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Social and Academic Experiences of Black, First-Generation, College Graduates While  
Attending Predominantly White Institutions

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A dissertation  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership,  
concentration in Higher Education Leadership

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by

James Stukes

December 2021

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Dr. James Lampley, Chair

Dr. Don Good

Dr. Keith Johnson

Keywords: first-generation, pell grant, code-switching

## ABSTRACT

### Social and Academic Experiences of Black, First-Generation, College Graduates While Attending Predominantly White Institutions

by

James Edward Stukes

First-generation college students represent a significant percentage of all college students and comprise various sub-identities and unique backgrounds. Compared to continuing generation college students, many first-generation students arrive on college campuses without complete understanding of how to navigate college life. Factors, such as family support, finding a sense of belonging, and the availability of resources and campus support, play key roles in the overall success of first-generation college students. The current study sought understanding of these aspects of college life and their relationship to the success of Black, first-generation, graduates of predominantly White institutions.

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to document the undergraduate experiences of Black, first-generation college graduates who attended predominantly White institutions. Recorded Zoom video interview sessions of 11 participants supplied the study data. Each interview lasted between 60 to 75 minutes. The data revealed that the participants persisted and graduated despite having minimal financial support, navigating psychological barriers, such as feeling the need to assimilate, and facing macro-aggressions regarding race. Scholarship money was the most common deciding factor when choosing their alma maters. Factors such as support from Black faculty and staff and personal motivation were key to their persistence and graduation.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late parents: my father, James Stukes, my mother, Nancy China Green, and my stepfather, David Green. All three have poured into me at some points in my life and their memories will always continue to guide me.

Additionally, I would like a dedication to my wife Trenise and my children, Khimek, Caiden, Sydney, and Gavin, who have exercised patience over the past few years and have supported me through the long nights and early mornings.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Researchers and scholars have studied first-generation college students for decades because, historically, this group has not only been underrepresented but also tends to arrive at college underprepared academically, socially, and financially. The Higher Education Act of 1965 defined first-generation college students as those whose parents or guardians did not complete the requirements for a bachelor's degree (Romanelli, 2020). This definition can be complicated, depending on the various ways and circumstances related to the educational levels of family members (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). Under this definition, parents who attended a community college, whether or not they graduated, likely did not experience such areas of college life as living in a residence hall, choosing a meal plan, or joining a fraternity or sorority.

The number of first-generation college students attending college steadily continues to rise and as of the 2015-16 academic year, 47% of students at public 4-year colleges and 64% of students attending public 2-year colleges were the first in their family to attend college (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NAPSA], 2021). This growth sparked conversation on the background of this statistic and increased the need for identifying the type of institutional support needed to enroll, retain, and graduate first-generation college students. It is important for college administrators to realize that, despite their individuality, first-generation college students have a holistic identity and may require help in cultivating and maintaining their success.

Data from the Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) determines the expected family educational contribution and thus indicates the classification of a low-income student. When the expected family contribution falls within the lowest percentile, those students qualify for a Pell grant. Low-income students often experience college more negatively than do students coming

from families with higher income (Dias, 2017). A level of marginalization can occur when this student group is afforded less importance, treated as a monolith, excluded from the college community, or portrayed as those with the least resources, therefore needing more assistance. Additionally, low-income students often combat feelings of financial exclusion when access to social events, study abroad, books, initiation fees for clubs and organizations, and the choice to live off-campus have associated costs (Dias, 2017). Thayer (2000) stated that the experiences of first-generation college students varied depending on their income background. First-generation college students from families with middle incomes often have an easier time adjusting and transitioning to college than do first-generation college students from lower-income racial minority groups and those from lower-income families in general. Obstacles between college entry and college graduation are typically compounded for first-generation college students who are non-White and from low-income backgrounds (Thayer, 2000).

Socially navigating a college campus is one of the greatest obstacles for all new college students. Language often produces first impressions and may cue interpersonal judgement (Koch et al., 2001). When the group views a student's language that is viewed positively, they may judge the student as one with favorable attributes; on the other hand, they may perceive a student with varied language patterns as one who possesses undesirable traits. This exchange can be common for Black students who attend predominately White institutions because they sometimes struggle with choosing to speak Black English or Standard English. While code-switching, the ability to navigate between two or more linguistic preferences, may be a goal for some Black individuals when conversing with those who are viewed in a positive manner, some believe it creates a burden for Black students (Koch et al., 2001).

Lige et al. (2017) defined imposter syndrome, often referred to as imposter phenomenon, as an individual's perception that he or she is incompetent despite hard work and merit. Anxiety, excessive worry, depression, fear of negative perceptions and evaluation, lowered self-esteem, and poor mental health can be manifestations of this syndrome (Lige et al., 2017). Additionally, for African American undergraduate students, imposter syndrome may associate with survivor guilt. African American students may feel they are perceived as the *other* when navigating the educational environment similar of a predominately White institution. Stressors that contribute to imposter syndrome may include experiences of discrimination and racism, overhearing insensitive comments, the presence of educational hegemony, or questions that prompt African American students to ponder their belongingness at a predominately White institution (Cokley et al., 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although much information is available on the barriers Black, first-generation college students navigate during their undergraduate experience, there is a gap in research relating to the way in which those experiences impact first-generation college students after they earn their bachelor's degree, enter graduate school, or begin their professional careers. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of first-generation college students, their experiences with code-switching and imposter syndrome, and its impact on their lives. This study is significance because it may offer a better understanding of the social behaviors and identities associated with the experience of some Black, first-generation, college students.

The intent of the study was to document the experiences of Black, first-generation college students with code-switching and imposter syndrome while they attended a predominately White

institution (PWI) and to explore the way that these two phenomena impacted their lives while attending a PWI. This study may contribute to the literature on Black, first-generation college students who attend PWIs and offer a better understanding of their motivations to pursue a college degree, their perceptions and interactions as students, and the impact of these variables on retention and graduation.

### **Significance of Study**

For decades, educators have discussed first-generation college students with much of that discussion focused on academics. Typically, first-generation college students are less likely to attend and to graduate from college when compared to others with at least one degreed parent, commonly referred to as continuing-generation students (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). However, there has been relatively little mention of the social and psychological experiences, often referred to as code-switching and imposter syndrome, faced by non-White college students.

Peteet et al. (2015) indicated that minority students at predominately White institutions expressed having to prove themselves by working harder in the same classes and on the same assignments as their White counterparts. Consequently, the notion of imposter syndrome becomes more of a reality and these individuals often attribute their college success to external factors such as luck and happenstance. Eventually, they may develop an unhealthy fear of being discovered as frauds.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The foundation for this research had roots in the sense of belonging model proposed by Strayhorn (2018). According to Strayhorn, a sense of belonging was a perception students realized when they felt a connectedness to the campus and found social supports. Establishing a sense of belonging is especially crucial for students from families with low-income, historically

marginalized groups such as first-generation students, and those from minoritized racial backgrounds. Strayhorn's model also highlighted the need to belong at different phases and that the development of a sense of belonging would produce favorable outcomes for students, including retention, happiness, and campus involvement. On the other hand, failure to develop a sense of belonging could produce negative results that might include mental health issues and enrollment withdrawal.

My study used Strayhorn's Model of Sense of Belonging because it provides a framework heavily correlated to the experiences of first-generation college students, including code-switching and imposter syndrome, which are rooted in the desire to be accepted. The model influenced the research questions and the overall outcomes of the graduates interviewed for this study.

### **Research Questions**

To gather data from Black, first-generation college students who attended and graduated from a predominately White institution, the study addressed the following research questions:

*Research Question 1.* What are the experiences of Black, first-generation college graduates of PWIs?

*Research Question 2.* What challenges did Black, first-generation college graduates encounter while attending a PWI?

*Research Question 3.* What were the participants' perceptions of the ways academic and cultural assimilation affected their lives while enrolled in the institution?

*Research Question 4.* How did the graduates feel their behavior, language, and attitudes differed while in college?

*Research Question 5.* In what ways have their previous experiences at PWIs impacted the current lives of Black, first-generation college graduates?

### **Definitions of Terms**

For the purpose of this research, the following definitions will apply:

1. Code-switching: A separate persona African American students create when they are in presence of Whites while revealing their true selves only during interactions with other Blacks (Guiffrida, 2006).
2. First-generation college student (FGCS): A college student whose parents or guardians have not earned a bachelor's degree (Garriot et al., 2015).
3. Imposter syndrome: "A complex array of feelings characterized by a belief that one is incompetent, and any achievements are in fact undeserved strokes of luck or other external factors" (Sewer, 2015, p. 34).
4. Predominantly White Institutions: Colleges and universities where White students comprise the student population more than does any other student racial group (Bourke, 2016).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations for this study exist because qualitative data is not often generalizable. It should not be inferred that, because the participants are all Black, first-generation college graduates of PWIs, other individuals from the same identity share the same experiences. Researcher bias as well as that of participants also adds limitations.

This study was delimited to the lived experiences of Black, first-generation college students who graduated from a predominately White institution. The goal was to gain a better understanding of the way that these intersecting identities impacted their college experience and

current life. The study participants included Black, first-generation graduates of predominately White institutions due to the limited available research that highlighted their experiences and illustrated the way in which those experiences varied greatly from their White, first-generation college student counterparts who graduated from predominately White institutions. Colleges and universities with historic majority White student populations may offer a cultural environment that differs from the culture of Black people and may produce barriers to these students assimilating to campus life.

Additionally, this study was specifically delimited to the experiences of Black, first-generation college graduates of a predominately White institution and their experiences with code-switching and imposter syndrome. For Black students, code-switching can serve as a defense mechanism to fend off negative notions or stereotypes associated with race, such as being uneducated or having less class. Imposter syndrome emerged as one of the outcomes of *othering* or creating a separate identity for the sake of fitting in. The study participants, Black college graduates from predominately White institutions, generally have different experiences compared to their White counterparts that attend identical institutions. First-generation college students often arrive at college with preconceived notions of inferiority and feelings of not belonging but when this mindset is compounded by psychological barriers, such as racial microaggression and discrimination, negative outcomes can be commonplace. At predominantly White institutions, Black students are within the minority population, thus making the search for a sense of belonging and peer groups more challenging.

The study was delimited to only participants who graduated from a predominately White university. By definition, first-generation college students are those whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree. Therefore, it was important to incorporate participants who



graduated to illustrate a metric of successful academic matriculation but also a successful ability to maneuver social and psychological barriers. While this study focuses on one specific racial and ethnic group, future research on other racial groups who identify as first-generation college graduates of PWIs could be beneficial.

### **Statement of Researcher's Perspective**

At an early age, I excelled academically without the assistance of tutoring, after school programs, or help from my parents. My father was a skilled supervisor for a local carpentry company but dropped out of high school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I cannot remember a time in my life when he either offered or was able to assist me with homework or studying. My mother was a high school graduate. Notions of attending college were not present within my household. After completing high school, I attended the local technical college, primarily just so that I could tell anyone who asked about my post-high school plans that I was doing something meaningful. My attendance at that time was a waste of time and of Pell grant funds but I gained an opportunity to attend a four-year institution 270 miles away from home. Although I was hesitant and very doubtful that I would be admitted, I mailed my application and materials. To my surprise, I was accepted and decided to leave everything I had ever known behind to attempt to better myself.

Being an adult learner and a first-generation college student presented many challenges during my first semester. Locating my classes, feeling out of place, interpreting syllabi, and grasping my responsibilities as a student were overwhelming. Nonetheless, I earned a 3.0 grade point average my first semester, which affirmed that I could walk this journey. As time passed, I applied for and was hired as a work-study student in an office answering phones. To my dismay, my South Carolina dialect did not transfer well to my new Appalachian environment. People had a difficult time understanding what I was saying and repeating myself constantly became an

annoyance. Therefore, I would go home and practice speaking, which included slowing down, making sure my words were not connecting, and adding the endings to my words. To my surprise, this propelled me socially as a student and worker, but when I returned home to visit family, this practiced dialect was not accepted and I experienced difficulty navigating the two environments. I realized that I had been code-switching, not only through speech but also in my clothing.

Embarking on the academic journey toward obtaining a bachelor's degree at the age of 24 came with some challenges. Attending orientation without fully understanding the purpose of the various university staff members and informational booths was somewhat uncomfortable and seeing students from different cultures for the first time brought on feelings of inadequacy. Nonetheless, I persevered and attended my first college course at the four-year university level in Fall 2005. There I was, a non-traditional, first-generation college student amid continuing-generation college students that made attending college seem simple. Graduating with my bachelor's degree was a milestone that I never thought reachable, but it also provided a sense of empowerment and a hunger for more education. As a doctoral candidate, I often reflect on my academic journey and the more research I conduct, the more it becomes evident that the academic, social, and family issues I faced were due to double consciousness and feelings of imposter syndrome. In summary, this topic and research hold personal attachments to my own academic and professional journey.

## **Overview of the Study**

Chapter 1 introduced the study, the research questions, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature that provides context to the research. A description of the participants, methodology, and research design will be in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 will contain

the findings from the interviews and the results from that data. Conclusions about the findings and recommendations will be in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 2. Review of Literature**

While the experiences of first-generation college students may be individually unique, when including additional factors, such as identifying as Black and attending a predominantly White institution, acclimation to the college environment can prove difficult. The literature review provides context for those factors to build a theoretical framework for this study. The framework illustrates the ways in which imposter syndrome and code-switching play a key role in academic and social experiences of Black college graduates during their undergraduate years and the way in which those outcomes can impact their lives post-graduation.

### **First-Generation College Students**

According to Stebleton and Soria (2012), first-generation college students included persons whose parents did not earn a bachelor's degree. Some researchers observed that roughly 43% to 50% of the students currently enrolled in post-secondary education were the first in their family to attend college (Garriot et al., 2015). The journey of first-generation college students may begin during their senior year in high school and comprise students with a background of low-income families, minimal time spent with high school groups, low standardized test scores, academic under-preparation for college, and lower critical thinking abilities (Padgett et al., 2012). In addition, first-generation college students generally have lower GPAs than continuing-generation students and a lower level of confidence in their ability than their counterparts have (Atherton, 2014). While other classmates prepare to apply for colleges and polish their academic records, first-generation college students often confront anxieties, such as leaving home for the first time, seeking ways to pay tuition, and navigating the college entry with no assistance from family members (Pascarella et al., 2003).

