

Copyright  
by  
Tiffany Vanese Tillis  
2017

**The Dissertation Committee for Tiffany Vanese Tillis Certifies that this is the  
approved version of the following dissertation**

***When and Where I Enter: A Phenomenological Study of Black Women  
at a Selective Predominantly White Institution***

**Committee:**

---

Richard J. Reddick, Supervisor

---

Victor B. Sàenz

---

Edwin R. Sharpe Jr.

---

Dorie J. Gilbert

---

Aileen T. Bumphus

***When and Where I Enter: A Phenomenological Study of Black Women  
at a Selective Predominantly White Institution***

**by**

**Tiffany Vanese Tillis, B.A.; M.Ed.**

**Dissertation**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at Austin  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2017**

## **Dedication**

*This dissertation is dedicated:*

*To my grandmother who paved the way for our family and instilled in me the spirit of hard work and never giving up;*

*To my husband for believing in my dreams and sacrificing in order for me to live my dream;*

*To my children who shared their mother with the demands of working full-time and writing a dissertation. You are the reason I do all that I do;*

*And finally to every Black woman on the planet... Keep making magic!*

## **Acknowledgements**

This study has inspired me and affirmed for me that the work I do everyday is meaningful and necessary. I would first like to thank the students who participated in this study. Each participant met with me three times: two one-on-one interviews and a focus group. I was honored to listen to their stories and learn from their experiences. Ladies, it is because of you that I am able to do this work.

To my family, thank you for all the support and love you have shown me during this process. I have been on this journey a long time and your faith in me never wavered. Momma, Tera, Tiana and Nakeenya, thank you for putting up with me. I know it is not easy being my mother, sister and best friend. Your love has sustained me.

To Calvin my child who went to college with me... Calvin, we did it! We grew up together and you made me be better. I knew you were watching and I wanted to make sure I was giving you the best and setting a good example. Thank you for being a great son. I'm proud of you and I love you. To Sydney, trying finishing this degree with a new baby was probably one of the hardest things I have ever done. Your arrival made finishing a priority. Thank you for pushing mommy to the end. I hope that when you are old enough you will be proud of your roll in helping me along my journey. I love you! To my husband, Shelton, thank you for your unconditional love and incomparable support of my dreams. You pushed me to go forward and not to quit even when I wanted to. I know that the story would not be ending like this if it were not for you.

To my grandmother who is no longer with me, but supported me until her last days on this earth, we were inseparable. I appreciate your patience and consideration for all the many obligations I juggled while trying to care for you. I know it wasn't pretty, but you never made me feel guilty about the other priorities in my life. You taught me to

work hard and to never give on my dreams and goals. As the first in our family to go to college and get your masters degree, you inspired me to go to college and reach even higher. I had you as my role model and I am lucky. I wish you were still here to share in this moment with me. I know you are looking down on me and I hope I have made you proud.

To my dissertation committee: Dr. Reddick, Dr. Saenz, Dr. Sharpe, Dr. Gilbert and Dr. Bumphus; thank you so much for hanging in there with me. When I asked you all to serve I had no idea it would keep us together this long. I really appreciate the patience and support you have shown me over the years. The gentle nudges were important to me, because it signaled to me that you all thought that I could do this work. Dr. Reddick, thank you for your supervision, patience and wisdom. I am honored and proud to have been your advisee.

I would like to say thank you to my LCAE family: Dr. Moore, Dr. Bumphus, Dr. Lu, Dr. Jimenez, Dr. Brown, Dr. Kelly, Dr. Sutton, Katelyn, Amy, Sakena and Eileen. Everyday someone asked me about my dissertation! I cannot deny that the support and confidence that you all had in me had everything to do with me being able to do this. I did not want to let you all down. Dr. Moore, thank you for your trust in me over the years. Your faith in me has allowed me to grow professionally in ways I never thought that I would. Dr. Bumphus, thank you for your mentorship and sponsorship. You too have been a constant source of encouragement. I am a better woman and professional because of your example. Thank you for the love you have shown me.

Lastly, to my friends, many of you I met in graduate school, some are professional colleagues and some of you I have known a lifetime: Nakeenya, Choquette, Rian, Marissa, FranCee, Beth, Taryn, Thais, Leonie, Daniel, Charles, Manny, Carmen, Darren and Dallawrence. Each one of you means something special to me. You may not

know it but each one of you has played a part in encouraging me to finish and I am eternally grateful to have friends and colleagues like you in my life.

***When and Where I Enter: A Phenomenological Study of Black Women  
at a Selective Predominantly White Institution***

Tiffany Vanese Tillis, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

Supervisor: Richard J. Reddick

Black females are the majority of Black students enrolled at both PWIs and HBCUs. HBCUs award a significant number of degrees to Black students despite the fact that they only educate 11% of all undergraduates enrolled today (Gasman, 2012). Why aren't we seeing the same completion rates of Black women at PWIs that we see at HBCUs? Studies show that African American women attending PWIs experience greater social and emotional distress than their counterparts attending HBCUs (Fleming, 1984; Watt, 1997). These factors and others tend to depress success for African American women.

