described her mother's

role in her decision to continue her education. The meme she chose can be found in Figure 7.

In explaining why this meme fit her experience, “I had no choice on whether or not I was going. My mother has always stated that I was going to start and finish college.”



Figure 7. Camille's meme selection for after freshman year.

Similarly, Jaleel and Julian’s parents both expected them to go to college and did not give them the option of not going to college. Jaleel described his mother’s background in education and the role it played in the expectation for him to go to college. In reference to why he continued his education beyond his sophomore year, Jaleel explained:

I had to. Mom expected that I had to. My mom is a little extra, but we should have more like her. My senior year in high school she made me sign a contract about all of the requirements I had to do while I was here in college since she was paying for it.

Julian’s family also expected that he would go to college as he described his reasons for attending college:

I didn’t really decide to go to college. Um, it was never really like a thought process. ‘Uh, should I go to college or not?’ I already knew I was going to college by like the type of family that I have. Everybody in my family went to college, so of course I’m gonna go to college and they held me to that standard to go to college. They didn’t really give me an option.

As Olivia stated in reference to why she decided to go to college, “Where my parents come from it’s kind of frowned upon if you don’t do something past high school.” Sade’s family also reflected this idea in regard to why she chose to go to college.

I decided to go to college because it was expected of me. My mom went to college, she put herself through college and paid her way through school and my dad as well. So it was just it was never a question whether I was going to college and I was just going.

Even though it was not expected of him, Trey’s family also impacted his decision to go to college because, “no one in my family has really been to a four year college.”

Participants’ families even impacted the decision of which college to go to. For example, Tia’s mom would not let her go to her first choice school because it was too far away, while Kayla’s mom was the one who told her to apply to University of West. Athena’s father worked at University of West at the time she was applying, which she cited as a big reason for choosing to apply to the school. Camille did not originally want to attend Lion University; however, her father really wanted her to, and she ended up liking the school after visiting the campus.

On the other hand, not all participants’ families supported their college choices. For example, in Trey’s narrative response, he chose a meme (Figure 1) and explained that it fit his experiences because:

My family didn’t support my choice to go to a Christian school 3 1/2 hours away. I’ve had to pay for college on my own, as well as general life expenses. Freshman year was kind of a rude awakening from a financial standpoint.

Kayla also felt that she should not rely on her family from a financial standpoint and needed to make better financial choices, one of her challenges during her freshman year. In regard to these

challenges, she stated, “I can’t keep asking my parents like, ‘Oh I don’t have any more money in my account.’”

Additionally, as participants progressed through their freshman year, they cited their family as having an impact on their experiences. As Athena indicated:

Family wise. Um, again, just having my parents, there like to support me financially, but also like mentally and emotionally was really helpful just because like they reminded me what I came to college for, what my purpose was. They told me like the um, hopes and dreams that they have for me. So I think that was very helpful.

Hasanati’s cousins attended University of West during her freshman year, which she described as an encouragement to her while she was a freshman, along with her parents also encouraging her during her first year. Octavia also felt that her family was a support for her through college, and that she also needed to set an example for her younger siblings.

Olivia’s mother helped her to realize she was overextending herself through being involved too much. In reference to her decision to not dance anymore, “My mom, she made me realize like you might love to dance but like that’s not what you’re here for.” Tia’s mom supported her similarly. Even though she had wanted to go to school far away, she realized that having her mom close by provided her with more support both financially and emotionally.

Family relationships also evolved through participants’ freshman year experiences. Having been raised by her mother, Olivia stated that her freshman year:

Strengthened my relationship with my father. I didn’t really have to, like he was always in my life, but we didn’t really have a close relationship so it made me like understand that even our parents are like human beings as well.

Friends. Relationships with friends emerged as a sub-theme of relationships when participants described their experiences relating to individuals who impacted their freshman year. In addition to those who supported them during their freshman year, participants faced challenges with friendships during their freshman year. Some of the friendships discussed included friendships formed during high school, while others were friendships that were formed during their freshman year. Similar to family relationships, friendships and lack of friendships also had both a positive and negative impact on participants' freshman year experiences.

Faye entered University of West with many friends that she knew from high school and was able to make a lot of friends during her freshman year. She believed that both groups of friends impacted her experiences positively because she could not only have fun socially, but they "helped me even academically, because if I didn't understand something, I would ask them and they could help me."

Although Julian mentioned that going to a different school from his best friend was an emotional challenge, the new friends that he made helped him adjust to being far away from his high school best friend. In regard to the friends that he made freshman year:

I met a wonderful group of friends and they're like, I found that support system that I was looking for, because I feel like you can't really enter into a new environment and not have somebody to fall back on when things aren't going great. So I met a new family per se. And it was able to like lead me through those hard times.

Kayla also worried about being eight hours away from her high school best friends; however, in regard to her new friendships:

I think that was very important to like make sure I have strong friendships and even if we may get into an argument or something like that. Like, we're still going to be like really

close so like we're still gonna, like make sure, like everybody's fine, everybody's ok.

And everybody's doing what they need to do and like we're all like fine on campus and stuff like that.

Trey and Sade echoed the positive impact of supportive friendships, as Sade explained that although her friends were in many different academic majors, the emotional support they provided each other positively impacted her freshman year experiences. Sade felt as though she did not belong at University of West, but her friends tried to convince her that she did, which she described as a major reason for continuing on to her sophomore year. Similarly, Trey developed relationships that lasted beyond his freshman year and positively impacted his college experience.

Octavia's best friend from high school also helped her get through challenging times during her freshman year. She stated that she had to learn to prioritize her friendships with her own personal goals as well.

The battle was just like with the many friends that I have, I did acquire, I had to, like some of them weren't prioritizing the way I wanted to prioritize. So like I felt like my first semester I kind of had to rethink things where like the friends that I had and their goals and my goals and making sure that they aligned. So that kind of had a negative impact.

Although Olivia entered college with a lot of friends, she felt those friendships evolve as a result of her friends not being secure in who they were as individuals. As a result of academic stress and losing these friends, she stated that, "My first semester took a toll a little bit, like depression and all that other stuff just because you just don't want to be alone in such a huge

university.” However, she explained that this was also a good thing because the friendships that she maintained were with more genuine people.

Amaya and Jaleel struggled to develop strong friendships during their freshman year, which led to them having negative freshman year experiences. As Amaya stated:

But then it’s like I just had this constant feeling of I don’t meet a certain criteria to be considered a part of like the friend group. I feel like it was very cliquey. And so I didn’t really identify with a lot of people. And so going through my, my freshman year until second semester, I was just, um, I was pretty much like doing it all alone. I had no friends.

Jaleel was not able to develop friendships until his sophomore year. As discussed with the song, “Walls” that he chose to describe his freshman year experiences, he felt segregated from his peers, which forced him to discover himself.

As discussed above, the four primary themes that emerged through data analysis include: 1) identity; 2) self-management and college awareness; 3) engagement; and 4) relationships. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how African American college students experience college readiness through analyzing the process of transitioning into the college experience. The four themes that emerged were organized into ten different sub-themes, which can all be tied back to the purpose of this research study.

Research Question Responses

The themes and sub-themes that emerged following the analysis of the data helped to answer the research questions that were the focus of this study. The central research question of this study asked: How do African American students in mid-Atlantic four-year institutions describe their college readiness experiences? The sub-questions that used Schlossberg’s (1981,

2011) transition theory informed the answer to this central question. The subsequent sections of this chapter provide information as to how the themes and sub-themes discussed in the previous section answer the research questions of this study.

Sub-question One

The first sub-question asked: How do participants describe their situation, self, supports, and strategies related to college readiness moving in to their freshman year? This question sought to understand participants in the “moving in” stage of the transitional experience of college readiness (Schlossberg, 1981, 2011). This question was informed through understanding participants’ experiences using the lens of Schlossberg’s four S’s.

Situation. The first S, situation, was impacted by other S’s such as self and supports. Participants’ situation focused on college being the next step for them, both because of their desired profession and because of the expectation from their families that they would attend college. Camille, Hasanati, Julian, Jaleel, and Olivia all mentioned that their families expected them to go to college. As Olivia explained, “Where my parents come from it’s kind of frowned upon if you don’t do something past high school.” According to Camille, her mother was a big reason why she chose to go to college. In regard to why she chose to go to college, “Well I didn’t have a choice. My mother told me that I had to go to college.”