According to Stephens et al. (2012), a high percentage of first-generation college students came from working class families having fewer resources than continuing-generation students. Fewer resources meant that enrichment opportunities, such as SAT/ACT test prep, summer camps, and tutors, were potentially not feasible for these students. Fewer resources might also result in the student working to provide for the family; thus, the proposed departure for college could add to financial strain. When many first-generation college students attend college, they often seek one or more jobs to assist with educational expenses (Stephens et al., 2012).

First-generation college students may arrive at college with doubts about their future success as a student. This doubt is often implanted during their formative high school years because others may view them as the *other* or *out-group* socially. In addition, college admission criteria, such as SAT and ACT test scores, indicate achievement and social status because students with financial resources can afford test preparation courses and materials, while first-generation college students often cannot and may consequently produce lower scores (Jury et al., 2015). Therefore, despite a university's attempt to view all students identically, first-generation students tend to evolve as outliers when compared with continuing-generation college students. Jury et al. (2015) also found that, through this context and social identity, first-generation college students could create defensive and protective mechanisms that could play a significant role in their performance, motivation, and overall well-being.

Palbusa and Gauvain (2017) pointed out that the major comparison between first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students was that the second group most likely received advice and guidance in preparing for college, while the other group did not. The knowledge passed on by college degree-attaining parents included information on seeking emotional support and general transitions to college. The interaction between continuing-

generation students and their parents provided an enhanced awareness of rules, best practices, and the appropriate navigation of a college campus (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). Due to this lack of information and support, first-generation college students were also more likely to earn lower grades during their first semester and more likely to withdraw from college.

According to Pino et al. (2012), first-generation college students comprised nearly one-third of all undergraduates with the majority identifying as Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino. The researchers also noted that one-third of first-generation college students who were 30 or older were more likely to attend a community college or a for-profit institute and to enroll part-time. Further, they indicated that 60% of all first-generation college students would fail to complete a degree program within six years (Pino et al., 2012). The obvious difference between first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students was degreed parents, which assumed that parents of continuing-generation college students had the knowledge to navigate institutional networks, systems, and cultures (Pino et al., 2012). In their research, Dennis et al. (2005) concluded, “Face-to-face interaction with, and support from, family members and peers are among the most common and important proximal processes for adolescents and young adults and play an important role in academic outcomes” (p. 254). They also found that not all contributors to academic success were necessarily spawned from cognitive variables. Family and continuous financial support had huge implications for predicting future academic success among first-generation college students. Furthermore, parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds often communicate the idea of receiving an education as a means of improving employment prospects, which might create motivation for the first-generation students to excel and obtain their college degree. Unfortunately, while family expectations and motivation were essential tools, parents of first-generation college students rarely provided those

attributes for their students, while parents of continuing-generation college students tended to do so (Dennis et al., 2005)

First-generation college students tended to have a lower level of social capital, which referred to the information, standards, norms, and values of education due to a lack of shared experiences from others through interpersonal relationships (Padgett et al., 2010). Furthermore, students with low levels of social capital likely lacked interpersonal relationships, did not adapt well to the new campus environment, and possessed poor collaboration and networking skills. Similar to social capital, cultural capital referred to attitudes and opportunities afforded to children of middle-class and upper-class families to preserve a certain economic status (Padgett et al., 2010). Essentially, parents reinforced morals and objectives associated with receiving a college education to becoming a successful and financially stable adult. Students with high levels of cultural capital had resources and knowledge, often provided by their parents, to which most first-generation college students do not have access. Therefore, continuing-generation students typically arrived at college with a clear vision of a chosen major and career field(s), insight on campus life, and an overall better understanding of the skills needed to be a successful college student. On the other hand, many first-generation college students arrived at college confused and unaware of the expectations the university had for college students. Unfortunately, they often did not receive that information until the point where academic or financial turbulence struck (Padgett et al., 2012).

Other advantages of strong social capital included insight on jobs and internships, career contacts who possessed hiring power and offered job references, and financial resources (Green, 2015). When compared to other ethnic groups, first-generation African American students appeared to have little access to social capital resources, such as valuable relationships and

mentors (Green, 2015). This disparity directly correlated to socioeconomic status; students from families with low-income often had few working professionals and college graduates to use as a source of valuable information. Additionally, these students were less likely to engage with extracurricular activities and professional organizations that have been proven to increase social capital (Parks-Yancy, 2012).

The transition to college can be a daunting experience for students coming from disadvantaged groups with significantly fewer financial resources, including the ability to pay for their college education. First-generation college students from low-income families are at a higher risk of not completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), potentially widening gaps in unmet financial need and cost of attendance. Those gaps are often filled with federal student loans, parent plus loans, federal work-study positions, or off-campus employment. In fact, Tabrizi (2020) noted that nearly 20% of college-seeking students whose families earned less than \$50,000 a year failed to complete the FAFSA. While the FAFSA is a valuable tool for any college student, its successful completion can be complicated due to the confusing questions and required tax information.

Achieving college success can be a struggle for any college student but low-income college students present unique challenges. In addition to securing the financial assistance to pay tuition costs, students must also purchase books, course materials, and often a personal computer (Delisle, 2017). These sometimes hidden and unexpected costs can serve as barriers to low-income students. In 1972, the federal government introduced the Pell Grant program that provides portable grants to any student that qualifies for federal aid assistance, enrolled in any accredited higher education institution, and in a degree or certificate program (Deslisle, 2017). To qualify for the grant, students families must complete the Free Application for Federal



Student Aid (FAFSA), which calculates the applicant's expected family contribution to determine the amount of Pell Grant funds, if any, the student may receive annually for a college education (Delisle, 2017). The expected family contribution is the determined amount of money that a student's parents can contribute towards the educational costs per year. Distribution of the funds is on a sliding scale based on the student's calculated expected family contribution. During the 2017-2018 academic year, over 7,000,000 college students received Pell Grants totaling more than \$28,000,000,000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

According to the Education Advisory Board (2019), about 90% of first-generation, low-income students do not complete the necessary degree requirements within six years. Researchers at the Education Advisory Board (2019) indicated that this statistic was partially due to the students' lack of familiarity with first-year success, including navigating higher education and implementing good study skills. Additionally, lower-income students typically worked part-time jobs averaging 20 hours per week to help finance their education (Education Advisory Board, 2019). According to 2012 data from the U.S. Department of Education (Education Advisory Board, 2019). African American students comprised 41% of all those first-generation college students.

### **Black First-Generation College Students**

A great deal of research exists on first-generation college students, their experiences, and outcomes. Because these students are first in their respective families to attend college, the data contrast drastically with their counterparts, continuing-generation college students. First-generation college students tended to enroll and graduate at rates lower than any other class of college student (Smith, 2015). Demographically, non-White, first-generation college students were likely to be female, either Black or Hispanic, and from low-income families (Engle, 2007).

According to Engle (2007), persistence was also a critical factor when discussing non-White, first-generation college students. Students in this group were more likely to drop out of college than were their continuing-generation college peers, respectively at a rate of 43% to 20%. The dropout rate could indicate a higher likelihood of being academically underprepared, having lower standardized test scores, and grade point averages. Socially, they were more likely to spend most of their time off campus and less likely to interact with faculty or other students (Engle, 2007).

Day (2020) opined that the number of African American college students earning a bachelor's degree had increased considerably but more should be done to close the achievement gap. In 1940, only 1% of African Americans earned a bachelor's degree, while the national average for all adults during that period stood at 5% (Day, 2020). In 2019, the national average for all students was 36%, while 26% of African Americans attained a bachelor's degree. Eakins and Eakins (2017) found that obstacles that hindered success and graduation rates included sense of belonging, lack of preparation due to educational inadequacies in grades K-12, little or no family support, and lack of finances.

### **First-Generation College Students' Sense of Belonging**

While it is important for all students to feel a sense of belonging on a college campus, belongingness is essential for first generation college students. Sense of belonging was characterized as the desire or need to be connected and part of the interactions on campus, whether formal or informal (Stebbleton et al., 2014). Sense of belonging was a necessary component of a student's mental well-being, retention, and graduation; thus, it had importance for the college as well (Stebbleton et al., 2014). Means and Pyne (2017) concluded students who felt a connection and sense of belonging increased academic excellence and social integration.

These are important attributes to remember when discussing first-generation college students who may have additional barriers and issues to navigate. Strayhorn (2019) concluded that a sense of belonging also included acceptance, respect, and value from the campus community to produce positive student results. Cultivating strong relationships with peers, faculty, and staff was crucial, especially in a college student's first year (Means & Pyne, 2017).

College students, like all individuals, are part of social identity groups, many may face marginalization or oppression that includes racism and classism. When those identities intersect, it can compound negative feelings and stereotypes and impact the sense of belonging in college (Means & Pyne, 2017). While measures exist to increase diversity within college student bodies nationally, the persistent lack can often stifle the sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017).

It is important to consider data about the lack of diversity at predominantly White institutions because those figures suggest that non-White students may have difficulty assimilating, making connections with others that share the same identity group, and encountering negative interactions on campus, including in the classroom (Fischer, 2017). In some instances, African American students frequently face the isolation of being the only person of color in the classroom, having ethnocentric names that may be more difficult to pronounce, and dealing with a different set of factors that impact outcomes, such as family background, academic preparation, and resources (Fischer, 2007). Another external factor that can impact sense of belonging is the preconceived stereotype regarding lower intellectual ability among minority groups that can essentially manifest into an academic fear for those groups. This fear eventually can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, which causes low academic performance and increases the sense of alienation among students of color at predominantly White institutions. However, it cannot be assumed that all college students experience and transition through the

same adjustment process as new incoming college students at predominantly White institutions (Fisher, 2007).

To capture a complete snapshot of first-generation college students, the discussion should include continuing relationships with friends and relatives back home after the student arrives on campus. Tinto's integration model (1975) argued for separation from former communities to integrate fully into a new college community (Fisher, 2007). However, later research noted positive relationships between family support and high academic performance among first-generation college students, especially those from minority groups. Furthermore, for African American, first-generation college students, the bulk of support derived from off campus sources because many students frequently experienced forms of discrimination and stereotypes within the on-campus community (Fisher, 2007).

### **Black College Students and Ethnic Identity**

Ethnic identity could mean many different things to individuals because it encompassed characteristics, such as nationality, ancestry, religion, language, and culture (Evans et al., 2010). Black Americans or African Americans could trace their roots and ancestral backgrounds throughout much of history and within many different countries around the world. Given this statement, no single ethnic identity theory encompassed the diaspora of African American ethnic identity research, originally posited by developmental psychologist Erik Erickson (1966) as an offset of his ego identity model. His research indicated that ego identity theory occurred throughout the life span of a person but was more evident during the adolescent and young adulthood years, concurrent with the concluding years of high school and initial undergraduate college period. The goal was for an individual to reach a point of identity achievement through self-exploration and commitment to an individual identity. Those who did not achieve stable

identities were likely to succumb to role confusion that could lead to struggles in making and fulfilling lifelong goals (Duffy & Klingaman, 2009).

Ethnic identity is indeed a process, whereby individuals must assume responsibility for exploring their cultural background. Everyone's culture has a set of guidelines and messages that ultimately shapes the structure of that culture. Often, however, African Americans find their values, vernacular, patterns of interaction, and other factors conflict with the mainstream view of the model student (Cokley & Chapman, 2008). As persons begin their college careers, they may question their cultural structures when exposed to peers from other backgrounds and dominant cultures (Duffy & Klingaman, 2009). Those who have achieved ethnic identity can likely navigate their own culture and that of a dominant group; however, the individuals experiencing ethnic identity confusion may ultimately alienate themselves from both their own culture and that of the dominant group. Those with a strong sense of identity exhibit higher levels of self-esteem, more community mindedness, lower levels of depression, a better sense of well-being, and a better fulfillment of academic goals (Duffy & Klingaman, 2009).

African American students often experience microaggressions related to bias and racism when attending predominantly White institutions (Sinanan, 2016). According to Sinanan (2016), DuBois (2005) introduced the concept of *double consciousness* as a coping mechanism for African American students who needed to navigate two identities to succeed at predominantly White institutions. The necessity of such tactics stemmed from historical discrimination, prejudice, stereotypes, and racism. Critical Race Theory developed as a theoretical framework to recognize that systems built on race and its impact intersect when analyzing society and culture. While the acceptance of African Americans into predominantly White institutions is commonplace, this does not suggest that these institutions are race-neutral or without prejudices.

Critical Race Theory challenges such notions by implying that inequities associated with race have predetermined consequences for minorities, such as poorer schools, lower achievement, inadequate financial literacy and economic engagement, and deficiencies in teaching (Sinanan, 2016).

### **Choice Theory and First-Generation College Students**

According to Green (2015), the developer of Choice Theory, William Glasser (1998), suggested that an individual's behavior, including those related to academic studies, correlated to internal motivation. The basis for this motivation included several human needs, such as that include power, autonomy, belonging, survival, and enjoyment of learning. Furthermore, Green's Choice Theory proposed that, when those needs were not satisfied in the classroom, the chances for academic success decreased (Green, 2015). On the other hand, when the varying areas were fulfilled, students tended to be more interested and contented in their work, leading to higher levels of academic success. In short, Choice Theory related to an individual's level of motivation in completing the necessary actions to pursue and to achieve their goals. For first-generation college students, this motivation could be merely earning a degree. However, that goal could be compounded with the motivation to earn a degree to help their family in various ways, including financially. Data suggested that students performed better when the path to reaching their goal was not littered with uncertainty and self-doubt. This lack of ambiguity was key to increased motivation and connected to overall performance. Choice Theory applies to many first-generation college students who arrive at college with little to no preparation in navigating the campus, recognizing institutional resources, choosing a major, and finding helpful information that their continuing-generation college students may already have in their possession (Green, 2015).

## **Imposter Syndrome Among First-Generation College Students**

Imposter syndrome is a pervasive feeling of insecurity, self-doubt, and incompetence despite evidence that an individual's success derives from his or her own work and skills (Robinson, 2017). Furthermore, individuals, especially undergraduates and graduate students, who suffer from imposter syndrome attribute their successes to luck, while feeling like frauds (Robinson, 2017). This feeling is compounded by the feeling they will be unmasked as such (Weir, 2013). In addition to fear, those suffering from imposter syndrome often experience bouts of anxiety and depression (Weir, 2013). Imposter syndrome has six specific components that include: "the need to be the best, the erroneous perception that superhuman qualities are normal, fear of failure, fear and guilt about success and the tendency to discount personal competencies" (Dudau, 2014, p. 130).