Furthermore, Black women face challenges just as Black men do when it comes to participation in, graduation from, and overall success in educational institutions compared to their White counterparts (Bush, Chambers & Walpole, 2010). The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth account of the college-going experience of Black women at a selective predominantly White institution and understand their pathways to graduation. In particular, the hope is that this investigation will provide more insight into the phenomena that contributes to these women's ability and/or inability to secure



degrees. By learning their effective survival tips and success strategies, hearing how they cope, and documenting the skills they have acquired to help them move in the direction of attaining their goal of a college degree, the hope is that this information will have implications for practice in places where attrition is an issue for Black women and in policy making. To understand the phenomena, a qualitative research design is in order and more specifically, a phenomenological approach. This approach will allow for exploring and analyzing these women's lived experiences at this institution (Creswell, 1998). This study will investigate using the frameworks of both "Black Feminist Theory" and "Intersectionality." Black Feminist Theory will allow for the opportunity to place Black women's voices at the center of research in an effort to make visible Black women's unique experiences and acts of resistance (Robinson, Esquibel, & Rich, 2013) and intersectionality will equip me with the tools to understand and explain the Black woman's multidimensional experience.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	xv
List of Figures .....	xvi
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	8
Purpose of the Study .....	11
Research Questions .....	12
Relevance of the Study .....	13
Overview of Methods .....	15
Limitations/Delimitations .....	16
Key Terms/Definitions.....	17
Organization of the Study .....	20
Summary .....	21
Chapter Two: Literature Review .....	22
History of African American Women in Education .....	23
Black Women in Education & First Wave Feminism .....	25
Lucy Ann Stanton (1831-1912) .....	25
Mary Jane Patterson (1840-1894).....	26
Black Women in Education & Second Wave Feminism .....	28
Black Women in Education & Third Wave Feminism .....	31
Black Women in Society .....	33
Multiple Jeopardy .....	33
Social Challenges.....	35
Economic Suppression.....	36
Marriage Decline .....	37
Black Women in Contemporary Higher Education .....	40
Black Students at PWIs.....	45
Microaggressions .....	46

Stereotype Threat .....	47
Poor Faculty Relationships .....	48
Othermothering .....	50
African American Women at Predominantly White Institutions.....	53
Coping Strategies .....	54
Factors that Discourage Persistence.....	56
The Impostor Syndrome .....	56
Low Academic Self-Efficacy.....	57
Racial Hostility .....	58
Lack of Mentors .....	58
Factors that Encourage Persistence.....	59
Spirituality.....	59
Involvement in Black Student Organizations .....	60
Academic Support Programs .....	61
Future Outlook .....	61
Theoretical Frameworks .....	62
Black Feminist Thought (BFT).....	63
Intersectionality Theory .....	67
Intersectionality Debates.....	70
Summary .....	74
Chapter Three: Methodology .....	75
Research Design Rationale .....	76
Research Design.....	80
Site Selection .....	80
Participant Recruitment and Selection.....	82
Data Collection & Analysis .....	84
Interviews.....	84
Focus Group.....	85
Participant Observations and Field Notes.....	85
Analytic Memos.....	87

Data Confidentiality .....	87
Data Analysis .....	88
Dependability .....	89
Triangulation.....	89
Peer Debriefing .....	90
Member Checking.....	90
Positionality/Researcher Bias .....	90
Limitations .....	92
Delimitations .....	94
Summary .....	95
Chapter Four: Participant Introductions & Pre-College Experiences .....	96
Faith .....	97
Ashley .....	100
Monique .....	105
Princess .....	108
Celeste.....	110
Danielle .....	113
Elle .....	115
Grace .....	117
Rebecca .....	120
Sheila.....	123
Toni .....	126
Summary .....	129
Chapter Five: Findings.....	131
Research Question One .....	131
Academic Challenges.....	132
Isolation.....	139
Faculty Interaction .....	141
Perceived Racism .....	146
Fight or Flight & The Power of Faith .....	153

Summary .....	156
Research Question Two .....	157
Student Organizations .....	157
University Programs & Services.....	162
Financial Aid.....	167
Summary .....	170
Research Question Three .....	171
Being Black & Female .....	173
Being West African, Black & Female .....	178
Being Black, Female & Lesbian .....	183
Being Black, Female & Middle Class .....	184
Summary .....	186
Chapter Six: Discussion & Implications .....	188
Overview of The Study .....	188
Key Findings .....	190
Theoretical Implications .....	195
Implications For Research .....	199
Implications For Practice .....	203
Conclusion .....	208
Appendices.....	210
Appendix A: Recruitment Materials .....	210
Email to University Partners .....	210
Email to Prospective Participants .....	210
Email to Interested Participants .....	211
Appendix B: Consent Form .....	213
Appendix C: Pre-Selection Survey Via Qualtrics.....	216
Pre-Selection Black Female College Student Survey .....	216
Appendix D: Protocol for First Semi-Structured Interview.....	219
Appendix E: Protocol for Second Semi-Structured Interview.....	221
Appendix F: Protocol for Focus Group .....	223

Appendix G: Fearless Leadership Institute Annual Report .....	226
References.....	230
Vita .....	243

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: 2012-2013 Black Female College Student Enrollment at Four Selective Public Institutions .....	4
Table 2. The University of Texas at Austin Fall 2008 Cohort 4-Year Graduation Rates for White and Black Females.....	5
Table 3. The University of Texas at Austin Fall 2008 Cohort 4-Year Graduation Rates for Black Males and Black Females. ....	6
Table 4. Unemployment, Employment and Earnings Characteristics by Race, and Hispanic Ethnicity, 2012 Annual Averages.....	37
Table 5. Participants' Demographic Information .....	130

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Race and Gender Difference in Wealth, Ages 18-64, 2007..	39
Figure 2. Intersectionality Model.....	172
Figure 3. Fearless Leadership Institute Model.....	206



## Chapter One: Introduction

Despite challenges, Black female college students continue to graduate from colleges and universities each year. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Aud et al., 2012), within each racial/ethnic group, women earned the majority of degrees at all levels in 2009–2010. For example, among U.S. residents, Black females earned 68 percent of associate's degrees, 66 percent of bachelor's degrees, 71 percent of master's degrees, and 65 percent of all doctor's degrees awarded to Black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). It is clear that Black women are making great strides academically and professionally.