Additionally, the situation of needing a college degree in order to reach their career goals was cited as a reason for going to college, which relates to the aspect of Schlossberg’s (1981, 2011) second S, self, as well. As Athena stated, “I just knew that was my next step after high school, and the career path that I see myself taking after I graduate, I kind of have to go to college.” These examples all relate to the family relationships and self-awareness sub-themes.

Self. Faye, Hasanati, Kayla, Octavia, Olivia, Sade, Tia, Trey, Athena, and Amaya described themselves as being excited or nervous about going to college, which relates to the S of self in Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) four S's. Additionally, all participants described themselves as determined, hardworking, and motivated individuals. These were all characteristics they believed they had prior to entering college. As Hasanati stated, "Despite me being scared at times of like the future, I was never like, I never liked to give up on myself." Kayla, Olivia, Trey, Athena, Amaya, Octavia, and Faye all described themselves as academically determined before they entered college as well.

Sade, Tia, Athena, Amaya, Hasanati, and Olivia also cited having a sense of self during the moving in stage of the transition. As Sade said in regard to knowing her path before freshman year started, "You have to really want it and work hard at it in order to be successful in that field so I had to know that." Similarly, Tia described herself as a focused individual. All of these instances represent participants' inner strength that they already had during the moving in stage that would help them cope with the transition and relate to the self-awareness sub-theme that emerged during the data analysis.

Supports. As mentioned previously, in deciding whether or not to go to college and which college to go to, families played a major role for participants. For participants such as Camille, Olivia, Julian, Jaleel, and Hasanati, the role of family involved expectations, such as Camille who said, "Well I didn't have a choice. My mother told me that I had to go to college," and Olivia who said, "Where my parents come from it's kind of frowned upon if you don't do something past high school." For Trey, his family did not support his college choice because he decided to go to a Christian school.

Friends as supports also impacted participants in the moving in stage. Participants, such as Faye already knew people on campus before starting her year in a completely new environment of University of West, which helped her to become excited for the transition through having an established support system. Starting in a new environment away from their friends was also a concern for some participants, such as Julian and Kayla. As Kayla remembered thinking before going to college, “I’m actually going to be in a different state and like my best friend is eight hours away from me now.”

Strategies. Hasanati, Faye, Julian, Trey, and Camille all stated knowing that they needed time management strategies before they went to college; however, this was a strategy that Hasanati, Julian, and Camille said they were lacking during the moving in stage. As Hasanati said in regard to what she thought she would need to be successful, “Like time management and being able to prioritize very well. That I didn’t get at all when I was in high school.” Trey also cited knowing that he would need to develop a system in order to be successful. Faye felt as though she had time management skills during the moving in stage as a result of balancing AP classes, leadership roles in school organizations, other extracurricular activities, as well as a social life. Julian also cited knowing that he needed time management skills, but stated that he was never taught those skills. Throughout participants’ descriptions of strategies during the moving in stage, time management was the most often cited strategy that participants knew they would need to be successful in college, despite the varying levels of the skill that participants had developed at the time.

Schlossberg’s (1981, 2011) four S’s were clearly noted throughout the data relating to sub-question one. These four S’s made up participants’ moving in stage of the transition as presented through the themes and sub-themes that emerged during the data analysis phase. The

four S's as presented in the moving in stage continued to impact participants in the subsequent stages of the transition.

Sub-question Two

The second sub-question asked: How do participants describe their situation, self, supports, and strategies related to college readiness moving through their freshman year? This question sought to understand the “moving through” stage of transition in regard to African American students' college readiness experiences, again through the lens of Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory.

Situation. Participants described their situations through the culture shock that they experienced attending a PWI, their workload, and the various responsibilities they had during their freshman year. As discussed through the theme of identity, Faye, Hasanati, Julian, Kayla, Olivia, Octavia, Sade, Amaya, Athena, Camille, and Jaleel all found themselves in a situation of struggling to identify with people on their campus since their university was a PWI. Participants had attended high schools that were both predominantly African American and predominantly white, and regardless of the high school they had attended, cited difficulty in feeling as though they belonged on campus. For example, even though Jaleel's high school was predominantly white, he described his situation freshman year as, “a little lonely because [Lion University] is predominantly white ... it's like mostly, so just finding my niche within that.” Similarly, in describing her situation freshman year, Sade stated, “I remember crying in my first freshman dorm about how I felt like my friends and I were the only black people at my school.”

Participants' workload and various responsibilities impacted their situation as well, and were reflected through the themes of self-management and college awareness as well as organizational involvement. As Amaya described her situation of feeling overwhelmed with all

of her responsibilities, yet trying to stay positive she stated, “I was drowning in all of the assignments, trying to keep up with deadlines, trying to have a social life, and maintaining healthy habits.” Other participants, such as Olivia and Tia who became consumed in organizations, found themselves in situations that impacted their personal care, including their eating and sleep habits, which also negatively impacted their academic performance.

Self. Self-awareness in the moving through stage helped participants such as Hasanati and Olivia who had already developed self-awareness, while others struggled with self-awareness during their freshman year. Hasanati felt she had a strong sense of self-awareness, which helped her cope with the challenges that she faced, including the doubts of others. Some participants, such as Amaya and Olivia, felt as though they had a sense of self in the moving in stage, but still had to develop a stronger sense of self throughout the moving through stage. Jaleel struggled with self-awareness throughout freshman year, and did not really feel as though he developed a stronger understanding of who he was until his sophomore year. Through these experiences, a sense of self had an impact on whether or not participants had a positive or negative experience during the moving through stage.

Supports. Supports that participants discussed related to the moving through stage of their college readiness experiences again played a major role in whether their experience was positive or negative. Supports that had an impact on participants’ experiences included family, friends, and the organizations in which they were involved. Some participants’ families, such as Tia and Olivia’s, provided emotional support during the moving through stage. Other participants, such as Trey, felt that their families did not support them, but were able to find support through friends in order to successfully transition.

Not having supports on campus negatively impacted both Amaya and Jaleel during the moving through stage. Although both Amaya and Olivia had negative roommate experiences, Olivia had friends on campus who supported her, leading her to state that her freshman year was a positive experience, while Amaya did not have friend support on campus, leading her to state that freshman year was a “horrible” experience. Similar to Amaya, Jaleel did not develop friends as supports until his sophomore year, citing the lack of friend support as a reason for the challenges he faced during his freshman year.

Organizations also served as a support throughout the moving through stage, as the various organizations that participants were involved in helped them identify with other African Americans on campus or find friends who could serve as supports. For example, Tia, who was involved in a lot of activities remembers freshman year being fun because of how many things she was involved in and how many friends she made as a result. Although Sade struggled to identify with people on her campus because it was a PWI, the Black Student Union provided her with support throughout the moving through stage as well. Similarly, although Jaleel did not have friend support during his freshman year, the multicultural center was the one thing he described as positively impacting his freshman year experience through connecting him with a mentor who could help him adapt to his surroundings and the new environment.

Strategies. Strategies moving through the college readiness transition were challenging for many participants, which were reflected in the self-management and college awareness theme as well as the engagement theme. Faye, Hasanati, Julian, Octavia, Olivia, Tia, Amaya, Athena, Trey and Camille did not feel prepared for the workload and did not feel as though they had time management strategies, they began studying earlier and studying more. In addition, they learned

to prioritize their time in regard to time management and to do the things that were more important first. As Hasanati said:

I kinda got used to the way things go around here at [University of West] in regards to midterms, the waves and terms ... like I said before in my time management, so that I can get my stuff done before I'm going to enjoy.

Similarly, Octavia also felt that she developed her time management strategies in the moving through stage of college readiness. She noted in reference to her biggest challenges:

Time management and prioritizing because I did have so much fun my freshman year, and like I met so many new people, and it was kind of hard for me to balance like making sure I still did good in school. Then like also wanting to make the most of my college experience. So that was kind of hard like the first semester. But when the second semester came around, I kind of like fixed it.