Clance and Imes (1978) identified imposter syndrome in their study of successful professional women that emphasized gender role expectations. At the time of that study, it was acceptable for men to attain measures of career success, while women were to fulfill roles of housewives and homemakers. However, when women began to carve out their own successes, there was an inevitable clash with cultural norms, leaving women questioning whether their success was due to intelligence and hard work or other factors. Clance and Imes studied 150 women who experienced imposter syndrome and discovered that personal and professional expectations were lower for women than they were for men. Nelson (2016) noted that the feeling of inadequacy did not dissolve with success. In fact, imposter syndrome connected to four cognitive and behavioral patterns that included a continued sense of phoniness, hard work and perseverance, the introduction of perception, and negative consequences of competence. Therefore, individuals experiencing imposter syndrome could essentially trap themselves in a

cycle of disbelief that their merit and hard work produced their past and current accomplishments (Nelson, 2016).

The causes of imposter syndrome continued to be under study, but some researchers, such as Weir (2013), found a relationship between this phenomenon and family upbringing. Placing a heavy emphasis on achievement could produce damage if the expectations were not met and parents could send mixed signals. When a child had to adapt to conflicting periods of excessive praise or criticism, it could increase the risk of future fraudulent feelings and tendencies (Weir, 2013).

In 2013, Weir administered a survey to minority college students at the University of Texas at Austin and found the students were highly likely to experience feelings of imposter syndrome and consequent mental health problems. Imposter syndrome appeared more commonplace among individuals embarking on new challenges. First-generation minority college students fall into that category because they likely did not receive valuable guidance from family members regarding navigating the college environment (Weir, 2013). Further research by Peteet et al. (2015) suggested that first-generation college students experienced imposter syndrome at higher levels than did other students. Compounded by all the other challenges first-generation college students faced, imposter syndrome could lead to higher withdrawal rates, lower academic aspirations, and prolonged degree completion times.

One obstacle not always connected to the lack of success of first-generation college students was family support. Essentially, the student walked between two cultures, one of family and the other of education (Kish, 2003). Generally, first generation college students might lack sufficient levels of emotional support from family members and might fail to grasp the full demands of being a college student (Peteet et al., 2015). This inadequacy could result in feelings



of distress (e.g., pressure, loss, and disconnection) by attempting to balance external and internal expectations of success, family pressures, and criticism from other intimate groups that judge the student as disloyal for disconnecting from home life to pursue a college degree (Petee et al., 2015).

Imposter syndrome connects to family background, especially for first-generation college students or those who exceed expectations and family norms of success professionally, educationally, and financially (Parkman, 2016). The impacts of imposter syndrome can be present whether a student pursues a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree. Parkman (2016) interviewed graduate students and offered one participant's description: "as a doctoral student in education, there are times when I feel as if I am living in the uncomfortable skin of someone who is seeking validation for the right to grace the halls of academia" (p. 55). Further research indicated that feelings of imposter syndrome were highest among minority populations, especially those on predominately White campuses (Parkman, 2016).

Several underlying negative outcomes associated with imposter syndrome, such as concerns about making mistakes and perfectionism, psychological stress, depression, anxiety, fear of ridicule, and a false sense of competitiveness, can become mental barriers (Chakraverty, 2020). Additional outcomes related to imposter syndrome include academic under-preparedness, decreased health and wellness, burnout, feelings of low self-esteem, self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, impairment of motivation, and decreased self-efficacy (Chakraverty, 2020). The Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale, created in 1985, measured individual experiences of imposter syndrome. The scale covered the three dimensions of "luck/chance as compared to one's ability as an indicator of success, fakeness, or fraudness one experiences thereof, and

disregard of personal achievement, “also termed as luck, fake, and discount “(Chakraverty, 2020, p. 435).

Various reasons, such as insufficient academic preparedness, inadequate finances, lack of parental support, minimal on-campus student involvement, and inability to deal to with stress, can cause first-generation college students to drop and not complete their degree requirements (Mehta et al., 2011). To curve this trend of degree incompleteness, many colleges instituted mentoring programs focusing on peer and faculty/staff partnerships. Mentors rather than college employees could guide the transition from high school to college by someone with like experiences (Mehta et al., 2011).

The transitional state involved stimulating first-generation college students to lose their passivity and to become more active and passionate learners to gain self-direction and institutional attachment (Folger et al., 2004). To aid this goal, pedagogical relationships proved effective, especially when communication concentrated on the individual student and included empathic care (Wang, 2014). Over time, those relationships could spawn into meaningful transactions that the student viewed as a connection to campus. Pedagogical relationships formed during the transitional period from high school to college provided first-generation college students with a means of support and an outlet to cope with stress (Wang, 2014). Wang (2012) also stated that pedagogical mentoring was effective in increasing self-esteem among first-generation college students, thus creating potential for them to reach their educational goals. This relationship also served as a bolster for student development, a focal point for achieving true academic success.

Imposter syndrome for college students could include complex emotions characterized by a feeling of incompetency and the belief that their achievements were coincidental and not

through their individual merit (Sewer, 2015). Some of those feelings for first-generation students might be ameliorated through mentoring, providing motivation that could also lead to academic success. The definition of motivation in this context is the activation of behavior associated with goal orientation (Petty, 2014). Coupled with past poor academics and the task of navigating the culture of higher education, first-generation college students often feel inferior to their classmates, creating feelings of self-doubt and possibly low retention rates.

Maslow's (1965) Hierarchy of Needs incorporated five distinctive levels, which include physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. Essentially, first-generation college students could have all those needs met at college with self-actualization being the overall result. Self-actualization, according to Maslow (1965), was a process whereby individuals realized their full potential. Motivation aided acquisition of Maslow's physiological and safety needs and allowed the student to demonstrate true potential in the classroom. The next level, social needs, proved critical in the motivation of first-generation college students and their persistence to remain in college (Petty, 2014).

### **Code-Switching Among Black College Students**

Cook (2014) defined the psychological phenomenon of code-switching as the "conscious splitting of the inner self in an attempt to create a character that would be accepted into mainstream society" (p. 1). Mainstream society in this context is the college setting. Specifically, Cook's definition related to African American students attending predominately White institutions. According to Evans et al. (2010), Root described this identity development as border crossing with five different identities: (1) student accepting assigned identity deemed by society, (2) student choosing a monoracial identity, (3) student choosing a mixed-race identity, (4) student racially choosing another identity, or (5) student identifying as White.

Code-switching occurred when an individual chose a method or style of verbal and nonverbal communication based on the situation and the other individuals involved (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). Individuals used determining factors, such as race, region, and social class, in the decision to elicit code-switching behaviors to maneuver multiple social environments (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). In modern society, the term acquired deeper meaning because demographics have significantly become more multicultural and multiethnic. As venues with changing demographics, college and university settings could represent classed systems, an environment where code-switching was a mechanism to navigate socially. For decades educators, the media, and others touted higher education as the avenue for individuals to advance socioeconomically, a message received by the working-poor and lower classes. Individuals in these groups sense a need to navigate various social classes as college students to survive and thrive.

In a study of the meaning Mexican American males made of social class in the college environment, Elkins and Hanke (2018) found that participants perceived dominant social class rules as pertinent to their success. For example, one of the participants claimed that the rules included “knowing how to talk” (p. 38) in general, but also how to do so when speaking with administrators, faculty, and staff. The researchers further stated the experiences of lower socioeconomic participants at elite universities revealed that students actively sought ways to dress and speak that allowed them to “pass” or “hide” clues about their social class.

The argument to code-switch linguistically for peer acceptance was particularly evident in professional settings. However, Young et al. (2018) posited that there were costs associated with code-switching for African Americans. Their research revealed that linguistic code-switching caused division because students must separate their dialect registers from their academic registers. This separation could create racial tension and negative perceptions with other African

Americans, ultimately producing charges of “acting White”. The term acting White illustrated the action of African Americans negotiating their Blackness to adopt standard forms of English as a process of assimilation (Young et al., 2018). Another cost associated with code-switching for African Americans was an increase of negative attitudes toward Black English, which implied that standard English was proper and formal, while Black English was improper and informal. Another cost of code-switching outlined by the researchers noted that African Americans could become linguistically confused about which standard was acceptable and when and how to use it properly (Young et al., 2018).

### **The Black College Student Experience at Predominately White Institutions**

When American higher education began, it was unlawful in most states for African Americans even to be taught the skills of reading and writing. Gradually, however, African Americans gained ground in education at select institutions, giving birth to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that opened their doors to all students who desired a college degree. Founded by Quakers, Cheyney University, opened in 1837, was the first historically black college but it did not begin awarding degrees until 1914. Lincoln University opened in 1854 and established as a higher education institution that same year. Both universities are in Pennsylvania. Over the decades, other HBCUs developed across the country and quickly became the place where African Americans could receive a formal education to pursue professional roles. Nearly 75% of all African American college students enrolled at HBCUs in 1950 (Allen, 1988); however, by 1982, due in part to desegregation and anti-discrimination laws, nearly three-fourths of all Black undergraduate students attending four-year institutions were enrolled at predominantly White institutions (Allen, 1988).

In 2018, 42% of White high school graduates between the ages of 18-24 attended college compared to 37% of Black high school graduates (Hussar et al., 2020). Jones et al. (2002) pointed out that the number of Black students enrolling in college continued to grow annually and institutions, especially predominantly White institutions, needed support systems for Black students' persistence and retention. Such support systems could include cultural centers, diversity in faculty and staff, appealing student organizations, and effective policies that speak against discrimination and racism. The status of being a minority can be situational. For instance, when a White college student enrolled at a HBCU, that student would be a minority. Jones et al. revealed that being a minority on a college campus added another level of stress associated with a higher risk of negative outcomes, both socially and academically. This stress could occur on different levels. "These include (a) social climate stresses, (b) interracial stresses, (c) racial discrimination, (d) within-group stresses, and (e) achievement stress" (Jones et al., 2002, p. 23).

Socialization is one of the most important student factors in terms of retention and overall student success. The socialization model incorporated the process through which persons acquired the skills, dispositions, and knowledge that made them effective members of their society (Padgett et al., 2010). When analyzing student socialization including pre-college background and ongoing interaction, socioeconomic status could affect the college students' experience (Padgett et al., 2010). This concept included learning the appropriate attitudes and behaviors of a particular group. According to Padgett et al. (2010), interaction with peers was the single most important environmental influence on student development.

Research indicated that, when students, especially Black students, built relationships with faculty, they were more successful and satisfied with their college experience (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2006). While these relationships are positive, studies also revealed that forming

relationships could be difficult for Black students because they might perceive White faculty as being culturally insensitive. While cultural insensitivities were not exclusive to college campuses, examples might include White faculty making stereotypical remarks about African Americans, treating African Americans as a monolith, and failure to incorporate African American perspectives into the classroom curricula (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2006).

Many colleges and universities have made increasing diversity on their campuses a priority. Diversity comes in many forms, including race, gender, religious preferences, and country of origin to name a few but socioeconomics is also important. To reach this segment of the population, initiatives, such as recruiting a more diverse student population and offering additional financial aid opportunities for low-income students, are underway (Stephens et al., 2012). Partially as a result of these efforts, first-generation college students represented approximately 17% of the student population at 4-year higher education institutions by 2012 (Stephens et al., 2012). According to Stephens et al. (2012) first-generation college students tend to encounter more academic struggles in college when compared to their counterparts. Furthermore, first-generation college students generally receive lower grades, take fewer credits, and drop out at a higher rate than do continuing-generation students within a four-year span.

### **Imposterism Associated with Black College Students**

As the discussion deepens in regard to imposter syndrome, the phrase fake it until you make it often oversimplified the psychological state that so many individuals lived with in their personal and professional lives (Peteet et al., 2014). Researchers linked imposter syndrome to poor academic achievement, psychological distress, low psychological functioning, and poor self-esteem on a global scale (Peteet et al., 2014). While Ewing et al. (1996) studied the connection between imposter syndrome in African American graduate students and academic

self-concept and identity connected to racial attitudes, Austin et al. (2009) researched imposter syndrome and the correlation to depression and survivor guilt in African American undergraduate students. The results illustrated a positive relationship between the two (Peteet et al., 2014).

Racial discrimination can affect the way that young adult, African Americans view themselves psychologically. Imposter syndrome is a relevant feeling for many high-achieving African Americans and can be a negative outcome of discriminatory experiences due to race (Bernard et al., 2017). According to Bernard et al. (2012) studies analyzing imposter syndrome among African Americans have examined African American students who attended predominately White institutions. Most of these studies found that imposter syndrome was linked to depression and survivor guilt among some African American students who attended predominately White institutions and played a significant role in lowered self-esteem and psychological distress (Bernard et al., 2012)

Imposter syndrome includes what individuals think of themselves but also how they are perceived by others. Coupled, this can culminate in subjective judgements of self-worth that can dictate overall self-esteem. An additional concept, Peteet et al. (2014) coined “defensive pessimism” to describe when self-esteem becomes connected to an incorrect attribution of success, a lowering of standards to meet levels of success and decrease failures, and anxiety. This research is important when connecting all the psychological components that have an impact on African American college students, especially those attending predominately White institutions. Overall, self-esteem is threatened when African American students disengage academically from the campus to avoid negative consequences, cultural stereotypes, and pressures to succeed (Peteet et al., 2014).



### **Chapter 3. Research Method**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black, first-generation college graduates of predominantly White institutions (PWI). The narratives provided a glimpse into the ways these factors influenced participants' undergraduate journey and current lives. Questions that pertained to family support, academic and cultural assimilation while on campus, awareness of differences when the participants visited their home towns, and how these experiences affected their lives while in college and beyond offered insight into the participants' lived experiences. I employed a phenomenological approach in this qualitative study to discover the experiences of college graduates who self-identified as Black, first-generation college students when they attended a predominantly White institution. This study was not limited to a single research site or academic major. However, my study was focused only on Black, first-generation college graduates who earned a bachelor's degree at a predominantly White institution. Interviews were conducted through an electronic method with video-based platforms to provide a greater level of contact than a phone interview. The open-ended interview questions encouraged participants to elaborate on certain aspects of their experiences and allowed me to gain an in-depth perspective of those experiences. I assigned pseudonyms to participants to help maintain the confidentiality of their replies to my questions.