A quintessential example of this was depicted in an October 2009 issue of *Essence*. *Essence* published an eleven-page spread, highlighting 16 Black women of the 2008-2012 Obama Administration. The women were representative of the highest levels of academic and professional achievement. As described by *Essence*, the Obama Administration encompassed the largest set of high-ranking Black women to ever work for the Executive Branch as foreign policy experts, business mavens, attorneys, and more (Gordy, 2009). What was most impressive was that all held degrees from Ivy League universities, elite private schools or selective public universities.

A guided keyword search for Black women in the Obama Administration yielded a total of 21 Black women in the administration and their academic backgrounds, most of them highlighted in this magazine article. Their resumes lauded the names of several highly esteemed private and public institutions like Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Radcliffe, Spelman, Oxford, The London School of Economics, The Ohio State University, The University of Michigan, The University of North Carolina, and The University of Virginia just to name a few. In comparison, past administrations may have held one or

two highly qualified Black women in high profile positions such as Alexis M. Herman, former Secretary of Labor under the Clinton administration; Dr. Condoleezza Rice, former Secretary of State of the Bush administration; and Dr. Susan Rice, former Assistant Secretary of State under President Clinton. But no other administration compares to the presence of highly educated African American women in the White House like the Obama Administration.

A 2009 article in *USA Today* affirmed that the Obama Administration was one of the most diverse cabinets ever with more women, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians (Camia, Jackson, Lewis, Roig & Smith, 2009). After further review of these women and their records it was noted that most of these women had matriculated in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). In many cases, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are credited with producing this country's Black elite (Price, Spriggs, & Swinton, 2011). This can be seen by the seemingly elevated number of HBCU graduates who are among the Black business elite (i.e. John Thompson, a Florida A&M University alumnus and Board Chairman of Microsoft Corporation and Rosalind Brewer a Spelman College Alumna and President and CEO of Sam's Club) (Boyd, 2007), university professors, congressmen, judges (Fryer and Greenstone, 2010; Wilson, 2007), and among the clergy and activists who waged the successful battles for civil rights (Redd, 1998; Roebuck and Murty, 1993). In 1976, 80 percent of Black college graduates were educated at Black colleges (Blackwell, 1976) and today HBCUs account for only one-fourth of the nation's African American graduates (Willie et al, 2006). With the push for integration in the 1960's, enrollment at HBCUs dropped and their role of educating the Black middle class shifted (Gasman, 2013). Now, the landscape is much different where approximately 80 percent of African American collegians are enrolled in predominantly White institutions (Fleming, 1984; Willie, Reddick, & Brown, 2006).

In light of this shift, it is important to note, however, that PWIs all over the country continue to struggle with the retention and graduation of Black students (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). The research on Black college students says that Black students who attend predominantly White institutions are less satisfied, experience significant social isolation, and are less likely to persist to degree completion than White students and other African Americans college students who attend historically Black colleges and universities (Cross & Slater, 2001; Fleming, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Walpole, 2009). Researchers find that even though the majority of Black students pursue their college degrees at institutions classified as PWIs, that it is actually the historically Black institutions that award a disproportionate number of bachelor's degrees to Black students (Allen, 1992; Constantine and Watt, 2002).

Recently, University of Pennsylvania researcher and HBCU expert, Marybeth Gasman, imparted that HBCUs are responsible for educating 11% of African American students attending college today (Gasman, 2013). Although the majority of African American college students (80%) are attending coeducational predominantly White higher institutions (PWI), HBCUs award a higher proportion of bachelor's degrees (28%) to African Americans according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011). Considering what we know about the demographics of Blacks in higher education, it would not be far-fetched to conclude that the majority of Black students earning degrees at HBCUs and PWIs are Black females (Wolf-Wendel, 1998; Drewry & Doermann, 2001). If Black females are the majority of Black students enrolled at both types of institutions, then why are we not seeing the same completion rates at PWIs that we see at HBCUs? Studies show that African American women attending PWIs experience greater social and emotional distress than their counterparts attending HBCUs (Fleming, 1984; Watt, 1997). These factors and others tend to depress success for African American

women. After surveying data of four of the nation’s top, predominantly White, public research institutions, it was a surprise to discover that on average Black females make up approximately 2% of the student body on these campuses.

Table 1: 2012-2013 Black Female College Student Enrollment at Four Selective Public Institutions

	<b>Total Enrollment</b>	<b>Black Female Enrollment</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Institution Type</b>
<b>UC Berkley</b>	36204	740	2.04	Selective
<b>UC Los Angeles</b>	42163	934	2.21	Selective
<b>University of Michigan</b>	43710	1062	2.42	Selective
<b>UT-Austin</b>	52059	1267	2.43	Selective

Upon further examination, it was also revealed that the Black female students enrolled at these institutions were not graduating in the numbers proportional to their enrollment in these institutions. Take for instance the graduation rates of Black females at The University of Texas at Austin. The 2008 cohort of Black female students at The University of Texas at Austin graduated at a rate of 39% in four years (2012) in comparison to 64% of White female students (Institutional Reporting, Research, and Information Systems [IRRIS], 2012). In addition Black female students in this cohort were dismissed at a rate 10 times higher than that of White women (IRRIS, 2012).