For those participants who discussed struggling with being involved in so many organizations that their personal care suffered, they cited napping as being a strategy to help them cope with the lack of sleep. As Tia described, "Once I learned about naps, I actually, and I started taking them, um, it definitely helps with doing everything that I was trying to do."

Although most of the strategies in the moving through stage were related to the sub-theme of time management and personal care, other strategies were discussed more in the moving out stage through the engagement as well as the self-management and college awareness themes.

Sub-question Three

The third sub-question asked: How do participants describe their situation, self, supports, and strategies related to college readiness moving out of their freshman year? This question

sought to describe the “moving out” stage of students’ college readiness experiences using Schlossberg’s (1981, 2011) theory of transition as the lens of understanding.

Situation. Participants’ situations after their freshman year were similar to before their freshman year. Their families still expected them to continue their college education. For example, as Camille stated:

No matter how bad freshman year was, or no matter how good it was, I always knew that I was going to continue all the way up until I graduate. Or you know, my momma wouldn’t have, you know, wouldn’t have liked that. We would have had some issues.

Similarly, to drop out and therefore not transition into sophomore year successfully, Julian stated, “I didn’t really think about dropping out like at all because I already know, like I said, my family, they expect so much of me, and for me to disappoint them is not an option.”

Self. Hasanati, Kayla, Octavia, Olivia, Sade, Tia, Trey, Athena, Amaya, Camille, and Jaleel all described having more inner strength after their freshman year as they began to prepare for their sophomore year. Olivia stated that she matured more, despite believing she was already mature. Amaya also felt like she had a sense of self before college but felt that after freshman year she had developed stronger self-awareness. When asked what advice they would give to future college students, Amaya, Athena, and Hasanati all emphasized the importance of knowing yourself in order to successfully transition through college.

Additionally, personal characteristics were frequently cited as the reason why participants continued their education into their sophomore year. Amaya, Athena, Faye, Hasanati, Octavia, Olivia, Sade, Trey, and Tia all described their determination and motivation to reach their goals as reasons for continuing their college education. As Trey said, “I think it just comes down to my personal, like drive to be successful. I want to be the best that I can be.” Other participants

echoed similar thoughts as well. For example, Sade stated, “If I would have left that would have been me quitting and I can’t quit at anything.”

Supports. Comparable to their situation moving out of freshman year, participants also had similar supports moving out of freshman year as they did moving into freshman year. Sade mentioned her friends as a major reason for returning to college her sophomore year and a support as she moved out of the transition. In reference to the impact that her friends’ encouragement had on her choice to continue on and move out of the transition, “I’m hearing that from them you know I didn’t want to leave them. So I was like, ‘I’ll just stay one more year.’” Although Olivia lost friends and supports in the moving through stage, the friends that she maintained as supports in the moving out stage were ones to whom she referred as “genuine people” who would continue to support and motivate her beyond her freshman year. Trey also cited developing friendships who supported him during his freshman year, which impacted him positively in a time when he did not have the support of his family.

Similar to the situation of the moving out phase, family relationships also served as supports for the moving out stage as families of participants such as Camille, Julian, and Jaleel expected them to move on. Additionally, as participants became more involved in organizations on campus while moving out of the transition, the experiences of their freshman year were made easier with the ability to identify with others on campus through being involved in organizations.

Strategies. As mentioned previously, time management was the most frequently cited strategy that participants knew they would need during the moving in stage. During the moving through stage, participants discussed having to develop and refine the skill more, and during the moving out stage, participants described having developed the skill to a much higher degree than

they had during the moving in stage. In reference to how she developed her time management skill, Kayla stated:

Especially like from, like the grade that I got my first year I was like, yeah, it's time for me to like, I have like now in my room I have a, like a dry erase calendar on my wall, which I didn't have before. So like I'm writing more stuff down.

This strategy also worked for Sade as she described how she changed after freshman year:

Something is always happening so you really have to make sure that you have really a planner or like, that's one thing I needed was a planner. Now I have one. And I just didn't know how to manage my time. I would forget about a lot of things.

Developing time management in the form of discipline was another strategy of the moving out phase by both Camille and Trey. Trey explained that his college experience after freshman year was a lot better because he learned how to discipline himself and balance everything that was on his plate.

Study strategies also changed as a result of freshman year as participants moved out of their freshman year and onto their sophomore year. For example, Octavia stated that in high school, "I would study like the week before the test, but now I study, like ok, I got out of class and I'm going to study what we just learned." Amaya also cited the importance of study strategies and studying ahead of time rather than waiting until right before a test to study.

Utilizing resources as a strategy was also frequently mentioned as something that participants learned could change their experiences as they moved out of the college readiness transition. Whether it was getting to know professors or learning to use the tutoring resources as well as other resources on campus, Faye, Hasanati, Olivia, Tia, Athena, and Amaya all advised future students to use resources available to them in order to be successful. Many attributed their

ability to use resources as what helped them to be successful in the moving out stage. For example, as Amaya stated in reference to how freshman year changed her:

I was definitely like visiting my professors, living in their office. I was definitely, just trying to, I definitely researched on the different departments that would be a benefit to me on campus and then going and really reaching out and asking questions.

Each of the three stages of transition discussed, moving in, moving through, and moving out, along with the four S's have helped to inform the central question of this transcendental phenomenological study: How do African American students in mid-Atlantic four-year institutions describe their college readiness experiences? Although in some instances experiences certainly varied, the reasoning for this variation can likely be traced back to one of the four S's through the themes and sub-themes that emerged (see Table 3).

Phenomenological Descriptions

Following Moustakas's (1994) method for a transcendental phenomenological study, textural and structural descriptions were formed after completion of the data analysis. In forming the textural descriptions of African American students' college readiness experiences, it was important to focus on *what* students experienced, while in forming the structural descriptions of participants' college readiness experiences, it was important to focus on *how* students experienced college readiness.

The composite textural description, or as Moustakas (1994) described as the *what* of African American students' college readiness experiences can best be summarized as: a year of culture shock that was an academically and socially challenging transition made more difficult without a sense of self, supports, or strategies, and made better through developing a stronger sense of self, supports, and appropriate strategies. As participants described their experiences at

PWIs, they experienced culture shock and struggled to identify with their peers, but were able to form many positive relationships. Those who had a strong sense of self, supports, and the ability to develop strategies had more positive experiences than those who did not have a sense of self, supports, or the ability to develop strategies. Additionally, as many faced academic and social challenges, they realized they needed to develop strategies such as time management, utilize resources available to them, and get to know themselves better, even if they already felt like they had a sense of self upon entering college.

The composite structural description required imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). Since the structural description focused on *how* African American students' experience college readiness at mid-Atlantic four-year institutions, imaginative variation required the researcher to determine what aspects of participants' college readiness experiences were essential in order for the phenomenon of college readiness to take place. As a result of the imaginative variation, the composite structural description can best be summarized as: challenges through identity, balance, and relationships overcome with the determination and motivation to be successful. All participants cited experiencing challenges in some aspect of the college readiness transition process and phenomenon, and all were either determined, self-motivated, or motivated by someone else to successfully transition into their second year of college.

As Moustakas (1994) explained, in order to have a more complete description of the phenomenon, the textural and structural themes must be integrated to form what is known as the "essence" of the phenomenon. In combining the textural and structural themes that emerged through data analysis and imaginative variation, the essence of the phenomenon of African American students' college readiness experiences can best be summarized as a journey of self-discovery. Although the essence of any phenomenon will never be completely exhausted or

transferable, all of the experiences and themes in this study relate back to this journey of self-discovery. Even the participants who thought they knew themselves before college, or what it took to be successful, or even who their support system was, had to discover themselves in some way in order to be successful, and therefore successfully transition into their sophomore year. Despite feeling prepared or not prepared, all participants cited growing and changing from the experience, allowing them to become more grounded in who they are as individuals.