The goal was to gain a holistic view of the participants' collegiate experience by asking participants to elaborate on several factors, including social connections, classroom experiences, assimilation to campus, availability of campus services, and use of campus services. The social connections revealed whether the student was a member of a student group or organization, an athlete, a work-study recipient, and how participants built student, faculty, and staff relationships.

## **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

### ***Research Question 1***

What were the experiences of Black, first-generation college graduates of a predominately White college or university?

### ***Research Question 2***

What challenges did Black, first-generation college graduates encounter while attending a predominately White college or university

### ***Research Question 3***

What were the participants' perceptions of the ways academic and cultural assimilation affected their lives while enrolled in their institution?

### ***Research Question 4***

How did the graduates perceive their behavior, language, and attitudes differed while in college?

### ***Research Question 5***

In what ways have the participants' experiences while attending a predominately White college or university impacted their current lives?

## **Participants**

The recruitment of participants centered on identifying, by using social media, Black, first-generation, college graduates who graduated from a predominantly White college or university. I posted a description of my study to several online social groups solely or mainly comprised of Black professionals. These groups included Black Student Affairs Professionals (BLKSAP) with over 11,000 members, Phinished/FinishEdD a Facebook group with 17,000

individuals currently working on or having successfully completed their doctoral degree requirements, and Empowering First Generation College Students, an advocacy platform of almost 4000 educators who work directly with first-generation college students. Additionally, my academic and professional experiences allowed access to many individuals who matched the desired participants' characteristics for the study. Some groups, based in higher education, support the needs of fellow members by participating in qualitative and quantitative studies, offering professional and personal advice, and networking with others conducting research. After the announcement of my study and a call for participants, 14 potential participants contacted me about my study. Of that number, 11 were judged to fit the study criteria and were chosen to be interviewed.

After potential participants were identified, the follow-up link included broader information regarding the topic, IRB information, and a request for electronic consent (Appendix A). The notification also noted that participation in the study was voluntary and persons could stop their involvement at any time. After I received their electronic consent, an agreed-upon time was set to conduct the video-based interviews. After completion of the one-on-one interviews, all participants received my contact information in case they had additional questions or concerns. I continued interviews until data saturation occurred.

### **Data Collection**

After receiving permission to conduct my study from East Tennessee State University's Institutional Review Board and in consultation with my dissertation chair, data for my study were collected using in-depth, one-on-one video interviews. Eleven Black, first-generation college graduates that attended a predominately White college or university were chosen to be included in this research. Interviews generally lasted about 60 minutes, with the range of 50 to 90

minutes. I developed a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B) to guide the interview process. Follow-up questions were asked when appropriate. The interview questions were designed to explore the views and experiences of the participants. Submitting a detailed collection process adhered to all policies and ensured the safety of the participants. Participants were not in hazardous or uncomfortable environments. All the interviews were conducted virtually because the participants were located in many different sections of the U.S. I recorded the entire interview, and then I transcribed each, along with my notes.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview transcripts and my notes were used for the data analysis. Creswell (1998) suggested that all qualitative analysis, regardless of the tradition of inquiry, start by developing and applying codes, identifying themes, patterns, and relationships within the interviews. The information is then summarized using the study's research questions as a guide to categorize the data and begin the content analysis. After applying this initial organization, I used the constant comparative method to look for themes and continued to explore those until all were identified (Glaser, 1965). In the next phase of coding, I identified relationships within the coded material and noted the connections between the codes. Coding, as defined by Creswell and Creswell (2018), is the process of organizing the material into segments of text and assigning a word or phrase to the segment in order to develop a general understanding of the coded material.

The goal was to identify themes, especially code-switching and imposter syndrome, to gain a better understanding of coping mechanisms employed by Black college students. Furthermore, it was interesting to determine whether the participants still described themselves in those terms and, if so, how it had affected their lives and outlook. This study may provide

valuable insight into the academic and social experiences of Black college students attending predominately White colleges or universities.

### **Role of the Researcher**

This topic and its related factors have been an interest to me since I received my bachelor's degree from East Tennessee State University in 2010. When I began my graduate studies at Abilene Christian University, I learned about factors that affected learning in college students, such as imposter syndrome and code switching. I could relate these concepts to my own undergraduate experiences. However, at the time as an undergraduate, I was unable to diagnosis those issues, which included periods of self-doubt, trouble assimilating to campus, adapting effective study skills, navigating college-based systems, and dealing with financial aid terminology. I take pride in being a Black, first-generation college graduate, and I truly understand the psychological barriers associated with students from similar backgrounds that have attended predominately White universities.

### **Ethical Issues**

It is important when conducting research by online methods that researchers protect and respects the rights of their participants. It may be easier to lose perspective when all the interviews are conducted by online video conferencing (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2010). Therefore, I took extra precaution to make sure participants had full knowledge of their rights; were not subjected to deceptive practices; were assured of confidentiality; and were provided with full details of my study. Participants signed consent forms for participation and for any additional information that might not be part of the actual interview. Furthermore, each participant had a pseudonym assigned (Creswell, 2008).

Although I likely shared similar backgrounds with the participants, I did not divulge my experiences to maintain a certain degree of credibility and help eliminate bias. I established boundaries and explained my role as the researcher in detail to the interviewees (Creswell, 2008). To aid credibility and trustworthiness, I saved transcripts and recordings of the video that served as a reference while compiling the data. The transcripts and recording will be stored in a secure location in accordance with the requirements of the ETSU Institutional Review Board. In addition, member check was used as all participants were given the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview for accuracy and completeness. Each participant granted permission to use their transcript in the reporting of my research.

## **Chapter 4. Findings**

The purpose of this research study was to examine the experiences of Black, first-generation college graduates of predominantly White institutions (PWI). The essential question of the study was: What are the effects of being a Black, first-generation, college student at a PWI? This study was guided by five research questions.

### **Participants Profiles**

The study's 11 participants graduated from accredited PWIs in the South, Southeast, Northeast, and Midwest. The PWIs included public, private, liberal arts, and research-based institutions with various student populations sizes. The investigator selected pseudonyms, used throughout the study to protect the identity of the participants.

Tyrone graduated from a PWI with a medium-sized population of nearly 16,000 students. He decided that he was going to attend college during his senior year of high school. When asked what he planned to do after high school, he realized that he did not have a plan. While both of Tyrone's parents worked professional jobs, neither earned a college degree. Tyrone stated his parent did not directly encourage him to enroll in college, but they did not discourage him either. Tyrone observed, "my parents just kind of let me navigate my own path." After he became serious about his post-secondary plans, he applied to several colleges and ultimately decided upon what would become his alma mater, mainly due to the school's affordability. With assistance from State scholarships and a Pell grant, Tyrone essentially could attend without paying out of pocket. His major was economics with a concentration in urban and regional development and planning, and he earned a master's degree from the same institution. At the time of this study, Tyrone worked as a buyer of software, hardware, and other needs for a national corporation.

Tammy's alma mater, located in the Southeast, is a large research institution comprised of over 35,000 students. Similar to Tyrone, Tammy did not think seriously about attending college until her senior year in high school. A math teacher asking, "What are your future aspirations?" triggered Tammy's thoughts about her future plans or as Tammy stated, "he planted a seed." Tammy indicated that neither of her parents earned a high school diploma, thus parental assistance in navigating the college entry process was nonexistent. She did mention, however, that her parents encouraged her and her siblings to go to college. The primary factor that persuaded Tammy to enroll at her alma mater was that the institution was well-known and has a great reputation. While Tammy received a Pell Grant, she could not obtain other major scholarships until later years because she missed the initial scholarship deadlines. Tammy later returned to her undergraduate alma mater to earn both her master's and doctoral degrees. She majored in journalism and at the time of this study, she worked as a higher education practitioner in the career services sector.

Tiffany majored in legal studies with a minor in theology as an undergraduate at her alma mater located in the Northeast. Neither of Tiffany's parents attended college and only her father had a high school diploma. Both of her parents were immigrants from a Caribbean Island with defined gender roles: the father was provider and the mother "was supposed to take care of the household and her little brothers and sisters." Tiffany stated that witnessing this dynamic between her parents ignited her passion to go to college because she viewed education as a method of advancing in society. The student population of Tiffany's alma mater was nearly 15,000 students dispersed across several campuses. During Tiffany's college search, she applied to a range of institutions that included public, private, HBCUs, and Ivy Leagues but her alma mater was the only college that accepted her and that was conditionally. Tiffany noted she was a



Pell grant recipient and also relied on federal and institutional aid to pay her tuition. She also earned a law degree from a different PWI located in the Northeast. At the time of this study, Tiffany claimed to be “fun employed” but she spent several years in diversity and inclusion roles in higher education.

Joseph stated his motivation for attending college was primarily that he would be the first in his family to attend a four-year school and earn a degree. Even though no one in his family ever attended a four-year institution, “not going to college was never an option in my household,” he said. While Joseph’s father earned a high school diploma, his mother earned an associate degree and he attributed a lot of encouragement to attend college to his mother. Joseph was attracted to his alma mater because his mentor in high school was an alumni and majored in the same fields that interested Joseph. Joseph received a Pell Grant to assist with his tuition but did not receive scholarship monies and had to rely on federal aid. Joseph earned his bachelor’s degree in political science from a PWI located in his Southeast hometown and pursuing a master’s degree at a different PWI. At the time of this study, Joseph worked at his undergraduate alma mater in student services for an academic department.

Jennifer was a graduate of a large research PWI located in the Southeast and earned her bachelor’s degree in sociology with a minor in African American studies. Jennifer remarked that much of her motivation to attend college “came from seeing my parents struggle.” Jennifer’s mother raised her and her brother in a single parent household. Her father graduated high school and served in the military for six years, while her mother earned an associate degree and began work. Motivation to attend college primarily came from her mother; her father’s message for her post-secondary plans was “just get a job.” Jennifer added, “I knew I needed to go to college in order to do well and for the profession that I wanted to pursue.” The deciding factor for Jennifer

when choosing her future alma mater was the proximity to her hometown. Additionally, the school was the flagship institution in her home state and had a great reputation. She received a full-ride scholarship based on financial need along with a Pell-grant that solidified her decision to enroll. Jennifer received her master's degree from a different PWI located in the Northeast and completing requirements for her doctorate degree at a Hispanic serving institution (HSI). At the time of this study, Jennifer worked in higher education overseeing a cultural center at a small, liberal arts institution.

Donna's motivation to attend college was similar to Jennifer's and her response to the question about motivation was, "I didn't want to be poor." Donna described her upbringing as living in Section 8 housing and receiving government assistance. She decided she did not want that for her adult life. Donna's mom enrolled briefly in college but dropped out and her father did not attend college. She described her mother as a source of encouragement for her to make good grades and to enroll in college. Although Donna was accepted into her home state's flagship institution, she could not attend because her parents did not have transportation. Thus, the deciding factor for her school selection was proximity, a college 10 minutes away from her home. Donna earned her bachelor's degree in social work at large public research institution located in the Midwest and was a Pell-grant recipient. At the time of this study, Donna worked as a clinical therapist while pursuing an online doctorate degree from a different PWI.

Melissa indicated that her motivation to attend college was engrained in her from an early age by her parents' knowing that she would be a first-generation college student. As a Pell-grant recipient, Melissa received a scholarship that covered her tuition, which, coupled with small class sizes, aided her school selection decision. Melissa graduated from a small, liberal arts PWI college located in the Southeast where she earned her bachelor's degree in sociology and African

American studies. Melissa earned her master's degree from a large public research institution located in the Southeast. At the time of this study, she had a position as curriculum coordinator within higher education.

Scott stated his initial desire was to join the military and become a chef. However, those plans changed once he realized that he would still have to complete basic training and possibly engage in combat. His high school counselors influenced his decision to attend college because they always discussed their college experiences. One counselor took his class on a college tour to his alma mater and that began Scott's interest in college. Money was the biggest factor in his college choice. He was accepted at Yale but simply could not afford the tuition even though he received a Pell Grant and other scholarships. Scott's father did not attend college, while his mother attended a state university but soon dropped out. He mentioned never getting encouragement from his parents and family. Scott earned his bachelor's degree in history and veterinary science from a rural, public, medium-sized PWI in the Southeast located in the same state as Scott's hometown. He earned his master's degree from a different PWI in the Southeast and completing doctoral requirements at the same location. At the time of this study, he worked as a student affairs practitioner for his undergraduate alma mater.

Toya did not have serious aspirations about attending college. She maintained, "Growing up was like if you can just finish high school, then you've made it." However, because Toya was an athlete, her coach aided her acceptance into a two-year program that transformed into a four-year program. Even though her mother raised her alone and did not have a high school education, Toya noted her mother as her biggest cheerleader. To avoid going into the military, Toya decided to enroll in college even though she did not have a full understanding of "what it meant to be a first-generation, college student at a PWI." As a Pell Grant recipient and some funds from her

mother's part-time job, Toya was able to afford her tuition. Toya's alma mater was a medium-sized, liberal arts institution located in the Northeast where she earned a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree. At the time of this study, Toya had worked as a student affairs practitioner for 15 years.

Derrick's desire to attend college began in his hometown middle school when he enrolled in a college readiness program that provided the necessary skills for students to navigate college entry. Proximity played a role in Derrick deciding to enroll at his alma mater because it allowed him to continue in his part-time job. Additionally, Derrick could use scholarship funds along with a Pell Grant to pay his tuition. Derrick's mother was a high school graduate, while his father earned his GED. His mother played a major role in encouraging him to go to college. Derrick earned his bachelor's degree in sociology from a small, public, liberal arts institution in the Southeast and his master's and doctoral degrees from two other PWIs. At the time of this study, he worked as a student affairs practitioner at a PWI.

For Jasmine, going to college was always a route she wanted to take after high school. She stated, "I always knew I wanted to go to college. Growing up, I wanted to own a magazine company so that was the reason that I chose my particular major." Jasmine's father was a high school graduate, and her mother was 30 credit hours shy of earning her bachelor's degree. As far as parental encouragement, Jasmine stated that her parent's stance was "either you go to college or you go to work." Jasmine was not a Pell Grant recipient and relied on her parents to pay her tuition for much of her undergraduate years. Jasmine graduated from a large, public, research institution with a degree in communications and earned a master's degree at a different PWI. Professionally, at the time of this study, Jasmine's work revolved around diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts for a private organization.