Taken a step further, when comparing the Black male students from that same cohort with Black female students, the female students only performed slightly better than their male counterparts in graduation and dropout rates (IRRIS, 2012).

Table 2. The University of Texas at Austin Fall 2008 Cohort 4-Year Graduation Rates for White and Black Females. Adapted from *IMA\_S\_GradRetention\_2006\_Fall*, Copyright 2012 by IRRIS.

<b>White Female</b>	<b>% Graduated</b>	<b>63.61%</b>
	<b>% Continuing</b>	22.76%
	<b>% Dismissed</b>	1.21%
	<b>% Dropped Out</b>	12.43%
	<b>% Flow Status</b>	<b>100.00%</b>
<b>Black Female</b>	<b>% Graduated</b>	<b>38.98%</b>
	<b>% Continuing</b>	35.43%
	<b>% Dismissed</b>	10.24%
	<b>% Dropped Out</b>	15.35%
	<b>% Flow Status</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Much of the literature and dialogue on college participation and completion has centered around African American male college students (Lewis, 2010). In many cases, the challenges associated with African American female participation and completion are not always acknowledged or investigated to the degree of African American male students. There is no question that Black women outnumber Black men in enrollment in higher education institutions (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010) and comprise 64% of Black students pursuing a bachelor's degree. This nearly two-thirds ratio of female to male matriculation represents the largest gender imbalance of all ethnic groups (Jacobson, Olsen, Rice, Sweetland, & Ralph, 2001; Hill, 2007). What is intriguing and not always common knowledge is that the increases in higher education for Black women are most prevalent in certain sectors of higher education, mainly lower status institutions, two-year institutions, and non-selective, predominantly White institutions (Zamani, 2003; Evans, 2007). It should be noted that Black women face challenges just as Black men do when it comes to participation in, graduation from, and overall success in educational institutions compared to their White counterparts (Bush, Chambers & Walpole, 2010).

Table 3. The University of Texas at Austin Fall 2008 Cohort 4-Year Graduation Rates for Black Males and Black Females. Adapted from *IMA\_S\_GradRetention\_2006\_Fall*, Copyright 2012 by IRRIS.

<b>Black Male</b>	<b>% Graduated</b>	<b>31.67%</b>
	<b>% Continuing</b>	36.67%
	<b>% Dismissed</b>	15.00%
	<b>% Dropped Out</b>	16.67%
	<b>% Flow Status</b>	<b>100.00%</b>
<b>Black Female</b>	<b>% Graduated</b>	<b>38.98%</b>
	<b>% Continuing</b>	35.43%
	<b>% Dismissed</b>	10.24%
	<b>% Dropped Out</b>	15.35%
	<b>% Flow Status</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

While extensive studies have been published on the experiences of Black men in response to the same question (Cuyjet 1997, 2006; Davis, 1994; Harper, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2013; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007), minimal literature was found to answer the same question for Black women (Chambers & Sharpe, 2012; Walpole, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). While surveying the literature dedicated to Black women in higher education, very little focused on or specifically addressed the experiences of Black women as they matriculate through predominantly White institutions. The research that was accessible focused on general issues about Black women in higher education. The literature ranged from: Black women in the academy, Black college women and eating disorders, Black college women and issues related to body image, etc. The recent research focusing specifically on Black women's academic success, retention, and graduation from college was sparse. In addition, any research on Black women attending selective, predominantly White institutions was even more difficult to find.

This study will add to the body of research about Black college women, but will specifically be dedicated to the experience of African American/Black women in

majority White spaces and how these women negotiate their Blackness and gender while attempting to earn their bachelor's degree. This research is particularly timely due to the fact that the National Center for Education Statistics (2014) reported that African American women, for the first time, have surpassed every other group in college entrance based on race and gender (2014). As Black women continue to enter PWIs in greater numbers (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004), it is important to look at how their multiple identities impact their experiences and how those experiences influence or threaten their retention and persistence at this particular institution type. Perhaps one explanation could be that African American women hold a unique position as members of two groups that have been treated in a peripheral manner by postsecondary education (Moses, 1989) and membership in both marginalized groups often makes African American women invisible on college and university campuses (Zamani, 2003), which may contribute to these women proverbially "slipping through the cracks."

The intersection of race and gender create a unique and distinct experience for African American women on college campuses and more attention should be paid to the educational, social, and political positions of African American women in postsecondary institutions (Zamani, 2003). This possible reality opens the door for the use of two theoretical frameworks, Black Feminist Thought and Intersectionality as analytical tools for this study. The Black Feminist Thought framework will be used to analyze the marginal position Black women occupy in academic settings. Hill Collins (1990, 1998, & 2002) promotes the importance of Black women telling their own stories and sharing their cultural experiences that validate their presence and contributions in these spaces.