Summary

This chapter began with portraits of each of the 13 participants who were a part of this study in an effort to represent them as individuals as well describe their experiences. Following the portraits were the results of the data analysis and subsequent themes and sub-themes that emerged, followed by a discussion of how the themes and sub-themes helped to answer the research questions. A discussion of the textural and structural descriptions, as well as the essence of the phenomenon of African American students' college readiness experiences concluded this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how African American college students in mid-Atlantic four-year universities experience college readiness. This concluding chapter consists of a summary of the findings as well as a discussion of the findings that includes the implications in relation to the relevant literature and theory discussed in the literature review. Additionally, the methodological and practical implications are also included, followed by a discussion of the delimitations and limitations as well as recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study were reached utilizing Moustakas's (1994) methodology for a transcendental phenomenological study. Detailed findings can be found in Chapter Four of this manuscript; however, the following sections delineate a brief summary of the findings according to the themes that emerged following data analysis, as well as answers to the research questions that this study intended to answer.

Themes

The four themes that emerged through this study include: 1) identity; 2) self-management and college awareness; 3) engagement; and 4) relationships. The first theme of identity revealed three sub-themes: personal characteristics, self-awareness, and culture shock or someone like me. The first sub-theme within identity of personal characteristics emerged through questions that asked participants to describe themselves as well as when participants described their goals and how they handled particular situations. Most participants described themselves as goal-oriented, motivated, and determined individuals who refuse to quit. Various challenges that participants

faced through both their experiences prior to and during their first year of college also revealed the individuals to have these characteristics as they worked to overcome particular challenges. The second sub-theme within identity was self-awareness. Octavia, Trey, Athena, and Jaleel all felt that they entered college not knowing who they were as individuals, including the things that would work for them to help make them successful. Those who felt that they did know themselves, such as Olivia and Amaya also felt that they had to get to know themselves better through the experience.

Within the theme of identity, the sub-theme of culture shock or someone like me emerged, which developed unexpectedly as a result of the fact that none of the interview questions or prompts brought up the idea of race or ethnicity, with the exclusion of the questionnaire. However, the questionnaire was only used to determine eligibility for the study, and participants were informed of that prior to agreeing to participate. Regardless, the questionnaire only asked students to identify their race/ethnicity to determine eligibility, and did not ask for any more details. Both sites that were included in this study are PWIs, and participants at both universities cited that they struggled to find people with whom they were able to identify, and experienced culture shock during their freshman year. Faye, Hasanati, Julian, Octavia, Olivia, Sade, Tia, and Athena attended predominantly black high schools and lived in a predominantly black region; therefore, it is somewhat more expected that they would experience culture shock attending a PWi. However, participants who attended predominantly white high schools, such as Jaleel and Kayla, also described experiencing culture shock and struggled to find friends and identify with peers during their freshman year. Although most were able to figure out how to cope with the feeling of not belonging on campus throughout their freshman year, Jaleel and Amaya went into their sophomore year with this continued feeling.

The second theme of self-management and college awareness emerged as participants described the challenges they faced during their freshman year. This theme included three sub-themes: time management and balance, personal care, and college level work. This theme represents both the challenges and realizations of the participants as they progressed through their freshman year. The most frequently cited challenge was time management, or the ability to balance all of the different responsibilities and opportunities. All participants mentioned the importance of time management and balance at some point, whether it was during their individual interview, in the focus group, or through their narrative. Similar to the self-knowing sub-theme, Amaya, Olivia and Tia felt they had somewhat developed the skill of time management prior to entering college, but had to become even better with managing their time as a result of the level of independence that comes with the college lifestyle. Trey, Hasanati, Kayla, and Camille felt that they had not developed the ability to manage their time at all, and that this was a skill that they had to learn upon entering college. Some of the strategies they learned to implement included writing things down more often, using a planner or calendar of some kind, and learning when to say no or how to prioritize what was most important.

As a result of many participants lacking the skill of time management, a second sub-theme emerged within self-management and college awareness, which was personal care. Sade, Faye, Tia, Olivia, and Camille felt they were not able to get enough sleep because of the various organizations they were involved in, social opportunities that they did not want to miss out on, or amount of work that they had to do. Additionally, eating habits were something that Tia, Olivia, Amaya, and Athena mentioned as struggling to manage, either because they did not have time to eat, forgot to eat, or struggled to choose healthy options over non-healthy options. Similar to time management, this personal care issue was again cited as a result of the many different

responsibilities and opportunities that participants had during their freshman year, as well as the level of freedom that they were not accustomed to.

The third sub-theme of the self-management and college awareness theme was college level work. Faye, Hasanati, Julian, Octavia, Olivia, Tia, Amaya, Athena, Trey and Camille felt as though they had to adjust to the amount of work as well as the rigorous level of the work during their freshman year. Hasanati and Octavia believed they did not have the appropriate study skills or strategies, which impacted their grades. One of the other sub-themes within the engagement theme, utilizing resources, was also intertwined with this theme. In order to adjust to the amount and rigor of college level work, participants not only had to learn better study strategies, but also how to utilize the resources available to them. Although Kayla, Tia, Athena, Faye, Julian, Octavia, Olivia, Sade, and Amaya completed dual enrollment courses and AP courses during high school, they still felt that the level and amount of college work was something that they had to adjust to during their freshman year.

The theme of engagement emerged through the sub-themes of organizational involvement and utilization of resources. There was an unmistakable divide between participants who had described their freshman year experience as something they enjoyed versus participants who described their freshman year as a struggle. The participants who enjoyed their freshman year were involved in various organizations, which helped them feel more connected to the campus and feel as though they belonged. Although organizational involvement also presented its own challenges in regard to time management and the potential negative impact of organizational commitment on academic performance, participants still felt that being involved had a positive impact on their overall freshman year experience. The participants who were not involved in organizations struggled to find friends and feel connected to the university. In

addition, those who struggled more explained that they began feeling more connected to the campus when they started actively reaching out and becoming more involved; however, this did not happen for them until after their freshman year when they made a conscious effort to become more involved.

Utilizing resources was a key aspect of the theme of engagement as the utilization of resources was often what participants described as their reason for success in the process of transitioning through their freshman year. Utilizing resources included campus resources such as tutoring centers and study sessions offered in conjunction with classes, as well as relational resources through reaching out to professors and asking friends for help or support. Faye, Kayla, Olivia, Tia, Athena, and Amaya all wished they had known the importance of fostering a relationship with their professors and the impact it would have on their learning. Those who thought that the relationship was important felt that they learned to get to know their professors either late in their freshman year or after their freshman year. Getting to know professors was something that participants felt not only helped their academic performance, but also helped them feel more connected to the campus as well.

The final theme of relationships emerged as participants described how family and friends impacted their freshman year experiences. Most participants described having the support of family and friends throughout the process of transitioning, and the importance of these relationships in overcoming challenges they faced during their freshman year. In terms of family, Jaleel, Camille, and Hasanati felt their families had particular expectations for them in college. Trey, who did not have the support of his family, found support in the form of friendships on campus. The sub-theme of friendships was a little more complex than family relationships. For example, Jaleel and Amaya cited struggling to find friends while Faye,

Hasanati, Olivia, Octavia, Tia, Athena, and Camille lost friends. Still others such as Kayla, Julian, Trey, and Athena felt they were able to develop friendships during their freshman year that would last a lifetime. Additionally, participants such as Julian, Kayla, Octavia, and Athena were able to maintain friendships from high school that were able to have a positive impact through providing support during participants' freshman year.

Research Questions

The themes that were discussed above also informed the answers to the research questions that were the focus of this study. The central research question of this study asked: How do African American students in mid-Atlantic four-year institutions describe their college readiness experiences? This question was answered through the three following sub-questions.

Sub-question one asked: How do participants describe their situation, self, support, and strategies related to college readiness moving in to their freshman year? Participants' situation, self, support, and strategies varied in the moving in stage of the transitional experience.

Hasanati, Camille, Julian, and Jaleel's situations involved expectation from parents, while others such as Athena, Octavia, and Tia knew that college was required for where they wanted to be professionally. Faye, Hasanati, Kayla, Octavia, Olivia, Sade, Tia, Trey, Athena, and Amaya described themselves as excited, determined, and motivated or nervous during the moving in stage. In regard to supports during the moving in stage, all participants had some level of support, whether it was from family or friends. Lastly, although Camille and Julian cited not having expectations about college, everyone else felt that they knew what was necessary to be successful in college; furthermore, participants varied in the development of the strategies that they believed would be necessary in order to be successful in college.