## **Interview Results**

The reasons that Black, first-generation, college students attend college varies by student. The motivation can be intrinsic, driven by the will to succeed, or the desire to achieve a certain level of financial stability. For my research I interviewed 11 Black, first-generation, college graduates of PWIs and hearing their individual stories was enlightening. The narratives varied in several ways and each story was unique but, I saw similarities and common themes emerged from their personal lives and educational journeys. These themes are listed below and include a series of direct quotes as evidence of the common threads that were identified.

### ***Research Question 1***

#### **What are the experiences of Black, first-generation, college graduates of PWIs?**

***The Role of the Family.*** Enrolling in college is a major milestone for any college student but staying enrolled is also a huge accomplishment. The role of their immediate family emerged as a theme in research question 1 and pertained to all participants. When asked to describe the role of their immediate family in supporting them financially and emotionally while they were in college, each participant provided some insightful information.

Jasmine stated:

So originally, my mom and dad covered my tuition for the first couple of years, and then they split up. So, my dad stopped helping with tuition. So, I had to apply for financial aid, and I had to get a work study job to cover the rest of my tuition. My mother expected me to pay the rest of my tuition, plus my car insurance. So, I had responsibilities. I had to work on campus and used that money since I couldn't just be out free-willed and spending money. So, that really played a role too, I think, in my experience. Emotionally, I would have to say they played a really big role. My dad would come and take me

grocery shopping, make sure I have what I needed. My mom supported all the events. I pledged when I was there, so they were on board for that. I was in a pageant while I was there, my mom showed up for that. I mean, they were very, very supportive, because I was the only one that was there at the time. My sisters and brothers were all older than me, so it was just me really at home. And they were getting older in their age and didn't have a whole lot to do anyway. So, they were very, very supportive and instrumental, I believe, in my success. Especially my mom. Once my mom and dad broke up, the relationship dynamic at home changed. And it was more of me and my mom versus everybody. So, that really was a turning point for our relationship.

Tiffany's statement focused more on her older sister as a major source of support:

I have a sister who co-signed that private loan, and some of the loans I had to put other names down—like references. I don't even know if the Department of Education even calls these people. I don't feel like they do, but you had to put references on the loan forms, and I did that for some people. But that was pretty much it, as far as financial support goes. Most of the financial support came from the institution itself in different grant monies and scholarships and things like that. I was pretty much on my own for the most part. My younger sister was probably the one that played the most supportive role in my college experience; in just being, I guess, supportive of the things that I was engaging in like coming up to campus every now and then, helping me out with running events, and things like that. I'd always been able to navigate these spaces on my own. I was doing well once I got to St John's because I was intrinsically motivated to demonstrate that I could do well. So as far as studying and office hours and building connections and relationships and things like that, I just applied what I didn't do in high school to college

and that worked out for me. My mother was also supportive in touting my accomplishments as it related to things that I was able to achieve. Therefore, I would say just those two—my mother and my youngest sister were the most supportive emotionally.

Tyrone highlighted the assistance from his sister as well:

Financially, I worked during that summer. I ended up working at ETSU as a student worker, so I made a little cash there and then always kept a job when I was in school. So, you know, I would work there to take care of that little balance. It wasn't too much to handle. As far as financially, they didn't provide much financially, but they would send me what they could when they could. My sister would send me \$20 every two weeks until I graduated. When I started college, she said, "I'm going to just put \$20 in your account every two weeks until you finish." And so that was \$40 a month that I had coming besides my check from my little jobs and stuff. Besides that, there were times that I did need help with books. There had been a couple of times that my mom would send me care packages with food and stuff in it. They would send me whatever they could when they could, but most of the time I just had to figure it out, man. I don't remember going hungry so it kind of worked out.

Derrick remarked:

Well, the good thing was at least my mom, at the time, had a job and that really helped. If I needed money, whether it was getting food or purchasing something for class, I didn't really expect to get a lot of things from my family. They helped me with getting stuff for my residence hall room and my mom helped me get my laptop. After that, I started getting jobs on campus. I started trying to save my own, even though I wasn't that great at the financial part of that either. But, definitely helped me in those regards, those small

regards. Absolutely. Oh yeah. That's who I vented to. If there was something that was going on or if I had a question about something or I'm thinking about something. I did have a close group of friends, but my mom was always the one that I would call. If there was something that was going on that was hard, we'd talk through it. Give me a sounding board, or either just encouragement of, you've got this, you can keep going with this. That was always something. Of course, holidays and stuff were great. I remember times being sick. There was one time, I had bronchitis, I remember coming home. She came and picked me up. Just being there through that because I didn't know what was going on. One minute, I'm fine and my temperature's 100 and I'm doing all this stuff. I do think, just because there were times where it was stressful. She was always there whenever I needed her to be able to be there. I even think about that in high school, if there was something that was happening. I always was the person that would try to figure out my own but then it if it gets to a point where, you know what? This is ridiculous. Then I would jump in and ask for help.

Scott's experience varied from many of the other participants because he noted support from home was not readily available:

I don't know if you're familiar with like that country dynamic, but you are kinda struggling on your own. I hate to say it. For me to go to college, I was not able to call home and say, "I need XYZ," but I think that pushed me more to maintain my scholarships and also to get a job in which I ended up getting a job and that was the biggest thing for me in terms of contribution. If I didn't have, I went without or I would hustle to try to get it. When it came to seeing everybody getting refund checks and stuff back, that was something I never quite understood nor was it explained to me because I



didn't have anyone to explain how financial aid worked and of course that turned around and bit me in the butt. When I did begin signing up for like student loans and stuff like that, my school was paid for but by that time I became an RA and I didn't have to have a meal plan, but I saw everybody around me getting a refund check so I'm like, "well, [expletive deleted] let me sign up, someone teach me how to sign up for these loans." That was the biggest mistake ever, but you know, it is what it is. In terms of just having people call and check on you or something like that no support in that fashion. The most I would get is the kind of the standard would be, "you better not go up there and [expletive deleted] up", you know, whatever the case may be. I think the expectation of like failure was just present in my family. As I mentioned, my mom got a basketball scholarship to Memphis State and never finished. I think one of my uncles had attempted to go to college, but he never finished. No one in my family had done that, you know. So, I think the expectation was, I hate to say it, but it was kind of like, "oh [expletive deleted], you gonna get up there and mess up too." But I think that was really the thing that fueled me. The unfortunate circumstances of going through the foster system and being adopted and just that life prior to that was something that always stuck with me. I never wanted to experience it and I wanted to make something better than myself. After my first year of college, I didn't have frequent communication with family. It was almost like it was my own little silo and I was able to really see this as a place that I was excelling, and I was doing well academically. I was finding my own little space and everything so it became a little silo almost. So, I wasn't really getting a lot of support and stuff coming from home or just encouragement anything.

When asked about family support Melissa stated:

Definitely as much as they could. There were a lot of other familial obligations. They definitely helped with other expenses when they could, but my first semester I had two on-campus jobs. Then for the duration of the rest of my college experience, I had three to four continuous on-campus, and then an off-campus job as well. So, a lot of the additional expenses I was responsible for. Yeah, so those things . . . those things really did add up. Yeah. They would definitely support when they could, but a lot of those responsibilities I incurred them myself. Emotionally, they were very supportive. One thing I will say is we're kind of talking about two different worlds. It kind of is two different worlds because a lot of things that I had to deal with sometimes, especially in reference to a PWI, like it's seen as an opportunity and the access from my immediate family and my extended family being very proud of the accomplishments and the journey, but the emotional support sometimes was hard to deal with because of the understanding . . . or you didn't want to take away from the experience that they have, because when going to college, especially as a first-generation college student, it's not just for myself. It wasn't just about me. But the experiences that I had at that institution were not always positive, and so some of those negative feelings were hard for family members to comprehend because it's looking at the access of this opportunity and not really understanding emotions of what I had to go through on that campus lack of belonging or just the micro-aggression, things of those natures. So sometimes it was . . . You don't want to come back and be negative about kind of those experiences because you know it's an opportunity that's bigger than yourself. But very supportive emotionally, very understanding of . . . especially like the hardships of studying and

being adjusted and getting in and getting out in the four years. So very supportive, but also to a degree of sometimes not being able to understand that experience of what it is like.

Jennifer added:

My mom was the sole provider for any other financial need I had, even putting away money so I could pledge my sorority, or if my work study check was a little smaller that week, she sent me money for food. My first year in college I actually got sick with mono and had to come home and I was quarantined on campus so she was the one to make sure I had the money so that I could at least have food before she could come get me off campus. She made all the sacrifices for me to actually go to school. My dad on the other hand . . . if I called him or if I needed the money, he would send it, but it wasn't like he was willingly giving me the money to survive through college. A roommate gave me money before my dad would give me money just to get around in college. I should've known that my mom would be emotionally invested. When I found out I got into the institution, she actually found out first because at that time parents could make an account and students could make an account, so she actually got the news of my acceptance before I did. I remember that I came in from band practice and she was crying, and I was like, "what happened?" and she's just like, "you got in, you got in, you got in!" So, the both of us are sitting there crying together because, for her, it meant I would have a better access to some things that she didn't have. Also, when she found out I got the covenant scholarship, all her dreams were manifesting. So of course, if I needed help, she was going to be there. When I wanted to do the sorority thing, she didn't quite understand it, but she told me to go for it because her father was a Mason. She

understood the connection of having sisterhoods and brotherhood, so she was going to help me do it. When I struggled at school, she was right there with me. And then, of course, when I graduated, I graduated on Mother's Day, so I think that kind of brought it full circle for her. Like, you know, I was like, I didn't buy anything for Mother's Day, and she said, "but that piece of paper you just got was enough for me." You know, she, she was like, that was enough for me or whatnot. Um, and so she was always emotionally invested. I don't think my dad quite understood because he didn't, you know, he didn't go to school. So, I mean, she, she knows how the logistics of it works and what not, but my dad didn't quite get it or whatnot. Um, even now I don't think he quite gets, you know, the benefit of it. Cause it feels like to him I'm wasting time or whatnot. Um, but you know, the emotional support came from not just my parents, like my grandmother, um, younger siblings, older siblings, because out of my siblings, I'm the first one to complete college. So, I was the first one to finish undergrad. So, I mean, they were supporting me as I got through it and things like that, you know, friends from back home that didn't go to school, all of that. So that's kind of what emotional support looked like for me.

Tammy affirmed:

But yeah, I was definitely Pell eligible and I am very thankful for that financial aid that came in because of my ability to be Pell eligible. Because my family contribution was zero. I remember when the counselor prior to the White woman who told me I wouldn't make it, she was Black. And she left and went to another high school in the city. So, when it came time to filling out FAFSA, whatever it is, I've been saying it wrong for years. And it wasn't until I saw somebody who said, "Black folks, why do we call this

FASFA when it's actually FAFSA?" I was like, "Oh." So of course, I didn't know how to fill it out. My mom and dad definitely, especially my mom didn't know how to fill it out. This is a great example of support. She reached out to the counselor, the black counselor who was there prior me, and who was there with my sisters, who shared that she would help me fill out the FAFSA. And this is when FAFSA was paper. Was it paper? She sat there with us in her living room and helped us fill it out. And that option when it came to student loans, I'll never forget, I was like, "Do I really want that?" And she was like, "Baby, let me tell you something. This is your education. When you born, you a bill, when you living, you going to be a bill. And when you die, you going to be a bill to somebody else. If you going to make some bills, make them bills count. Get your education."

Toya offered that her mom was a key supporter as well:

Oh, my mom was a huge supporter. She even got a part-time job and took out a parent loan so that I could make it through once. And crazy as I was, I've never had a roommate when I lived on campus, probably one semester. And then I became an RA, but I used to invite my family to come on campus with me so that they could come to some of the step shows or talent shows. And my mom began . . . and, I explain it, she never went to college and she didn't know what that experience was like, so I will always give her an opportunity and my younger brothers to have a glimpse. And once she understood the magnitude of me being the first to go to college, she wanted me to succeed. And so, she took a part-time job to make sure that I had it. She took out loans. And, once I found out about being an RA, a resident assistant, I applied and I tried to hold that down so that I can have free housing, free room and board. Emotionally, my mother has been the rock

for me being in college, but because she can only empathize, or she didn't really understand that these classes were hard. And when I wasn't in the student union building, hanging out with Black friends and in the classroom, I felt isolated because I was the only Black person, one or two Black people in the classroom. And my major was English. The professors would accuse me of plagiarizing my work. I had professors that would question my work like, "This black girl can't write like this." And so, I didn't want to go to my mom because I felt she wouldn't understand, but I also didn't want to stress her out. And so, I looked to mentors, it was a secretary and the Dean of Students' office, who I'm still friends with to this day who helped to provide emotional support that I needed to navigate this space.

Joseph also stated the importance of the support he received from his mom:

So, in my first year, my mom actually had to pay around a thousand dollars for four months of each semester. For me to be in school because financial aid didn't cover everything. Going into my second year, I stayed off campus, which cut out the price of the housing package. So, what my financial aid covered, everything just barely. But then, she did pay for my rent and I had a car and she basically had, she took care of all the, all the bills side of my life while I was in undergraduate until my senior year. And then I started paying my rent and things like that, basically up until about my senior year, she was taking care of everything financially for me to be able to survive at college. In terms of emotional support, looking back, I don't really think that I had much emotional support from my family. I think it was a lot of them not fully understanding what college was and everything that I was participating in, and the different ways that it could cause stress, but not being a factory job or, you know, working in healthcare type of stress. So, I

think it was a large disconnect, so there wasn't really much emotional support coming from back home.

Donna stated she had a lack of family support due to the availability of resources:

I mean, they probably gave me food stamps to buy food so I can have food in my dormitory, but that was it. They couldn't help. They were supportive in that regard. If I cry and stuff like that, they will listen. My mom is more of the hard but, than my dad, so my mom was like, get it done and get it done and get it done and get off the phone. A story about that . . . I was in the library to two o'clock in the morning doing my homework. And I told them, I'm like, I'm on my way home, you know, on my way to the dorm or whatever. She called the police and had the campus police follow me all the way back to the dorm. And all of my friends were outside while the campus police was following me to the dorm. I'll never forget that because she was so invested in making sure I made it home safe, but she was glad that I was at the library.

### ***Research Question 2***

**What challenges did Black, first-generation college graduates encounter while attending a PWI?**

***Sense of Belonging.*** The evident theme that arose from the interview questions connected to Research Question 2 was that finding a sense of belonging was difficult at times due to prejudicial, stereotypical, and racist incidents. The majority had this negative experience as an undergraduate.