Intersectionality helps explain the multidimensionality of Black women's experiences. In 1989 Kimberlé Crenshaw reminded us that as scholars investigating Black women, we must take into account the intersection of race and gender and that

without it we cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. The intersection of a Black woman's race and gender often influence her treatment in society (Jordan-Zachary, 2007). While Crenshaw mentions only race and gender, this study will explore other identities that participants may claim.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The level of educational attainment for African American women has risen very slowly and still sits at a significantly lower level than that of white women (Guerra, 2013). According to Maria Guerra, from the Center For American Progress (2013) only 21.4 percent of African American women had a college degree or higher in 2010, compared to 30 percent of White women (Guerra, 2013). This is especially intriguing due to the fact that Black women's participation rates are among some of the highest. African American women held 8.58 percent of bachelor's degrees held by women in 2012 though they constituted 12.7 percent of the female population.

In addition to the low completion rates for Black women at PWIs, it seems that the attention and resources are evading them and being directed other places. Due to the rise in strategic programming and resources for African American male students, it seems that African American females have become even more invisible on college campuses (Muhammad & Dixson, 2008; Sims, 2008). Retention and support programs for African American male students are appearing on college campuses all over the country in efforts to remedy what has been called "The African American Male Education Crisis." Examples of programs include The Center for African American Males at Albany State University, The Todd A. Bell National Resources Center on the African American Male at The Ohio State University, The African American Male Resource Center at Chicago State University, The African American Male Research Initiative at The University of



Texas at Austin, The Black Male Initiative at the University of Illinois and Southern Illinois University, The African American Male Initiative at the University of Louisville, and The Black Male Initiative at Louisiana State University and the list goes on and on with many programs at community colleges, private and public institutions all over the country.

In contrast, upon searching for comparable programs from Black women, there are significantly fewer acclaimed initiatives for African American/Black female students. Given the fact that there is a persistent achievement gap for African American students as a whole in comparison to their white counterparts, there should be a focus on both African American males and females. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2009) reports that 32.6% of the non-Hispanic White population over the age of 25 holds a college degree compared to only 19.6% of Blacks over the age of 25. While the figures for African American women are impressive at the micro-level, when one considers these numbers at the macro-level alongside other ethnic groups this distinction shrinks. The Black college student achievement gap continues to persist in spite of the academic achievements and contributions of African American women. The disparities are significant and this achievement gap has life-long lasting effects on the Black community as a whole, limiting the opportunities for Blacks in higher education, employment, earnings/wages, and overall, the Black middle class (Carnervale, 1999; Jencks, 1992; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Ogbu, 1994).

In an op-ed piece by Brian Alexander of MSNBC (2009), he begins by describing Michelle Obama as the archetypal African American female success story as somewhat of an anomaly. He contends that her reality is very different from the reality of other highly educated Black women. His article highlighted three researchers who have studied and written seminal pieces of scholarship on the highly educated Black woman. Nitsche

and Brueckner (2009) explained that the gender disparity in education is important because highly educated Black women outnumber men in this education group. Nitsche and Brueckner impart that Americans have a strong tendency to marry those with equal levels of education and that this trend has only grown stronger since World War II. They assert that for Black women there are fewer men with the same level of education, so in many cases Black women have to find men from other groups to marry or be out of luck. The authors and other scholars remind us that Black women are much more reluctant to marry outside their race, some citing that they would rather be single than to settle, resulting marriage declines (Clark, 2002; Stanley, 2011). Lastly Brueckner expounds on the topic by reiterating that the trend is significant and detrimental to broadening the Black middle class. Fewer highly educated Black people having less children means that they cannot pass on those advantages and knowledge.

While this is only one example of how the achievement gap may impact the Black community, there are many other ways that the achievement gap endangers the Black community as a whole. This research endeavor takes the stand that Black women should command attention as well, because there is something that can be learned from both groups. For example, the strategies that African American female students have utilized to encourage their persistence and completion could affect change for African American males and vice versa. Currently, the focus is on Black males, however, in order to advance the collective, both groups have to bring their experiences and stories. Lewis (2010) has suggested that African American women experiences be brought alongside the Black male experience. Dr. L'Heureax Lewis, assistant professor of sociology at the City University of New York (CUNY) addressed the pervasiveness of Black male privilege that many times subordinates the experiences of Black women in this country. He discussed this matter as it relates to society as a whole, but his statements are incredibly

relevant to what is happening in education. He states: “There are actually spaces where Black men are advantaged and often sometimes dominate a dialogue, when we should be listening more carefully to what’s happening with Black women equally.” He followed up by saying that Black male privilege allows Black men to center their oppression to the exclusion of others (2010). This statement is apparent given the massive amount of attention focused Black males in education.

Perhaps it is because African American women are disproportionately represented in higher education, some may assume that programming, academic support, and/or an intervention for this group is not needed. That assumption, however, is problematic. Although African American women have gradually increased their participation, matriculation, retention, and completion rates in higher education, their struggles and successes are still apparent and distinct (Gold, 2011). While Black women go to college in higher numbers, many women fail to leave with a degree (Hacker, 2011). For example, when looking at six-year graduation rates at The University of Texas at Austin, the rates for Black females increased to 42 percent. That figure is above the rate for Black men (29 percent) and about on par with Hispanic men (41 percent). But Black female students still lagged behind Hispanic women (51 percent), white men (61 percent) and white women (71 percent) in graduation (IRRIS, 2012). The figures and discussion in this section of the proposal present a compelling case for African American women at PWIs. Closing the gap of unfamiliarity is the first step. This endeavor is an answer to that call. The study will focus on Black female students and their experiences at a PWI.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study serves as the beginning of an investigation to discover what the college experience is for Black women who choose to attend a selective, predominantly White

institution and what factors contribute to their abilities to secure a degree at this type of institution. More specifically, I hope that this study will uncover the effective strategies that African American female college students utilize to persist in environments that were not designed with them in mind (Yosso, 2005). For those female students who are currently enrolled in a selective, predominantly White institution, how do they cope in environments where they are invisible? What skills have they acquired? What attitudes do they possess? And what strategies do they employ to encourage their persistence and eventual graduation? My assumption is that the attrition rates for African American female students who do not acquire the necessary academic and social skills to survive are substantial.