Sub-question two asked: How do participants describe their situation, self, support, and strategies related to college readiness moving through their freshman year? Upon entering freshman year, Faye, Hasanati, Julian, Kayla, Olivia, Octavia, Sade, Amaya, Athena, Camille, and Jaleel all found themselves in a situation that was best described as culture shock and the feeling of being overwhelmed. These participants felt they needed to develop a stronger sense of self-awareness during the moving in stage in order to figure out what would be necessary to be successful. Additionally, all participants described themselves as motivated and determined throughout the entire process of transitioning, which impacted the idea of self during the moving in stage of the transition. The support of family and/or friends was important during the moving in stage, as those relationships impacted whether the experience was viewed positively or negatively. Those who did not have supports described having more challenges during this stage. Furthermore, organizations also served as a type of support during the moving through stage of the college readiness transition. Strategies during the moving in stage were another major challenge for participants as many felt they lacked the necessary time management strategies and understanding of the college level workload. However, participants developed the necessary strategies either during the moving through or moving out stages.

Finally, sub-question three asked: How do participants describe their situation, self, support, and strategies related to college readiness moving out of their freshman year? Participants' situations after freshman year were similar to before freshman year. Faye, Hasanati, Kayla, Octavia, Olivia, Sade, Tia, Trey, Athena, and Amaya all experienced nervousness and the feeling of excitement going into college that was replaced with either relief and/or a sense of accomplishment, the situation of family expectation and need for a college degree to reach their professional goals did not change. Hasanati, Kayla, Octavia, Olivia, Sade,

Tia, Trey, Athena, Amaya, Camille, and Jaleel felt that during the moving out stage of the transition, they had developed more inner strength and self-awareness to be able to continue their college experiences and reach their goals. Though Faye, Hasanati, Olivia, Octavia, Tia, Athena, and Camille did not maintain all of the friendships they made during their freshman year, all participants still had some level of support from family or friends. Those who did not have on-campus supports developed relationships after completing the transition. Strategies during the moving out stage included participants' abilities to manage their time better and utilize the resources available to them in order to help them become successful.

Phenomenological Descriptions of the College Readiness Experience

The composite textural description of African American students' college readiness experiences focused on what students experienced through the process of transitioning in, through, and out of their first year of college. The composite structural description can best be summarized as a year of culture shock that was both academically and socially challenging, made more difficult without a sense of self, supports, or strategies, or made better through developing a stronger sense of self, supports, and appropriate strategies. All participants successfully completed the transition and progressed onto their sophomore year; however, challenges were dealt with and overcome based upon the individual four S's.

The composite structural description of African American students' college readiness experiences focused on how students experienced college readiness through the process of transitioning in, through, and out of their first year of college. The composite structural description of African American students' college readiness experiences can best be summarized as challenges through identity, balance, and relationships overcome with determination and

motivation to be successful. All participants completed the transition successfully; however, all participants experienced a challenge they were able to overcome.

Finally, the essence of the phenomenon of the college readiness of African American college students attending four-year universities can best be described as a journey of self-discovery. As participants' self-perceptions evolved through the process of transitioning, they were able to develop a stronger sense of their own identity and determine what strategies would help them become most successful. Although supports in the form of relationships were certainly important, participants were also self-aware of the importance of these relationships, again relating back to the essence of the phenomenon of self-discovery. All participants felt they had grown and changed as a result of their freshman year, and felt they knew more about who they were, what they wanted to do, as well as what they had to do in order to be successful in their futures.

Discussion

In order to understand the bigger picture of the results of this study, it is important to understand the results of this study in the context of the empirical and theoretical literature that was reviewed in Chapter Two. The findings of this study both corroborated and extended the existing literature in regard to college readiness and the application of transition theory.

Empirical Literature Discussion

Much of the literature surrounding college readiness is quantitative and focuses on the standardized measures rather than qualitative, holistic measures (Abraham, Slate, Saxon, & Barnes, 2014; Atherton, 2014; Cates & Shaeffle, 2011; D'Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Melzer & Grant, 2016; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015). Additionally, much

of the literature focuses on external factors that impact college readiness (Atherton, 2014; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Royster et al., 2015; Vega et al., 2015) and specific college readiness programs at both the secondary and post-secondary levels (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; An & Taylor, 2015; Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Hughes, Gibbons, & Mynatt, 2013; Koch, Slate, & Moore, 2012; McDonald & Farrell, 2012). Although the literature revealed an achievement gap according to standardized measures and external factors impacting college readiness (Atherton, 2014; Cates & Schaeffle, 2011; Harvey, Slate, Moore, Barnes, & Martinez-Garcia, 2013; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Ozuna, Saenz, Ballysingh, & Yamamura, 2016; Royster et al., 2015; Vega et al., 2015), it did not include the voices of African American college students and what they experienced upon enrolling in their freshman year.

Conley (2007) provided a broader definition of college readiness that was comprised of four different facets of being college ready, which include cognitive strategies, content knowledge, learning skills and techniques, and transition knowledge and skills. This study confirms Conley's definition and his proposed need for a more holistic definition of college readiness. Participants of this study entered college with relatively high GPAs and/or higher level SAT scores; however, many still faced challenges that went beyond the realm of academics. The theme of self-management and college awareness confirms the need for the definition of college readiness to include content knowledge, learning skills and techniques, and transition knowledge and skills. The theme of college awareness and the theme of engagement, with a specific focus on utilizing resources through developing relationships with professors both confirm the need for defining college readiness with cognitive strategies.

In their longitudinal study, Gaertner and McClarty (2015) found that achievement, behavior, motivation, social engagement, family circumstances, and school characteristics all have the potential to impact students' levels of college readiness. This study confirmed some of Gaertner and McClarty's findings as the participants of the present study all successfully transitioned into their second year and all described themselves as motivated and or determined individuals. Additionally, those who became socially engaged with the campus were more likely to have a positive experience, and participants such as Olivia, Tia, and Sade also described having the support of their families, which impacted their ability to be successful in their transition.

In regard to support during the college readiness transition, this study confirms Melzer and Grant's (2016) findings as well as Workman's (2015) findings. Melzer and Grant found that underprepared college students would be less likely to seek guidance and therefore less likely to experience success. This study does not necessarily confirm the findings of Melzer and Grant as all participants did experience success whether or not they sought guidance; however, participants did cite that forming relationships with professors and utilizing resources through seeking guidance was something that they had to learn to do during their freshman year. Additionally, for participants such as Camille, Julian, and Jaleel, parents were a significant part of the decision making process in both the moving in and moving out stages of the transition. This confirms Workman's findings that parents have an impact on the decisions their children make, even at the college level.

This study purposefully excluded students who were part of any post-secondary college readiness remedial program; however, as the themes of engagement and self-management and college awareness revealed, supports during their freshman year were crucial aspects of their

success. Some of the research regarding post-secondary college readiness programs revealed that the supports these programs provide assist in ensuring the success of participants (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Donaldson et al., 2016). Although the supports of the present study were not necessarily in the form of a specific post-secondary college readiness program, having some level of organizational support or relationship with professors confirms the idea that college level supports enhance the potential for success.

Although this study excluded participants in post-secondary college readiness programs, Kayla, Tia, Athena, Faye, Julian, Octavia, Olivia, Sade, and Amaya had experiences in high school college readiness programs in the form of dual enrollment or advanced placement courses. Additionally, some participants' high schools, such as Tia's and Amaya's, had unique college readiness programs they participated in during their high school experiences. An and Taylor (2015) found that students who participated in dual enrollment were more likely to be prepared for college than those who did not. The results of this study do not necessarily confirm or refute An and Taylor's findings because all of the participants in this study persisted beyond their freshman year; however, not all participants completed dual enrollment courses. Additionally, participants who were part of a secondary college readiness program did not reveal any unique findings in comparison to other participants who did not participate in a secondary college readiness program.