Scott remarked:

So, I experienced a lot of microaggressions and sometimes outright racist things.

However, I think that's honestly what kind of fueled me to be successful because in

listening to some of the things that some of the professors would say or when they forced group work nobody ever wanted them to be in the group with me. Those experiences made me fight harder and say, I'm going to prove to y'all [expletive deleted] that I can do this.

Tammy added:

Oh, hell yeah! Oh yeah. They were strong. They were very strong. And you know what's crazy, is, I caught a whole hell of a lot of the micro and macroaggressions more from the White females than what I did with the White dudes.

Melissa agreed:

But the experiences that I had at that institution were not always positive, and so some of those negative feelings were hard for family members to comprehend because it's looking at the access of this opportunity and not really understanding emotions of what I had to go through on that campus, a lack of belonging, or just the microaggression, things of those natures.

When I asked Melissa to elaborate on her experience and its nature, she stated it revolved around race:

I was in my humanities class and a man who was on my hall, he said, "Oh, the riffraff is here." I just like walked in and I looked at my professor, and my professor . . . whom I'm very close to her to this day. She addressed the situation publicly in class because that's who she as a person is, and made this individual write me like an apology. But that happened the second week of classes, and for the whole month and a half of my first semester, I left campus every weekend. After my Friday class ended at like 10:00 a.m., I



was gone the whole weekend. Things of that nature transpired throughout my time during undergrad.

When Joseph was asked about his experiences, he confirmed the presence of aggressions pertaining to racism and mentioned that an issue with racism occurred:

To the point of death threats in 2016. I mean, when we [the band] took that knee, the White students did not understand. And so, after the game we had three cases of assault. One person had a beer bottle thrown at their head. One person was approached with a knife in the bathroom. We had a threat that if we did it again at the next home game that there was going to be hell to pay literally. I mean, we got personal death threats, group, death threats. It was almost all racially motivated and not politically.

### ***Research Question 3***

**What were the participants' perceptions of the ways academic and cultural assimilation affected their lives while enrolled at the institution?**

*College Readiness.* Research Question 3 posed two specific interview questions. Participants elaborated on their experiences. When asked if they had any concerns about succeeding academically prior to beginning college, the responses varied.

Tyrone stated that he did not have any concerns:

No. I had always been a good student at school. School wasn't something that I ever struggled with but I knew my motivating factor for staying there was that I knew I couldn't go back home. And so, part of staying at [my college] once I arrived and finishing my first year was that I loved it. I got my own room. I had my own friends. I could come in and go as I pleased. It was like I'm living on my own. And, I knew I could not go back home, and to maintain this I had to make good grades. That's just what it is. I

have to do what I had to do to stay here. And so the school was never tough. It didn't feel like it was hard at all, but I knew I had to stay and so getting good grades and doing what I need to do in the classroom was paramount. I had to do that. And so, it came natural. It was a motivating factor for me. So therefore, school and making good grades kinda came easy for me.

Tammy stated she definitely had some concerns about grades:

Oh, yeah. Heck yeah! Took that first science class, I was like, "What the hell?" Yeah, that geology. I took geology. Yeah buddy. But the professor, I had a professor of color, he was Indian, who took me under his wing. Let me tell you what I know also helped, too. I went to every last one of my professors' office hours. One of the best decisions I'll tell somebody I ever could have made. I went to every last one of their office hours. And I didn't go later in the semester. I went at the first. At the beginning of the semester. Probably after we got about two or three classes out of the way. And I went to my geology professor's office hours, as well. I'll never forget this man. Because he was so nice. He went to LSU. Can't remember his name, but he literally told me, "Sister you have no problem. You going to be okay." Because I was concerned. I was like, "I've never taken a geology course in my life. What would you say, what would you suggest that I do in order to be successful in here?" I remember him reading, "Come to class. I'll tell you the test. Come to class." He said, "Sister you going to be okay." And I don't know if he was talking about with geology or just in general.

Melissa offered her concerns:

Yes. It was really a different language to me. I could do the work, but it was kind of just a different world in general of doing things in a certain way. Writing was really my weak

point, and still is even in graduate school. That's something that I'm developing, that I'm becoming more comfortable with. But in some classes, I had professors that I didn't feel comfortable using their office hours just because of kind of rhetoric that they displayed and things. So, I was kind of trying to find my own ways to re-direct or re-navigate, and a lot of times that came, again, from that transition program that I mentioned. So yeah, I did kind of. And there were classes that I definitely struggled in academically, but that transition I kind of just found my . . . built my network through the people I could trust and I became comfortable in asking them for help. But it wasn't until I reached that level of trust that I definitely struggled in learning how to study, learning how to do presentations and write papers in a certain way. So, it was a transition, but I just kind of was able to navigate sometimes the bare minimum, get by the bare minimum with those few people until really I would say my junior year was when I really kind of started to get things to click and understand more of the academic process.

Scott mentioned that his perception of academic preparedness was mixed:

I would say yes and no. I would say yes because the classes were hard especially after my first year since I was the only Black student in my upper division history and vet classes. So yes and no it did play a factor, but I did know that I did not want to go back home. I didn't want to be what I felt like my family wanted me to, like a failure, if that makes sense.

Derrick also expressed some ambivalence regarding concerns about academic preparedness:

Yes and no. I do, obviously. You come from that high school mindset and things were a little bit easier. Like, oh, okay. You walk in there and you realize, oh, wait. This is a lot more. Oh, wait, there's only four exams? That's it? There's nothing else? It was and I

was kind of like an up and down roller coaster for a little bit. I do think, honestly, when I started getting into my third and fourth year, I felt more comfortable because I was writing more papers, I was able to put more of my thoughts and ideas. I was really good at piecing things together versus legitimate classes where it's, you need to know this information and be able to regurgitate it back, in a way. I don't think I felt as prepared at the beginning. I knew that I had certain resources. I did well in high school so I didn't actually think that I needed certain things. Realizing that things could have been a lot better if I had taken more advantage of it. Even in high school, there wasn't that many resources for those types of things. Yeah, you can meet with a teacher after school but that was it. I do think at the beginning it was a struggle but towards the end I was like, okay, you have to write these papers. I would go to The Writing Center because I knew that the content was fine but it was the grammatical stuff that needed help with too. I also had one professor that just left mid-year so we had an interim professor for the rest of the semester. Last paper she said, "three errors, F." I was like, okay. Let's go to The Writing Center, and you know I went. You know I took their suggestions. There better not be more than three errors. It was a scary moment at that point but that was one of the best papers I wrote. I don't even know if I still have it now, but I thought I kept it because it was one of the best. I put a lot of effort and it was a great topic, I don't remember what the topic was but I just remember I put a lot of effort into it. And, the research that we did. I didn't realize how much I enjoyed research and to kind of have a stop and still between grad school, but when I had the opportunity to do it again, it was great. I do think academically it was hard at the beginning. I don't think I used my resources as well as I could have.

Donna expressed that she did not have many concerns about academics:

No, actually that's and that's funny because I didn't, I knew that I had the tenacity to like do it and try, and I wasn't gonna let my friends leave me behind. I was going to be better than them. That kind of sucks, but I knew that I was going to finish. So, I didn't worry. When I got my first F like, I was like, okay, like this sucks. I knew I just had to try harder. And if it took me five years instead of the traditional four, then that's my own fault.

Joseph voiced his concerns:

That was actually one of my number one concerns about attending my alma mater in the first place. I felt like as a Black student at a White school, they won't be as difficult as a Black school. And I was like, you know, honestly, I'd rather go to this school where I could probably get away with a few more things and get through a little bit easier than to go to this other school and end up failing out.

Toya stated her concerns about academic success:

Absolutely. Again, being in this two-year program, I didn't realize that I wasn't really fully accepted to the program. I was like, "You can't tell me I didn't go to [my college] and not this other school." The building was far. And I wasn't the only one. I don't know, I was just maybe aloof in a sense, because I had some other friends who lived in the residence halls with me and two, we would take the shuttle over there. And all my other friends that I knew, their buildings were much closer. And I didn't realize it was for the slow people, that's what they say, "You didn't really get in."

Jasmine offered her opinion:

I did, because I was an okay high school student. I did what I needed to do to get by and I was worried what that would look like. It's college, I didn't have anybody making me get up and go to class, and making me turn this in, and making me attend this event, and do these kinds of things. And I was worried on how successful I would be because I didn't have a role model. My mother didn't really finish and she was very private and didn't want to talk about her experience. I couldn't go to her and ask, "This is happening, what can I do?" At the time, to be honest, I was in a bad relationship. So, I had that going on and he was attending the same school as me. So, that may for some difficult times. So initially I didn't think I would be successful, and I was worried about going. I really was. I was a nervous wreck. I didn't know how to navigate this big place of people that didn't look like me and didn't really care about me and my success. So I thought, how am I going to succeed? I didn't know how I was going to do it. I didn't know at all. I had no idea.

Jennifer added:

I think so. I think there was a high pressure on me or what, not, not necessarily just in, you know, me, the individual, but there was pressure from my hometown. I mean, the bar was really high because I had graduated third in my class, you know, that year, the top, what out of the top 15, 10 of us were students of color or whatnot. So I mean, we, we set the bar really high, you know, um, and there was a lot riding on it. I mean, even being voted most successful, you know, out of my class and stuff like that. So yeah, you naturally go into college thinking I wanted to do well. I wanted to do really well. And then I don't know if I didn't think I was ready for it, but I don't think anybody had ever

had that conversation with me of, oh, when you go to college, you need to change the way you study. You need to change how much time you dedicate to study. And because I've gotten through high school with no problems. So, and that wasn't a conversation that any of my counselors had had with me or whatnot.

Tiffany didn't really voice any concerns about academics:

I didn't ... I think that put a lot of pressure on myself, especially in my first semester, to, get all A's and I just had this mindset that it had to be an A or better, and I thought that anything less than an A was representative of failure. And then within week four or five of classes starting, I had to do a demonstration for my public speaking class. And I chose to do something that went well past the time limit, and I think I got an A minus on that assignment, and I was sitting there crying on a bench outside of the classroom. The girl that was a classmate that I had, her name was Simone. And she was like, "you know, it's okay, an A minus isn't that bad and you'll still be fine in the class". And I was like, "you don't understand". So, I think that, I put a lot of pressure on myself to really perform outside of the bounds of like self-care.

When asked if their alma mater offered adequate support to help them and other minoritized students get adjusted to college life, the majority of the participant's responses indicated that the needed support was not present, while others found adequate institutional support.

Tammy noted the absence of institutional support during her underclassmen years, but support seemed to increase prior to graduation:

No. When I first got there, no. The alumni association had their first black president during the time that I was an undergrad, like my junior/senior year. And the big thing that really began to shake it up, too, was seeing faculty and staff of color. Seeing people who

look like you, and not just necessarily working in auxiliary services, or in the cafeteria, or in the student union. Like being able to see faculty and staff who looked like you popping up across campus.

Scott noted the lack of institutional support:

No. I think getting here Black students try to find that community and support within the Black student population, but just as an institution, the support wasn't there especially looking back now. I think the school was intentional in doing a lot of things to stop or decrease the number of Black students or students of color that were enrolled. So, in terms of support, you saw a lot of students of color come in, but then by the next semester or the next academic year, you saw probably half if not more of them leaving or not returning. We had a good time, but in terms of measures in place that were supportive and helped students maintain their academics and stuff like that, I don't think those resources were readily available.

On institutional support Melissa noted:

Not at all. A lot of the support I would say came from peer support groups. There was a transitions organization that upper junior and senior students of color were our mentors kind of coming in. They kind of sat us down and said, "Hey, here's you go to." So, we kind of found informal familiar networks on the campus of faculty and staff who we knew that would support certain things, but as far as from the administrative level no. Yeah, there was no support network really that we had. That kind of even started just from the racial lens, but that further turned into.... So, I came in early because of my scholarship to find that I was able to sign up for classes, but post that meeting with advisors, there were certain aspects of like forms that I needed signed that I didn't learn



about in my FYI class, I didn't learn about from my advisor. I had to find out things the hard way, so that really impacted my academic transition as well of not really feeling prepared in the classroom either.

Jasmine remembered:

I would say, not necessarily the university, but definitely the scholarship group that I was a part of. That was what they did. They made sure that we had a connection and that we felt comfortable and that we felt valued while we were there. But the university as a whole, not so much at all. Yeah, not at all. I was lucky enough to know people in pockets, especially after I joined my sorority. So that helped my sense of belonging and sense of having a voice. But other than that, I would say definitely not. There was nothing prepared. They were not prepared for that at all.

Joseph stated the following about institutional support:

I can say that when I was a freshman, sophomore, they were not helpful at all to me. Mainly I think, I think honestly, had I not been in the marching band and everything, I don't think I would've made it through my first year and even stayed in college to my second year. It was, it was a lot of, it was a lot of adjusting because high school came easy to me. I just had horrible study habits and there was like coming into college, there was no kind of support system to explain anything or to explain that this is a three-hour class and you need to spend nine hours on it a week, but they didn't, they never understood. So, I can definitely say that my first year there was not any support that I saw personally for students like me.

Toya remarked:

I don't think that this particular institution provided me really with the tools that I needed. I learned how to survive by leaning on peers. And like I said, the secretary who had no degree at the time, was a mentor to me. So just say, "You have come this far, you can make it." But they had a EOF, I don't know what you may call it in South Carolina, but they had what we call in New Jersey, an Educational Opportunity Fund program. I guess this is like a TRIO program.

Jennifer stated that support was present:

I do actually. I know it's kind of contradictory considering everything that has happened at my institution since I've graduated but I mean even taking the step to provide me what they called a minority advisor. So, I got paired with a senior that was from an area similar to mine and we just connected. She was who I would talk to and ask questions like, "where do I get my hair done?" or "where can I go find the soul food?"

Tiffany observed there was support in place:

I think my alma mater did a good job in acclimating students to the point that they want students to listen to the rules and things. They have a very good way of picking orientation staff that people want to gravitate to and be friends with and things like that. And those people then, in turn, and the same with RAs, those people then, in turn, espouse all of the values of the institution in ways that make other people want to ascribe to them. I felt that my alma mater was different from other institutions that I worked at and I saw myself represented in people in leadership positions at all levels. That included student leadership, but also administrative leadership as well. And I think that that was helpful in demonstrating to a first-gen student that it was possible to be whatever it was I

wanted to be. That demonstrated that there were places and spaces at the institution for people to occupy, and to be able to feel whatever passion they wanted to, especially in my advisers. I think all my advisers were people of color, now that I think about it.