This study is in direct response to the lack of research and literature about African American women at PWIs. Walpole (2009) specifically called for more research on the highly successful African American woman on elite college campuses. She expressed that we needed to know how they cope with the isolation among other things. Furthermore, this study will highlight the challenges that Black female students confront associated with their attendance at a predominantly White institution.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following questions guide this study about Black female students at a selective, predominantly White institution.

1. What are the social and academic experiences of Black female college students at a selective, predominantly White institution?
2. What institutional structures promote or threaten Black female degree completion at a selective predominantly White institution?

3. How do Black female college students describe how their identities shape their experiences at a predominantly White institution?

### **RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study is relevant because it will add to the small body of research on African American females in higher education. With the abundance of research and attention on Black males in higher education, this study is an attempt to increase the body of knowledge on African American females in higher education and to bring awareness to an issue that is often overlooked. The study is unique because it is an attempt to study these women's experience at a specific institutional type. Much of the research on African American women in higher education focuses on the success of Black women in HBCUs (Fleming, 1983, 1996; Gasman, 2007, 2009; Perna, Lundy-Wagner, Drezner, Gasman, Yoon, Bose & Gary, 2008; Ross, 2003) and best practices for working with African American female students in general; (Constantine & Greer, 2003, Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Rosales & Person, 2003; Watt, 2003; Zamani, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Chambers & Sharpe, 2012).

Very seldom does the research examine particular institution types to see which institutions encourage and/or depress success for African American female students. What is missing from the conversation is that there is no single approach to working with all African American female students. The needs of African American women at a women's college are very different from the needs of African American women at a community college or selective four-year university. This body of work will address the need to explore African American women's experiences and needs at a selective, research, predominantly White Institution. This work is important, because there is a substantial number of Black women in these educational spaces and they happen to be

experiencing significant challenge as it relates to their retention and graduation Walpole (2009).

Secondly, student affairs professionals, college administrators and faculty members may view these findings as incredibly helpful and beneficial to their work. Because selective universities in most cases do not have a very large presence of African American students on their campuses, the study could be used to influence their interaction and support for this population. Also, practitioners who are not African American or female may be intrigued by this work, because it will be a first-hand account of how the women navigate and many times prevail in spite of the marginalization that may occur in these spaces. Colleges and universities will hopefully learn from this study that it is imperative to support the entire African American student population in order to move the needle and close the achievement gap of the African American student population and other ethnic populations. The recent explosion of academic centers focused on African American male students' success (Albany State University, Ohio State University, Chicago State University, The University of Texas at Austin, University of Illinois, and the University System of Georgia, etc.) should be complemented with initiatives and efforts focused on the African American female student as well.

Lastly, this study will use Black Feminist Theory (BFT), and Intersectionality Theory (IT) to analyze and tell the story of African American women at a selective predominantly White institution. The use of two frameworks will be a unique contribution to the study of African American women in the field of higher education research.

Black Feminist Theory will allow for the opportunity to place Black women's voices at the center of research in an effort to make visible Black women's oppression and acts of resistance (Robinson, Esquibel & Rich, 2013). Using BFT will also be my

contribution in supporting the use of theories by and about Black women. Intersectionality will equip me with the tools to understand and explain the Black woman's multidimensional experience. Crenshaw (2003) argued that race and gender are not mutually exclusive for women of color. In order to address the subordination of African American women we must avoid using a single-axis framework, like race or gender, in order to understand identity and experiences.

The use of multiple conceptual frameworks provides a fuller and deeper explanation of what is happening to African American female college students at selective universities (Borko, 2003). The ability to use multiple frameworks at the same time adds to the ability to offer several perspectives on one problem and also adds to the overall robustness of the study.

## **OVERVIEW OF METHODS**

Again, the purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth account of the college experience of Black women at a selective predominantly White institution and understand their pathways to graduation. In particular, this investigation provides more insight into the phenomena that contributes to these women's ability and/or non-ability to secure degrees. By learning their effective survival and success strategies, hearing how they cope, and documenting the skills they have acquired to help them move in the direction of attaining their goal of a college degree, this information has implications for practice in places where attrition is an issue for Black women and in policy making. To understand the phenomena, a qualitative research design was used and more specifically, a phenomenological approach. This approach allowed for exploring and analyzing these women's lived experiences at the institution (Creswell, 1998). This section briefly describes the methods for data collection and analysis.

The methods of data collection included student interviews, a student focus group, a recruitment questionnaire, and an observation at a Black women's student organization meeting where the challenges for Black women on campus were frequently discussed. The individual interviews and the focus group were recorded and transcribed. Once this process was complete, an open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was employed in order to identify any common themes among the women's stories and experiences. The individual narratives and common themes among them were analyzed against the two theoretical frameworks, Black Feminist Theory (BFT) and Intersectionality. The use of two frameworks yielded an enriched interpretation of what was happening.