Similar to the influence of organizational support, previous studies indicated the importance of adult support and its impact on college persistence (Moon & Singh, 2015; Vega et al., 2015). The results of this study confirm that adult support can have a positive impact on students' college readiness. This confirmation was indicated in the theme of relationships

through the sub-theme of family, as well as the theme of engagement through the sub-theme theme of utilizing resources in the form of professors.

Although the research revealed the existence of an achievement gap, the research providing a voice to students to describe their experiences was limited. The research that included the voices of African American students focused on their participation in a particular college readiness program or on the achievement gap in general (Moon & Singh, 2015; Vega et al., 2015), rather than providing them with an opportunity to describe their general college readiness experiences. This study adds to the literature through providing African American college students an opportunity to describe their experiences with college readiness.

This study provides new findings that go beyond the present literature regarding college readiness in that it provided a voice for African American college students and revealed the culture shock that participants faced upon attending a PWI. Even participants who attended predominantly white high schools experienced culture shock and struggled to find their place on campus. None of the literature regarding college readiness or the experiences of African American students with college readiness discussed culture shock as an aspect of the experience. However, the results of this study indicated that finding someone with whom to identify was an important part of the college readiness experience for African American students.

Theoretical Literature Discussion

Additionally, this study builds on the body of literature related to Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory as it applies to college readiness experiences. The transition theory includes two major components: the four S's and the process of transitioning. Much of the literature that has used the transition theory focused on the four S's (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Tovar & Simon, 2006; Wheeler, 2012), but ignored the process of

the actual transition. This study confirms Rodriguez-Kiino's (2013) findings that indicated the impact of personal characteristics and psychological resources, as well as the impact of supports through family and organizations with regard to successfully transitioning. Although Rodriguez-Kiino focused on transitioning from community college to a four-year institution, the results of the present study are similar in that both demonstrate the importance of having supports and particular personal characteristics in order to successfully transition. However, the present study extended Rodriguez-Kiino's findings as it focused on freshman experiences at a four-year institution, and also incorporated both the four S's and transitional process of Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory.

Implications

The findings of this transcendental phenomenological study have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for secondary educational stakeholders including students, parents, teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors, as well as post-secondary educational stakeholders such as administrators and program leaders. This section will discuss the various implications as well as provide specific recommendations for the stakeholders involved in the college readiness transitional process.

Theoretical Implications

This study used Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory as a lens through which to view the college readiness experiences of African American college students. This study revealed that the transitional process of moving in, through, and out of a transition cannot and should not be separated when describing an experience. In order to understand the process of transitioning, analysis of the four S's is essential. For example, although Amaya, Hasanati, and Olivia felt they had a strong sense of self during the moving in stage, they lost that sense of self

during the moving through stage. Through this example, it is impossible to separate the idea of self from the process of transitioning without losing a crucial understanding that emerged through the theme of identity.

The research questions for this study focused on evaluating the four S's of Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory at each of the separate stages of the transition. Although some of the four S's were the same in both the moving in stage and the moving out stage, the moving through stage revealed many of the themes discussed in the results of this study. For example, the self-management and college awareness as well as the identity themes relate to Schlossberg's concept of self, while the relationships and engagement themes relate to Schlossberg's concept of supports. Additionally, Schlossberg's concept of strategies was a part of the themes of engagement, self-management, and college awareness. Each of the themes that were revealed in this study demonstrated the importance of evaluating the four S's at the various stages of the process of transitioning if the goal is to understand the experiences of the transition itself.

Empirical Implications

As mentioned beforehand, college readiness is not new to the body of literature at either the secondary or post-secondary level. The achievement gap was revealed in the literature at both the secondary and post-secondary levels; however, this study helps to understand the lived college readiness experiences of African American college students, rather than attempting to quantify them or relate them to a particular program. This study focused on the experiences of African American college students, and the results have empirical implications for high school students considering enrolling in college, parents with students considering enrolling in college, teachers, administrators, college students, and college organizational leaders or administrators.

Much of the literature focused on quantitative measures of college readiness and have indicated that African American students were less likely to be prepared for college and have higher dropout rates (Atherton, 2014; Cates & Shaefle, 2011; Harvey et al., 2013; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Ozuna et al., 2016). However, as participants of this study were all individuals who successfully transitioned beyond their freshman year, the challenges they faced and their successes in overcoming those challenges can help other individuals in preparing for college. For college students and parents of college students, this study builds on research of Gaertner and McClarty (2015) through confirming the idea that motivation and engagement are important parts of college readiness.

For administrators, teachers, college level administrators and organizational leaders, this study builds on the idea that students who do not seek guidance will be more likely to struggle (Melzer & Grant, 2016). These findings indicate the need for, or validate, the existence of freshman outreach programs to help students feel connected to campus and provide them with guidance while adjusting to a new environment. Additionally, as previous research has indicated African American students as being less likely to be college ready, the results of this study demonstrate the need for outreach programs that are specifically for African American students. Although the literature did discuss various post-secondary college readiness programs, many of these programs focused on the academic readiness of students (Donaldson et al., 2016; Huerta & Watt, 2015; Moon & Singh, 2015; Vega et al., 2015) and ignored the other aspects of the college experience that are equally important to transitioning successfully into college such as Conley's (2007) cognitive strategies, learning skills and techniques, and transition knowledge and skills.

Practical Implications

The results of this transcendental phenomenology have practical significance for secondary educational stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, parents, students, and higher education professionals and administrators. These various stakeholders will be able to make more informed decisions regarding school-based decisions, curriculum decisions, and decisions related to preparing students for college using the experiences described in this study.

For potential college students and their parents, the results of this study demonstrate the importance of learning the necessary skills prior to enrolling in college, as well as developing particular personal characteristics such as determination and motivation in order to be successful. Some of these skills include time management, developing personal study strategies, and learning how to utilize the resources and opportunities that are available. Additionally, fostering relationships with teachers through learning to advocate for themselves was revealed as an important strategy for students to develop in high school that could enhance the level of success attained upon entering college. Finally, through the theme of culture shock and identity, the results of this study revealed that getting involved in organizations and finding friends or supports with whom they identify is an important part of ensuring a positive college readiness experience for African American college students.

For teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators at the secondary level, these findings indicate that skills such as time management and study strategies need to be taught to high school students. Although high schools are presented with the challenge of educating students who plan to attend college as well as those who intend to enter the workforce immediately following high school graduation, the skills that participants of this study felt they lacked are skills from which all students can benefit. For example, time management is a life

skill that does not necessarily apply only to college readiness. Additionally, high school teachers and administrators through curriculum and teaching decisions can, and should, focus on challenging individuals according to their needs. Although teachers and administrators have various pressures through specific graduation rates and other such measures, it is important to remember that scaffolding for students through challenging them will help them to be successful when they face future challenges as well. This will help future college students learn more and be more prepared for the workload and rigor of college level courses.

Finally, for college students, college administrators, and program leaders, these findings emphasize the importance of students getting involved and taking advantage of the various opportunities available to them on campus. Developing relationships with peers as well as faculty was revealed as an important part of being college ready. Additionally, finding a place to belong and people to identify with was revealed through the theme of identity in the results of this study. However, understanding how involvement has the potential to impact time management and the ability to balance the various responsibilities and expectations is also important.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations for this study include boundaries that were set to purposefully limit the scope and applicability of this study. Delimitations were a result of decisions made by the researcher through the specific research method and design chosen, or as Wolcott (2009) described, what this study was not about as a result of choices made by the researcher. Delimitations in this study included site selection and participant selection. As this was a transcendental phenomenology aimed at understanding the college readiness experiences of African American college students, only participants who were currently enrolled in college

were included. African American college graduates were not included as potential participants because their freshman year would have been an experience that occurred more than three years prior to the study, and may not have revealed as detailed information.

Additionally, participants were required to have attended a public high school and could not be attending a community college or an HBC. Private schools are not required to follow the same standards as public schools; therefore, participants who attended private schools were excluded in order to obtain data that was more likely to be transferable. Furthermore, participants could not be attending or have attended a community college or an HBC during the time of participation in this study or during their freshman year, as the literature demonstrated varying experiences in both of these settings. This decision was made in an effort to ensure that experiences were shared experiences related to the setting of a four-year institution.