Tyrone expressed that the support was in place:

I do. I actually thrived off of that. I actually used to work with the director of multicultural affairs there. From day one, I had her in my back pocket . . . even until the day I defended my master thesis, I had her in a room with me for support. Lisa Bell, Keith Johnson. There were several professors and administrators that let me know that they had my back. So, I definitely think there was a good support system when I was there. They were there for me. They definitely were instrumental in that they created a sense of family for me. I appreciated that.

#### ***Research Question 4***

**How did the graduates feel their behavior, language, and attitudes differed while in college?**

*Code-switching and Imposter Syndrome.* The interview questions associated with Research Question 4 revealed the majority of the participants shifted their behavior to fit into certain environments and roles on campus in order to feel accepted.

Tyrone stated that he did not alter or diminish his norms because he didn't know how to:

So, I've never had to diminish myself or make myself smaller so anyone else could feel comfortable. What I did do though is learn how to speak with different people. Not change the way I talked or anything, but I did learn to just communicate a lot better. Being around a lot of different people. So, it, it did teach me that, but I always kept the core of myself there. So, I didn't diminish myself at all.

Tammy shared her experiences with code-switching:

I experienced that a whole hell of a lot in high school. But prior to joining my sorority, I would say, “Yes.” At summer orientation, I was one of maybe two Black people. He was an upperclassman. He is a member of a NPHC [National Pan-Hellenic Council] fraternity so as far as me being able to have camaraderie with another person of color other than him.

Melissa reported she had to adjust her behaviors:

That definitely really happened, again really towards the beginning. I was in my freshman so in my first year, and in my sophomore year. Towards the end, in certain atmospheres you had to play that card, but towards the end of my time, especially after my junior year . . . In my senior year I did not play that code-switch card I will say in the classroom. There were times still because I worked in the Office of Advancement, I was in certain presidential arenas and atmospheres where you knew that card, you had to come out and play that, so I code-switched often. My first year, it was just kind of a very shock of like and very apparent that you didn’t belong. A lot of times I found myself more so in the community that I resonated more with than the actual institution. My space where I didn’t have to perform those performances, gestures, or actions.

Scott noted that he changed his normal behaviors and felt he had to code-switch:

Heck yeah! During my second semester of freshman year, I had one of the Black professors on campus. One day I nodded off in his class and he made this statement about me being from Memphis and he really embarrassed me in front of the class. Since then I never would fall asleep in class and I always sat in the front. It would always seem as if there was this expectation, especially because I would be excluded from group work that

I was dumb or I didn't know stuff. So, I always wanted to make sure that I, I hate to use this term, but like "represented for the culture." I wanted to counteract that perception of what they thought a tall, skinny, Black boy was because I always got the question, "You must be here for a basketball scholarship" or "What are you doing in these classes?". Especially once I started getting into the upper division classes, like it was a struggle especially because I think I got a little bit of narcolepsy. It was a matter of code-switching and everything like that, but from those moments, I realized that I did not want to be the brunt of jokes. However, at a point you realize that you were in a class with some ignorant people and their expectation of you were you're going to be dumb especially when certain topics came up that centered around race. At times I look back and I was very much disappointed in my either lack of being able to articulate intelligently and come up with an adequate response to combat some of their ignorant statements, or just kind of just being silent about it. So, those are some regrets, but I definitely felt the need to code-switch and everything when I got in certain classes and spaces.

Donna described her code-switching as well:

Oh yes, most definitely. When I worked in housing, I worked in freshmen dorms. It was definitely different, especially when I worked in other dorms, ones that weren't freshmen dorms. So, these were more graduate students. I definitely had to be different or, you know, not appear to be like, I don't know what I'm doing. I definitely didn't wear the funny looking hairstyles, what they would say was funny but I thought it was cute. Because of the professional nature that I was in front of all these people, people would come through the front desk, I'm checking people in. So yeah, I did switch things up.

Derrick related:

I definitely would think so and I did it without knowing. I think about clothes for one example. There were times when I wore the sports coat to go to this event because I knew that other people would be doing that same thing. Especially the White people that were there. Or, to have to be able to impress someone. I do think I definitely changed speech patterns a lot. Especially different groups, depending on what group of folks I was with. Again, not realizing I was doing it. Especially in front of administration because talking with them, of course, is going to be a little different. I still do that now. Well, somewhat. Lately I've been a little more down to earth in some of these conversations, because I'm like, I need you to understand and feel the passion that I feel about this.

Joseph stated that he felt the need to code-switch to adapt:

Yes, I mean it could be anywhere from when I was a drum major addressing the whole band or when I was a bus driver having to address students who were doing things they weren't supposed to do on the bus or in class. Basically, all the time. For me, it was more of who was the audience and connecting to the audience. Knowing that 90% of the people on the bus would be White, anytime that there was an issue, they were always White. It never failed that, if I was driving, there was an issue or if there was going to be a problem, most likely a White male student. In the band, basically 19 students, including myself, we took a knee to a national anthem while the rest of the band played. So, there were still students in the band who were against us, even when I became drum major and was now a leader.

Toya observed that she felt the need to shift in order to avoid negative racial stereotypes:

Absolutely. I felt that way in the classroom all the time. I think it was probably only until my later years in college that I realized that Black students did not run this campus. Most of the students were White and it was a commuter school. So, it was an affluent area and one of the richest counties in the state. We [the Black students] didn't realize that we were the minorities. And so, I really felt my color inside the classroom. A lot of my classes were English, and I think a lot of my peers were probably maybe taking business classes, sociology, or criminal justice classes. So, it wasn't a lot of my inner circle that was taking English classes and the English professors, they had been there for so long and it was a lot of white students. And, I took a literature course, so I definitely felt I had to scale back and watch what I wore since I had bright color hair and long nails and there was a perception about not just me, but black students that were ghetto. So, I did feel at times I had to be mindful so that they wouldn't stereotype me, but I know I didn't have any control over how they view.

Jasmine reported situational occurrences of code-switching:

So yes, as an undergrad student, there were times that, the university boards that I sat on and there were times I'd have to put on another face to attend those meetings. I couldn't go in as the [Black woman] that I am. I had to deal with a lot of imposter syndrome. Where you have to fit in this little box that they want you to fit in, or you're not welcomed, you're not received well. And there was a lot of that because I was on so many different boards that had the mixed race. It wasn't people that looked like me. It was people that wanted me there, but didn't really want my voice. I was more like a number.

Jennifer stated:

I would say I felt like that more when I was a political science major because you just didn't have a whole lot of students of color that were assigned majors. It was a different expectation. It was a different feel. Depending on where you are on campus, you couldn't be your full authentic Black self and everything. I stayed in south campus, which if was mostly Black students so when I was down there, I could release my hair down, someone down the hall would have a fish fry, or you can go get your hair done on this hall. You had to switch it a little bit depending on who you talk to and how you talk to them. But once I dropped a political science major, it was almost like "you can be Black now" because my sociology professors never had a problem with it. Once I switched majors, it gave me the power of confidence to be who I am not feeling like I had to code switch.

Tiffany remarked that she shifted her behavior on a minimal level but also discussed code-switching:

I think with my work study job, I did a little bit have to code switch just because the environment. I worked in the office of business affairs and that was like a math thing, but it was like simple math. So there, I think there was an expectation of being polished and proper and ascribing to these ideals of White heteronormative society in a way that for instance—in the office of multicultural affairs that wasn't a thing because they understood being able to come to work as your full and authentic self. Whereas that wasn't necessarily the case in business affairs, and I think that maybe representative of the fact that the business office is not tied to a student affairs space, but more reflective of a prevailing cultural-American identity and expectations. I think was only space where I was like expected to ascribe to those sorts of like values and ideals, but everywhere else, I



didn't feel like I had to code switch or assimilate in way in any way, shape, or form, really.

### ***Research Question 5***

**In what ways have the experiences at PWIs impacted the current lives of Black, first-generation college graduates?**

*Living Off Experience.* Research Question 5 allowed the participants to reflect on the way in which their experiences as Black, first-generation college students impacted their perspective, personally and professionally.

Tyrone stated:

Just the professionalism, being able to communicate. Each day, I'm speaking with somebody I don't know so it definitely taught me how to communicate with a wide range of people who probably aren't from the same background as I am. So, it definitely taught me how to communicate with those people and . . . that's the main thing just taught me how to communicate with people of all different backgrounds.

Tammy remarked:

It has truly prepared me for dealing with White folks. Dealing with the macro, the microaggressions. And I know it ain't the healthiest, dealing with the micro/macroaggressions, as well as, I will say this in a more positive light, being at a PWI and even working at a PWI, when I can see students of color, because they're already looking you out for solidarity and solace, anyway. So, when you encounter these students of color, being able to share my experiences with them because it's them talking to me about what they're going through.

Melissa shared that her experiences were positive:

My service in those student orgs, but really coming from working in the ODI office, is how I ended up in higher ed. The dean at that time, I was graduating . . . And that kind of goes back to preparation. I was a month and half out from graduating. Well, I knew I wanted to do diversity work and/or civic engagement work, so I had been applying at some high schools to do diversity and inclusion. The dean said, “Have you ever thought about student affairs?” I said, “I have no idea what that is,” and he said, “That’s what I do.” So, my leadership really kind of shaped who I was and it allowed me to see a career doing things that I care about and saw ways in which that can impact relations. Right now, I’m really passionate about relationships between institutions and communities, so that’s something that we kind of oftentimes see institutions as being within communities. But now doing work with minority-serving institutions and HBCUs is a very different pathway than what I’ve seen done, or where I see PWIs to be.

Scott reported the way in which his experience added to his understanding of best practices to assist Black students:

I think now from my experiences it has made me be a lot more intentional in how I support and advocate for students who look like me. I established a faculty and staff mentoring collaborative or mentoring program. I make sure that, at the beginning of every semester, I have a resource guide for students of color that come in. I’m intentionally and keep communicating with students from underrepresented populations. And what I mean by that is every three weeks I send out a check-in. I’m like, “Hey, what’s going on?” “How y’all doing?” or whatever the case may be and those students that respond back, I connect them to appropriate resources or make sure that I’m

advocating and fighting for them. I also work to get students involved because I advise our NPHC and our multicultural organizations. So, making sure that I can connect students with those support systems. And also, just in terms of the leadership development I provide opportunities for them to go to different places, but also opportunities that teach them how to stand up for themselves, how to present themselves in high-esteem and see the bigger picture.

Donna noted that her educational experiences and upbringing helped her build relationships with the people in her work:

Professionally, was just in the center of it all and I could of grew up in some of the same areas that these ladies [incarcerated women] I work with grew up in educationally wise, it was just the knowledge that I gained from college, plus my experience living in Detroit mixed together, I believe, definitely benefits me because the prisoners see me as somebody that can help them, but they also see me as she knows our struggle.

Derrick observed that his involvement on-campus aided him in finding a sense of belonging:

I think that getting involved while in college helped. One, it gave me a new sense of idea about certain things, but also it humbled me in a way, too, because of knowing some of the things that they went through. Making sure I'm cognitive of that whenever I'm planning for talking to the students or things like that, maybe to pull back from the experience. Those things prepared me, based off working with other people's children but then also just some of those tidbits of things I've learned along the way helped in the role. Also, it helped with just trying to be careful with tone sometimes in certain situations. But, still learning to get my point across. I do feel a little bit more comfortable, obviously because I've been there. I know where everything is, or at least know some things.

Obviously, some things change, but it's obviously a challenge too so I want to say it definitely impacted, my undergrad experience definitely impacted, just because of being involved as a RA and being involved as a President Ambassador.

Joseph added:

Professionally, I have a different level of empathy for the students that I deal with a lot of times because having been the not-so-stellar student all the time and needing help getting into classes and having failed a class or needing little massaging. Having had that experience and having been someone who didn't understand the system, when I get questions from students and advisors I always kind of tap back into where I was just a few years ago.

Toya reported:

I'm rooting for everybody Black! The institution where I work prides itself on being the leader, the number one tool of public health in the world, and they attract the brightest and the best. And we get a lot of Black students from all over the world. Parts of Africa, they come from the wherever, and it's not a lot of black students or professionals that look like this. And so, when they see me, they just had that look like, "Is you good?" My experiences have propelled me now that I understand what it means to be a first-generation college student. Now that I know what it means to be a Black woman in higher ed and looking at all of these challenges, the systemic racism that we experience, I feel I have a responsibility to make sure that in all of my roles, do what I can to make sure that all my Black and brown people have an office that they can come to, a staff person that they can come to, to get support, because I know that they are smart.

Jasmine stated:

DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] work is what I do now. It's my passion. And I know it's because of my experience as an undergrad. I was blessed to have had a great advisor through my undergrad . . . she was there for me. I got to see her every time I went to that advising center. Most advising centers you see whoever, but I got to see her every single time. And, I think that made a difference, because she made me feel wanted and welcome. She made me feel like she cared. And so, that passion that she had translated to when I was an advisor for my students, I was the same way. I made sure that they knew that I'm going to do everything I can to get you through. Whatever that is, whoever I need to advocate for, whoever I need to talk to, I did it for my students. And then in professional career, I do a lot of the ER [emergency room] training and workshops. And I know it's because that's my passion. When we're filling those microaggressions and we're dealing with imposter syndrome, and we can't be who we really are, and they keep asking, "Are you okay?" No, you're not okay. So, I'm trying to give people the tools that they have to express themselves in those kinds of situations. So, it truly affected me, and I think it made me the professional that I am now. I'm more aware of my situations and my surroundings. I know that they're looking at me some kind of way. I know that they're thinking something. I already see it coming, so I'm able to prepare for it better. And I think it's because I went to PWI.

Jennifer expressed her opinion:

I'm actually writing about that for my dissertation because I'm looking at like black millennials and student affairs professionals. And one of my points that I've come across is why we get into the field. Why are we, as young, black millennials, getting into the

field? And when I started reading over it, I was like, “that’s why I got into the field,” You get into the field because you remember going through the PWI, you remembered the people that helped you get through. I’ll never forget my advisor. You remember the few black people . . . like I remember the black woman in the dining hall. I didn’t have a dime and I never had a dining plan, but my friend would have meal swipes and she would buy my meals sometimes. All your professors that helped you along the way.