To guarantee reliability of the data and the study as a whole, I incorporated several measures to ensure that the work was dependable, such as member checking (Creswell, 2009), employing rich descriptions (Creswell, 2009), debriefing with a peer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and acknowledging and checking my positionality and member bias (Creswell, 2009 & Maxwell, 2009).

#### **LIMITATIONS/DELIMITATIONS**

The results of this study provided an opportunity to understand the stories and experiences of Black college women at a selective institution and it provided critical information for the women in the study, college and university personnel who work with these women, researchers, and policymakers. With this considered, it should be noted that this study had some limitations and delimitations. Limitations referred to the restrictions of the research design or methodology, and delimitations are the boundaries that the researcher strategically sets to the study (Patton, 2002).

There are three primary limitations for this study. The first limitation was that the women participating in this study were from across the African diaspora, not just African



American. Secondly, my insider status with the participants may have impacted the data collection, and lastly my presence during the observations could have effected how the young women behaved or interacted in the student organization meetings attended.

As for delimitations, there were three for this study. First, all of the data collection for this study came from a single site. Secondly, the sample size for this qualitative study was purposefully small. Lastly, the decision to do a phenomenological study instead of another tradition of inquiry was a delimitation that made it possible for the participants to describe their lived experiences. The limitations and delimitations are explained in more depth in Chapter 3.

#### **KEY TERMS/DEFINITIONS**

Throughout this work, a number of terms were used. Some of those definitions have been listed below to inform the reader.

- Attrition: A school's loss of students. A large number of students who enroll in college expecting to earn a baccalaureate degree do not return for a second year of higher education (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013). Attrition rates are highest among students of color and have not improved over the past few years (Aud, Hussar, Johnson, Kena, Roth, Manning, Wang & Zhang, 2012). Tinto's (1993) Theory of College Student Departure is one of the most widely cited theories on educational persistence and it stresses the importance of support from institutions of higher education. He explains that students who are successfully integrated into a school are less likely to leave. According to Tinto, when students drop out of school, do not do well academically, or are unsatisfied

with school it is because they are not successfully integrated into the academic and social college communities (See Persistence).

- **Black:** (inclusive of African American): For this study, the term Black was used to refer to non-Hispanic and non-Asian people of color who have lived in the United States since the beginnings of transatlantic settlement, some of whom refer to themselves as “African American.” I anticipate that there will be first and or second-generation native African women participating in this study who still have a significant connection to their ancestral homeland in the continent of Africa and they may self identify as Black instead of African American (United States Census, 2000). The term Black will be inclusive of both the African American and Native African identities.
- **Educational Attainment:** Reaching a desired educational goal. Educational attainment is generally lower for Black students in comparison to other groups (Allen, 1992) although racial and ethnic gaps in achievement and educational attainment have narrowed in the past three decades (Kao & Thompson, 2003). According to Allen (1992), college performance is higher for those students who report high educational attainment aspirations and who feel they have chosen the right institution to attend. The attainment process is influenced by a combination of cultural, institutional, interactional, and individual factors (Allen, 1992).
- **Historically Black college & university (HBCU):** Historically, these are the 104 institutions founded before 1900 whose mission was the education of Black people (Willie, Reddick & Brown, 2006). The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as: “...any historically Black

college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation.” HBCUs are a source of accomplishment and great pride for the African American community (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

- **Intersectionality:** An analytical tool that examines the ways that gender, race, class, and sexuality work in concert to create inequality and interlocking systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). McCall (2005) defines it as the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations.
- **Persistence:** A student’s postsecondary education continuation behavior that leads to graduation. Also defined as the individual’s self-motivation, self-determination and ability to continue enrollment in a degree program (Isaac, 1993).
- **Predominantly White Institution (PWI):** Though there is no standard definition of what it means to be a Predominantly White Institution within the world of higher education, the term PWI for this study represented colleges and universities where more than 70 percent of the total enrolled student population self-identified as being of a White race.
- **Retention:** Usually a percentage measurement showing how many students re-enrolled at an institution that they attended the previous year. Retention was defined as an institution’s ability to retain a student to degree

completion (Tinto, 1987). Helping students persist from the first year to the second year of college is an issue many institutions have confronted for decades and the overall baccalaureate degree persistence rate has not significantly improved over the past few years (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013).

- Social integration: Tinto (1975) introduced the terms academic integration and social integration to the study of attrition. The two constructs became a means for organizing students' campus experiences for discussing and testing of a model of campus withdrawal. Social Integrations includes a number of factors that contribute to students' ability to develop relationships with other students and student groups outside an academic setting. Examples of some of these factors are students having lunch together, participating in school clubs, and attending football games etc.

## **ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY**

This dissertation is organized into six distinct chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, a brief description of the methods, the proposed frameworks, introduction to the limitations/delimitations, and key terms and definitions. Chapter 2 is the literature review that begins with a historical overview of Black women in the United States from slavery until now, the current climate for Black women in society, history of Blacks and women in higher education, factors that encourage and/or discourage persistence in higher education for Black women, and frameworks. The third chapter of this dissertation discusses the methodology, including research design, site and participant selection, data collection, analysis, researcher positionality, and a more detailed explanation of the study's

limitations and delimitations. In chapter four, the participants from the study will be introduced. Chapter five discusses the findings. Finally, chapter six summarizes the participants' experiences, re-states the key findings, analyzes the experiences through the lens of the chosen frameworks and presents my recommendations. In the closing remarks, implications for future research and best practices at institutions of higher education will be expressed.