Limitations of this study include any weaknesses beyond the researcher's control. Although this study attempted to include an equal number of female and male participants, only three male participants were used. This limitation was a result of snowball sampling and the ability to find enough participants. Additionally, though all participants completed the interview, not all participants completed the narrative prompt or participated in the focus group interviews. More specifically, of the 13 total participants, 10 were part of the focus groups, and nine completed the narratives. However, through those participants who did complete the narratives and focus group interviews, little to no new data were revealed, as the narratives and focus groups confirmed the data that was gathered through the interview process. Additionally, as the researcher's location was in the mid-Atlantic region, only mid-Atlantic universities were chosen. Although students at multiple mid-Atlantic universities were invited to participate, participants from only two universities were obtained. This limits the transferability to universities in other

regions. Finally, as participants had all successfully transitioned through their first year of college, the findings do not include the experiences of African American students who did not successfully transition through their first year.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the college readiness experiences of African American college students attending mid-Atlantic four-year institutions. As a result of the findings and delimitations, as well as limitations, this section details recommendations for future research. First, due to the fact that participant and site demographics represented particular populations, future research should consider studies with a more distinct gender or high school experience focus. As the experiences in this study were disproportionately focused on the experiences of female students, future studies could focus on the experiences of African American male students.

Second, since this study only included the experiences of college students who attended public high schools, a study that focuses on the experiences of African American students who attended private high schools could also add to the body of literature and provide a different perspective of the college readiness experiences of African American college students. Private high schools prepare students for college according to their own guidelines, which could potentially mean that African American students who attended private high school had different experiences in comparison to the participants of this study.

Third, though this study was aimed at describing the college readiness experiences of African American college students, only students who successfully completed the transition beyond their freshman year were included. Future research could include the voice of African American students who did not successfully transition into their sophomore year. Including

these students could reveal experiences that are different from the experiences described in this study.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the college readiness experiences of African American college students attending mid-Atlantic four-year institutions. Although the literature regarding college readiness is extensive, the voice of students describing their own experiences was missing. Additionally, much of the theoretical literature focused on one aspect, such as the four S's of Schlossberg's (1981, 2011) transition theory, rather than integrating both the process of transitioning and the four S's. This study has helped to fill that gap through providing African American students with a voice while incorporating the four S's throughout the entire process of the college readiness transition.

The four themes that emerged as a result of this study were identity, self-management and college awareness, engagement, and relationships. These themes will all help educational stakeholders including students, parents, secondary education stakeholders, and post-secondary educational stakeholders make more informed decisions relating to the process of transitioning into college. Future college students, parents, and secondary educational stakeholders can utilize the results of this study through ensuring that time management skills and organizational involvement are emphasized at the secondary level in an effort to prepare students for the college experience. More specifically, future African American college students should understand the importance of becoming involved in organizations and make a conscious effort to connect to the campus and find people with whom they can identify in order to develop the supports necessary for a positive and successful transition through their freshman year.

Additionally, helping students develop a realistic awareness of college through the experiences of current college students while also increasing the rigor for students intending to attend college could help in minimizing the challenges that were detailed by the participants of this study. Some of the themes that emerged demonstrated that some aspects of college readiness are beyond the control of any stakeholders involved. Additionally, the results of this study provide insight into the experiences of African American students who were able to successfully transition into college.

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APPENDIX A: LU IRB APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 25, 2017

Rachel Strang

IRB Approval 2983.092517: A Phenomenological Study of Second-Year African American College Students' Experiences with College Readiness

Dear Rachel Strang,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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APPENDIX B: EMAIL INVITATION TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Dear University Student,

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research study is to describe the first year college experiences of African American college students who are now in their second year of college, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

You were selected as a possible participant because someone you know has expressed your qualifications for participating in the study. If you choose to participate in this study, you would be requested to do the following tasks:

- Complete and submit a brief questionnaire related to your high school education and college education.
- Participate in a one-hour interview with the researcher. The interview will take place in a mutually agreed upon location either face-to-face or using an online format such as Skype. The interview will be audio recorded.
- Participate in a focus group with the researcher and other study participants. The focus group will take place in either a face-to-face format or a combination of face-to-face and online formats depending on the availability of study participants. The focus group will be audio recorded.
- Write a brief narrative related to your first year experiences in college.
- Participate in the member-checking process to review the findings and conclusions reached by the researcher and to provide feedback on the accuracy of the information you provided.

To participate in this study, please complete and submit the required consent form. If you have any questions regarding the study before signing the form, please do not hesitate to contact me at rjgiljam@liberty.edu or (443) 786-2561.

Sincerely,

Rachel Strang

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

A Phenomenological Study of Second-Year African
American College Students' Experiences with College
Readiness Rachel Strang
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of college readiness experiences of second-year African American students. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an African American who has completed your first year of college, you are between the ages of 18-22, and you attended a public high school. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Rachel Strang, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the college readiness experiences of second-year African American college students from a four-year institution.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete and submit a brief questionnaire related to your high school education and college education. This will take approximately 5-10 minutes.
2. Provide your unofficial or official transcripts to the researcher. This step is only to verify that you have completed your first year of college.
3. Participate in a one-hour interview with the researcher. The interview will take place in a mutually agreed upon location either face-to-face or using an online format such as Skype. The interview will be audio recorded.
4. Write a brief (1-2 paragraph) narrative about your first-year experiences in college. This will take approximately thirty minutes to an hour.
5. Participate in a focus group with the researcher and other study participants. The focus group will take place in either a face-to-face format or a combination of face-to-face and online formats depending on the availability of study participants. The focus group will be audio recorded and will last approximately one hour.
6. Participate in the member-checking process to review the findings and conclusions reached by the researcher and to provide feedback on the accuracy of the information you provided. This will take approximately one hour.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include:

- Helping African American students who are considering entering college

- Helping educators learn from your experiences in order to better prepare African American students for college
- Helping universities learn from your experiences in order to help African American college students transition into college successfully

Additionally, findings from this study may be published and potentially prove beneficial to higher education administrators, secondary education administrators and educators, current college students, and potential college students and their parents.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for this study. However, participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

Research records, recordings, and associated transcripts will be kept confidential through storage in password-protected data files. Written and hard copy records will be kept in a secure file cabinet until they are converted to electronic form and stored on a password-protected computer. All electronic files will be backed up using an online backup service. Additionally, pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants and used in all written or electronic records and reports to protect participant identity. However, because focus groups require the involvement of other participants, security of identities and confidentiality of information provided during the focus group cannot be assured.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your institution. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Rachel Strang. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at rjgiljam@liberty.edu, or by calling (443) 786-2561. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Jim Zabloski, at jlzabloski@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX D: QUESTIONNAIRE

The main purpose of this study is to describe the college readiness experiences of second-year African American college students at a four-year institution. This questionnaire intends to capture demographic information and confirm eligibility for your participation in this study.

1. Name:
2. Gender:
3. Current age:
4. Race/Ethnicity:
5. Name of college attended freshman year:
6. Is this college a four-year institution?
7. Number of college credit hours completed:
8. Name of high school:
9. Location of high school:
10. Was your high school public or private?
11. Did you enter college with any college credit through dual enrollment or AP courses? If so, which?

Use the following scale to respond to questions 12-13.

1=strongly disagree 2=disagree 3=undecided 4=agree 5=strongly agree

12. I am confident that I can recall details about my first year experiences of college, including the events that led to my interest in enrolling in college and those that occurred during my freshman year.
13. I am confident in my ability to reflect on and discuss my freshman year college readiness experiences.

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A Phenomenological Study of Second-Year African American College Students'

Experiences with College Readiness

Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself. Where did you grow up? How would your friends and family describe you as a person?
2. Why did you decide to go to college?
3. What made you choose your specific university?
4. What are your plans for the future after you obtain your bachelor's degree?
5. Describe your high school experience including academics, extracurricular activities, and memorable moments.
6. Describe your favorite teacher from high school. Why was he/she your favorite teacher?
7. Describe your family life during high school.
8. Describe how you felt after you graduated high school and prepared for your freshman year of college. What were your expectations?
9. What skills or strategies did you think would be necessary to be successful in college?
10. What important personal characteristics do you felt you possessed going into college?
11. Describe your college experiences your freshman year.
12. Did you experience any challenges during your first year of college? If so, describe them.
13. Describe strategies or personal characteristics that you felt you possessed that positively impacted your first-year college experiences.