Tiffany stated that her undergraduate experiences exposed her to a more global society:

I think my alma mater allowed me to be exposed to new people, thoughts, ideas, and experiences that I didn’t even know existed. Because for a very long time my world had been just like South Jamaica, Queens with this Jamaican identity—from an underclass community. So, when I went to college that was the first time I had any classmates that were White. Growing up in Queens, most of the people that I went to school with were either Black or brown so being exposed to White for the first time was an experience . . . a whirlwind experience. My institution provided me with a lot of things that I don’t think I would have gotten if I had went elsewhere. For example, when I was on the president’s society, I knew so many people, and then when it came time to take that class that I would have to pay, the institution paid for it for me. We had this excursion to Paris and I was like, “Yo, I can’t afford this . . . I guess I’m not gonna be able to go.” Then I got an email saying that between the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Provost Office, we were able to make it possible for you to go to Paris to engage in this trip. Being exposed to different types of people too was also helpful for me in understanding that one type of people are not representative of an experience. So, for example, understanding that there were Asian people that were cool and they were Asian people that weren’t cool,

understanding that there are Black people that are cool and there are Black people that weren't cool. So, instead of demonizing an entire group, I was able to understand that essentializing a race based on my experiences with individuals within that race was not conducive to liberation in ways that have informed my solidarity, my social justice work, and activism, which I hope will impact the students that I come into contact with and having them understand that the systems of oppression are operating across all different types of races and different types of ways. If you're only aware of how this is impacting Black people, you're not going to be able to understand how this can be reified and re-operationalized to impact other groups into eventually impact you. That's been helpful. My alma mater has taught me to very much be aware of issues that not only impacted my community, but the communities around me. It also very much instilled values of community service. Before going to college, I had no idea about what purpose community service was providing me with, but in understanding that we see everyone in the world is an extension of myself and caring for people in ways that would allow for disruption of the systems of oppression is exactly what a service is all about and intended to do.

## Chapter 5. Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of my study was to explore and gain insight into the overall experiences of Black, first-generation college graduates of predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Through interviews, 11 participants provided qualitative data that offered a perspective into their experiences as undergraduate college students. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the study's context, followed by a discussion of the findings, and finally recommendations for practice and for further research.

### Research Questions

The interview questions (Appendix A) asked of participants aligned with the five research questions to help guide the conversation and organize the data:

*Research Question 1.* What are the experiences of Black, first-generation college graduates of PWIs?

*Research Question 2.* What challenges did Black, first-generation college graduates encounter while attending a PWI?

*Research Question 3.* What were the participants' perceptions of the ways academic and cultural assimilation affected their lives while enrolled in the institution?

*Research Question 4.* How did the graduates feel their behavior, language, and attitudes differed while in college?

*Research Question 5.* In what ways have their previous experiences at PWIs impacted the current lives of Black, first-generation college graduates?

### *Motivation and the Role of Family*

When the participants reflected on their individual motivation for being the first in their families to attend college, two themes emerged. The majority of the participants had parental



motivation to excel or they viewed a college degree as a means to escape poverty. These goals provided intrinsic motivation. This finding related to Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory. Glasser (1998) stated that the basis for internal motivation included several factors, such as the need for survival, belonging, or autonomy. None of the participants indicated that either of their parents earned a bachelor's degree but that their parents worked hard to provide a good life for their families. The second theme related that several participants had a high school teacher or counselor who motivated and encouraged them. Most of the participants reported they performed well academically in high school; but it was the guidance and motivation from key adults that encouraged them to apply to college, attend, and graduate.

### ***Institutional Financial Aid***

Ten of the participants were either eligible for or recipients of the Pell Grant either for the entirety of their undergraduate experience or at some point. The basis of Pell Grant funds was on income information provided by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), completed each year to determine financial aid packages (Delisle, 2017). Additionally, in terms of financial support, many of the participants chose to attend their alma mater based on of affordability and overall cost of attendance. One participant, Emily, detailed the full scholarship that she received:

Also, the money was a factor because I actually attended my institution on a full ride. It wasn't merit-based per se it was need-based. So, it was a scholarship program in which if you could get into the institution on your own merit but if you were below a certain poverty level, they would pay for you to go to school. So, they paid for me to go completely all four years plus provided work study, paid for books, all of that so that was a big incentive.

Further, another participant, Melissa, stated that the full scholarship was the deciding factor but the type of scholarship was appealing as well in the final decision to attend her alma mater:

It was the scholarship. I was looking to be pre-med going into college and a physician that my mother had worked for, he had attended this institution and he said, “Hey, if you’re wanting to get into pre-med or go into medicine this is the route to go.” So, I applied for a scholarship that would cover all four years. It was based on service, so I was very involved in community service from an early age within my community, within my church, so the scholarship was appealing to me not only from the financial aspect, but from what the scholarship was actually about, being involved in the community as well.

Most participants indicated that their parents were unable to provide significant financial support while they were in college, thus scholarships and on-and off-campus jobs were important for filling in financial gaps and purchasing necessities.

### ***Dealing with Stereotypes and Racism***

The majority revealed that they dealt with incidents of stereotyping or racism during their undergraduate experience. This finding supported Sinanan (2016) who stated that Black students often experience microaggressions related to bias and racism during enrollment at PWIs. Some of the incidents noted by participants stemmed from perceived stereotypes pertaining to clothing, hairstyles, hometowns, and speech patterns. The same participants who had profound negative experiences mentioned the need to adapt new behaviors and adjust attitudes to assimilate and disassociate from negative perceptions. In the literature, Cook (2014) referred to this shift as code-switching in which individuals consciously created a separate character in an attempt to be accepted into the mainstream.

### ***Black Faculty and Staff Support***

Another common finding my research illustrated was that many of the students indicated that a Black faculty or staff member at their alma mater provided support on some level. One participant, who expressed that his alma mater provided adequate support to aid his adjustment to college mentioned that:

I actually used to work with the director of multicultural affairs there. From day one, I had her in my back pocket. Even until the day I defend my master thesis, I had her in a room with me for support. So, I definitely think there was a good support system when I was there. They [Black faculty and staff] definitely were instrumental in that they created a sense of family for me. I appreciated that.

In the literature, Jones et al. (2002) stated that PWIs needed to equip themselves with support systems to accommodate the growing number of Black students enrolling in college. Several supports included effective policies that combated discrimination and racism, appealing student organizations, and ethnic diversity among faculty and staff.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to gain insight into the experiences of Black, first-generation college graduates during their undergraduate years at PWIs. While there were similarities, the findings demonstrated that each graduate had the motivation to earn a bachelor's degree even when financial support was not always available, a sense of belonging was not always present, and despite incidents of stereotyping and racism. Campus engagement was a strong contributor in helping the graduates find a sense of belonging and many of the clubs and organizations that they joined during their time as undergraduates were with other Black college students.

First-generation college students arrive may with many attributes that include adaptability, perseverance, resourcefulness, and a strong sense of community. Being a Black, first-generation college student at a PWI magnifies the importance of these traits, but it is the actual experiences of Black students that can uncover negative feelings of imposter syndrome and inadequacy.

Five research questions provided structure for this qualitative study and those questions served to analyze the answers to the interview questions, ranging from the matriculation process (learning about and applying to colleges) through post-graduation and professional outcomes.

The major findings of the study included:

1. College preparation, college readiness programs, and early discussions about college while in high school positively impact college enrollment rates for Black, first-generation college students.
2. Black, first-generation college graduates of PWIs receive motivation to apply and attend college from various sources that include immediate family members, college student groups, and non-White college faculty and staff.
3. While undergraduates, Black, first-generation college graduates of PWIs often have negative experiences rooted in stereotypes and covert racism due to their race.
4. The positive and negative experiences of Black, first-generation college graduates of PWIs have a profound impact on their personal lives and professional work.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The findings from this study illustrate that Black, first-generation college graduates often arrive at college with overwhelming support from their immediate family. However, that support has limitations because their parents, who did not earn a college degree, could not fully

understand the complexities of college life and the experiences of their children. Nonetheless, Black, first-generation college graduates can thrive and often have intrinsic motivations to perform well and to graduate.

Higher education institutions would benefit from the following practices based on the research:

1. Providing intentional ongoing support for Black, first-generation college students.
2. Ensuring that faculty and staff receive ongoing necessary training regarding discrimination, harassment, and unconscious bias.
3. Creating mentoring programs for Black college students soon after their arrival that will allow them to build relationships with other Black students, faculty, and staff.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Further research could expand the relevant data on Black, first-generation college students and graduates at PWIs. One of the limitations of this study was that it focused on graduates of four-year institutions, but it might be beneficial to replicate this study at two-year institutions because the enrollment rates at two-year institutions is higher for first-generation college students (NASPA, 2021). Additional recommendations for future research are not limited to but could include:

1. Examining the relationship between Black faculty and staff and Black, first-generation college students at PWIs and its impact on persistence and graduation rates.
2. Exploring the importance of NPHC fraternities and sororities at PWIs and the impact they have on the sense of belonging for Black, first-generation college students.

3. Investigating the reporting mechanisms for cases of race-related issues at PWIs, the frequency of reports, and the outcomes of such cases.
4. Exploring the financial gaps that potentially hinder Black college students from low-income families from participating in curricular, co-curricular, and developmental opportunities.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview Questions

Welcome! Before we start, please confirm that you are a first-generation college graduate, that you self-identify as an African American, and that you graduated from a predominately White college or university.

1. Can you tell me about your undergraduate alma mater?
2. What motivated you to attend college?
3. What factors were important in your decision to enroll at a PWI?
4. Can you tell me about your parent's educational background? Did they encourage you to attend college?
5. What role did your immediate family play in financially supporting your educational pursuits? What role did they play emotionally?
6. Do you feel that the college offered adequate support to help minority students adjust to college life?
  - a. If yes, describe that support.
  - b. If no, what types of support would have been helpful?
7. What was your academic major?
  - a. How did you decide on a major?
  - b. Did race or ethnicity play a role in your choice of a major?
8. Just before or just after starting college, did you have any concerns about being successful academically?
9. Did you join any student organizations or clubs while you were an undergraduate student?

- a. If yes, what were those organizations? Were these organizations comprised mostly of White students or students of color?
  - b. If yes, how did you select the organizations that you joined?
10. Was there a time while you were an undergraduate that you felt you had to diminish your culture, change your speech patterns, or change your appearance to assimilate into the campus environment and fit in? If yes, when you returned home to visit your family or friends while an undergraduate, did you revert to your previous speech patterns or manner of dress?
11. What is your current role or profession? In what ways did your experiences as an undergraduate at a PWI impact your current professional and personal life?
12. Did you attend graduate school? If so, was it another PWI or a HBCU?
13. Do you have anything to add?

## Appendix B: Consent Form

**Principal Investigator's Contact Information:** stukes@etsu.edu

**Organization of Principal Investigator:** East Tennessee State University

### INFORMED CONSENT

This document explains about being a participant in a research study. Please read this carefully. This will help you decide if you would like to volunteer to join this study.

If you are interested in volunteering for this research study, please read the rest of this document.

### **STUDY DETAILS**

- **What is the purpose of the study?** The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of African American, first-generation college graduates of predominantly White institutions. The narratives will provide a glimpse into their experiences as undergraduate students and how those challenges impacted their lives. This study does not involve using marketed drugs, devices, or experiments.
- **How much of my time will it take?** The individual interviews necessary are expected to take 60-75 minutes.
- **What are you asking me to do?** If you decide to volunteer for this study, you will be asked to review the consent form and schedule a date and time for a Zoom interview. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions that speak to the purpose of this study. All Zoom sessions will be recorded and transcribed soon thereafter. You will be provided a copy of the transcription in order to confirm its accuracy and will have the opportunity to redact statements at that time.
- **Are there any benefits for me?** Yes, your participation will provide an opportunity for you to discuss your journey as an African American, first-generation college graduate and may serve as a point of reflection. Additionally, you could gain insight into the experiences of other African American first-generation college students. Colleges and universities may use this data strategically and intentionally to implement supports and resources to serve this study population, if required.
- **Are there any possible risks or discomforts?** There is a possible risk associated with this research as the data you provide is identifiable to the researcher. As the principal investigator, I will not publish or share any identifiable information and you will be assigned a pseudonym to increase confidentiality. I will be the only recipient of your contact information and will use it in setting up an interview date/time, providing you with the transcript for review and possible redaction, and for notifying you if are chosen for a gift card.
- **Will I be identified? How are you keeping my information safe?** The Zoom recordings, which include facial recognition, add the possible risk of loss of confidentiality. As the

principal investigator, I will not share your name or other identifiable information with anyone else. The study will not include identifiable information and I will make every effort to keep your study records confidential. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings. You will not be named as a participant. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, both the research records and signed consent form that identify you may be reviewed by others that have the legal right to see that information. This may include the ETSU IRB overseeing this research, other individuals at the University with the responsibility for ensuring we follow the rules related to this research, the federal Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) that protects participants like you, and the Principal Investigator and research team. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as described in this form.

- **Will any of my data be used in the future?** All information that can identify you will be removed from the data. These data will then be stored for possible use in future research studies. We will not ask for additional consent for those studies.
- **Do I have to pay for anything?** There is no cost to you if you decide to be a part of this study.
- **Will I be paid for participating?** You will not be paid directly for joining this study. At the conclusion of the interviews, a random drawing will be held to determine two recipients of \$50 gift cards.
- **Do I have to join this study?** No. This study is voluntary. You decide if you want to be a part of this study. You may decide you do not want to participate. If you join this study and then change your mind, you can withdraw at any time. Deciding not to join the study or withdrawing will not affect any benefits you would normally receive. You may quit by contacting James Stukes at 803-983-1211 or by email at [stukes@etsu.edu](mailto:stukes@etsu.edu).
- **Whom should I contact for questions?** If you have any questions or research-related problems at any time, you may call James Stukes at 803-983-1211. This research is overseen by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). An IRB is a group of people who conduct independent review of research studies. You may also contact the ETSU IRB at 423.439.6054 or [IRB@etsu.edu](mailto:IRB@etsu.edu) for any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant.

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understand this Informed Consent Document. I also confirm that I had the opportunity to have it explained to me verbally. I confirm that I was able to ask questions and that all my questions have been answered. By signing below, I confirm that I am 18 years or older and I freely and voluntarily choose to take part in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed Name of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

You will be provided with a copy of this signed consent form.

VITA

JAMES STUKES

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