14. Describe strategies or personal characteristics that you felt you lacked that negatively impacted your first-year college experiences.
15. How were experiences in your first year impacted by any significant others, including family members and friends?
16. How did your first year of college affect you? What changes do you associate with the experience?
17. How do you view your first year of college now? Was it a positive experience?
Negative?
18. What do you believe contributed the most to your decision to continue your education into your sophomore year?
19. What advice would you give to students entering their first year of college?
20. What do you wish you knew about college before you began your freshman year?

APPENDIX F: WRITING PROMPT**Directions:**

Find or think of a meme, a picture, a song, or a movie that most closely relates to your experiences in each of the stages of transitioning into college listed below.

- If a meme or a picture is used, please copy/paste it below. If it is a song or movie, please write the name of it below.
- Underneath each selected object or title, please briefly describe **how and why** what you selected most closely resembles that stage of the experience. Please write as much or as little as you think is necessary to explain why you chose that object.

1) Before Freshman Year**2) During Freshman Year****3) After Freshman Year**

APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Take a look at what other participants chose for the narratives. Which ones do you identify with and when do you think they fit your experiences?
2. How can high schools better prepare students for college?
3. What is the most important thing that incoming freshmen should know about entering college?
4. What advice should be given to high school students who are considering enrolling in college?
5. How can universities better support college students during their freshman year?
6. What influences students the most in deciding to continue to their sophomore year?
7. Is there anything else you would like to say about your first-year experiences?

APPENDIX H: EXAMPLES OF CODED TRANSCRIPTS USING ATLAS.TI

Speaker 2: 07:37 I have been playing soccer since like, um, I was four so that was like a really big part of like my high school experience. I really liked playing with all my friends who I have literally been playing with since I was in like kindergarten and stuff like that. So my school is also very small so I literally, I've grown up with because since I was learning Spanish since kindergarten. It was a program called dual-language, so we basically learned half Spanish and half in English. So like those friends who have been in the program with me, like they literally like still my best friends now. I think like academic wise I never really like, I never like, I've always been like a really big, like math, like, like I've never really had too many struggles. Not to say that like it wasn't like hard or anything like that. I think like academically, like I was saying before, I always like wanted to get like a 95 on a test and like if I would start getting something lower than that and be like, yeah, like what can we do? This isn't like right. But I think uh, one thing about my school is that like, a lot of the time, like we had four quarters so it would just be like a lot of the time. My senior year I took calc and like my grade would be like a 60, like two weeks before the end of the quarter. But then with all the extra credit and all that stuff is put in like my grades would like switch. Like I kinda used to that. But at the same time I always would just try to like, do like really well. And I think like since my sister was like I was in high school with my sister for like two years. So for those, like my freshman and sophomore year I was kind of, it was that kind of like relying on them a little bit and like I was just used to like, oh there's my sister when they, um, when like my sister and like all her friends graduated. Like it was kind of like, it was kind of like weird because I was like, oh, like I don't really have like those, like older friends anymore and stuff like that. But I think it was good for me because like I kinda, I kinda like got to like come out from my own if that kind of makes sense. Like I said, I would always just have rely on them and be like, oh, like oh your little sister and oh this and that way that would still happen with like my teachers and stuff. Like I was more able to like become like my own person.

Speaker 3: 09:52 For some of your classes and stuff, I know you mentioned earlier that you were always taken like ap and you took calc your senior year academically, like for electives and AP classes. Do you feel like you pushed yourself in those classes and that's why you enrolled in them or like where the other one's too easy or why did you take like what made you want to take ap classes?

Speaker 2: 10:14 I think it was Kinda just like I knew since I literally all my classes were honors, like before aps were offered. I kind of just knew like, OK, well, like my junior, senior year, like I'm gonna start taking ap just because like that's just like what you do. And then also because since I kind of saw how the people older than me, I would see the same people who would be in all the honors classes, just move into the AP classes. So it was kinda like, it kind of wasn't like, Ooh, should I do this? It was kind of just like I see it happening already. And so I'm just like I might as well. And then like, but the one thing I wish is I kind of wish that they explained the whole, uh, the whole credit thing to us more because I never would always. Like I took ap bio my junior year and like I only got a three on the exam, but I didn't really understand like they would explain the whole credit thing, but I didn't really get that. Like if I get a four I'm going to have more credits in college. I kind of wasn't like explained to that and I kind of wish it was because I know like some of my friends now, like my roommate from last year, she was like a whole year ahead now because she got fours and fives on a lot of her aps and like she took a like a lot more of them. So like she's like a whole year ahead. So it's like I don't feel like I

Speaker 1: 09:23 um , what skills or strategy , think about , you know , going into college , what did you feel like you would need to be able to do in order to be successful in college ?

Speaker 2: 09:35 I knew I have to have time management skills because like of course there's so much want to do. You want to socialize. You also want to get good grades and the extracurricular activities, so I knew that I had to like practice time management skills when it comes to studying , doing homework , like balancing other things . I'm also um, not to procrastinate a lot because I did that a lot in high school. So I knew that I would have to like stay on top of my things, so I knew I would not have to wait to the last minute to do it, to like stay on top of it so that it's done quicker and I have time to do other things.

Speaker 1: 10:20 Do you feel like you had both of those things and skills being able to go into college or do you feel like , um , that during high school you were able to practice those things ?

Speaker 2: 10:31 Yeah . Um , yeah , again , especially since I was in a lot of extracurricular activities like I did have to use time management to be able to get my work done and also to do my duties for the equal positions I had or like the games I wanted to go to, for example, so I did have to practice time management skills in that aspect.

Speaker 1: 10:59 I know you've mentioned some of these already , so if you feel like you've already answered this , I can move on , but what important personal characteristics do you felt that you possessed going into college ?

Speaker 2: 11:50 Um Organization especially. Like not only in my school work but also in like where I live. I noticed that I like always like keeping a clean space and being aware of other peoples' space so it's just like not like I'm being a hinderance towards them whether it's like cleaning up my side of the room or cleaning the bathroom when it's my week. Just in general being organized and clean. An also with like my books and homework. Like keeping a planner to like write down my assignments so I wouldn't forget. Like when to set aside time to study , like having that written down so that I know like the flow of my day without having it all over the place.

APPENDIX I: EXCERPT OF REFLEXIVE JOURNAL

October 1, 2017

I just had my first interview with Kayla. She was awesome. We FaceTimed and I just asked the questions and let her talk, so I don't think that my questions guided her in any way. She gave me a lot of really good data, but I don't know that I can do much quite yet until I get some more participants. It lasted about 40 minutes, which was around what I anticipated. The pilot interviews were a little shorter, so I was glad Kayla had a lot to say. I explained the prompt to her before I hung up. I told her not to rush and to think about it, but she said she would do it soon.

October 17, 2017

I just completed my second interview and I'm seeing some common themes emerge already. I know that for future interviews, I will need to focus on not letting these potential themes guide my probing questions or lead the participants in any way. This interview was a little bit shorter, but gave me just as much great information as the first one. I'm finding that I need time to process and reflect on the interviews, and it's helping me see the themes start to emerge more clearly.

November 15, 2017

I have completed my third interview and WOW. I'm experiencing so many different emotions. Sade really opened my eyes to show me her experience, and my naivety as a result of my race was definitely evident for me in this interview. Both Sade and Faye in my last interview come from areas that are predominantly African American, and their experiences with more diversity at [University of West] are so interesting. I know that my study is not using or focusing on Critical Race Theory, so in analyzing the data for this interview, I need to definitely focus on my research questions. Sade was so interesting, friendly, and open, which I appreciate so much since she doesn't know me. However, a lot of the information that I find most interesting may not help with my specific research questions. I know that in analyzing this data, I'll have to keep that in mind.