## **SUMMARY**

Despite the fact that more and more African American women are entering into higher education, the literature on their experiences, challenges and triumphs is scarce. African American women have unique experiences in higher education, and this study is an attempt to investigate these women's experiences and how intersectional identities impact the college-going experience at a selective, PWI. The following chapter is the review of the literature, which will provide the historical context of Black women in society, as well as, the foundation for the current study.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Black women are non-monolithic group. They differ in culture, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and sexuality (Hill Collins, 1986). While they do vary in several capacities, there are shared experiences and challenges that extend and evade the “tapestry” of Black women. These commonalities are the experiences of exclusion from social and political participation (Hill Collins 1986). The literature presented in this chapter will explore those experiences most common for Black women on both a micro and macro level. A review of the literature is necessary to show the path of prior research and how a current work is linked to it (Weiser, 2006). This review is strategically organized to demonstrate the importance of the issue and the need for this study. In addition, this review should help familiarize the reader with both the historical and current state of Black women in higher education. Lastly, this review will address the gaps in the literature, thereby clarifying how this work fits within the broader field of higher education research.

The literature review is organized into six areas of research that are most relevant: 1) the history of Black women in education, 2) the state of Black women in society, 3) Black women in contemporary higher education, 4) Black students at predominantly White institutions, 5) and Black women at predominately White institutions. When discussing the literature I use the same ethnic labels that the author uses in the literature. Ethnic labels include: African American and Black. The end of the chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks, Patricia Hill Collins’ Black Feminist Thought Theory and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Intersectionality, which will help frame the study and future discussion related to the Black female college experience at a selective, predominantly White institution.

## **HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN EDUCATION**

The history of Black women in higher education in the United States is a lesson in courage, persistence and overcoming adversity. Black women were brought to this country for two reasons: to work and to produce more workers (Hine & Thompson, 1998). Before the Civil War, with widespread laws prohibiting teaching Blacks to read and write, opportunities for Black women to receive even minimal formal education were extremely limited. Efforts to educate Black girls brought violent reprisals even in liberal New England (Evans, 2007). Some slave owners did teach slaves to read, females more often than males (Rankin, 2001). In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century "Race uplift" became a widely professed idea of the time and women were considered key to the moral improvement of humanity. Many believed Black women's education should focus on their special role in increasing morality and elevating the race (Rankin, 2001). Since then, the principle of "uplift" has long been the banner of Black women. The development of herself and the development of the Black community has been one of the most powerful of all survival skills that Black women have mastered (Hines & Thompson, 1998).

As far back as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Black women, both free and slave, "took up the cross," responsible for teaching children and fellow Black people means of survival. For example, during the Antebellum period, Black women were instrumental in promoting literacy throughout the Black community although it was strictly prohibited and against the law (Evans, 2007). Depriving Black people the opportunity to learn was a priority for the South. White people in the South held conflicting views about the intelligence of Black people. On one hand, they insisted that Africans were an inferior race and did not possess the intelligence to function equally with whites. On the other hand, they declared that it was dangerous to teach Blacks how to read and write (Hines & Thompson, 1998).

Facing opposition, Black women forged ahead. Many times these women created and managed underground schools in their slave quarters, living rooms, and in the community churches (Evans, 2007; Hines & Thompson, 1998). Black women believed that education was the salvation of the race, despite the trials and tribulation encountered while in search for it. The necessity for an education out-weighed the threat of violence or even death. Because of this conviction, teaching became the vocation of choice for many young Black women in the mid 1800's (Hines & Thompson, 1998). The history chronicles the many struggles and triumphs of Black women's journey toward education. Toward the middle of the 1800's Black women began charging into new territory. They set their sights on higher education (Bush, Chambers & Walpole, 2009). By this time Black women were woefully behind in college access (Evans, 2007).

The first Black woman to attain a bachelor's degree did so two hundred years after a white male, forty years after a Black man, and nearly twenty-five years after three white women received their B.A. from Oberlin in 1841 (Evans, 2007). The first Black women to even attempt to infiltrate the institution of higher education were pioneers and paved the way for other Black women in pursuit. This first wave of Black women's college attainment happened to coincide with the "First Wave" of the Feminist Movement. Black women have a long-standing feminist tradition dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The First Wave was characterized by women focusing on gaining rights as full citizens, including the right to vote (suffrage), equal access to education and health care, and the right to enter and practice in certain professions. Prior to the movement, higher education in the United States was off limits to all women (Conger, 2010).



## **BLACK WOMEN IN EDUCATION & FIRST WAVE FEMINISM**

The “First Wave” of the Feminist Movement began in the nineteenth century and lasted until the early twentieth century (Taylor, 1998). Prior to 1833, no college regularly admitted Black or female students (Bush, Chambers & Walpole, 2009; Evans 2007). Oberlin College, in Oberlin, Ohio became the first American institution to offer such admission. While the college was coeducational from the beginning, they began regularly admitting African Americans in 1835, after trustee and abolitionist, the Rev. John Keep, cast the deciding vote to allow them entry (archived at <https://new.oberlin.edu/about/history.dot>). Although the college was ahead of their time in admitting women, the college still had a separate program and curriculum for women dubbed the “ladies’ course,” which was referred to as the L.D. or the Literary Degree (Evans, 2007). At first, women were not allowed to take courses that were just for men called the “gentlemen’s course.” The “gentlemen’s course” granted bachelor’s degrees. The first women admitted into the bachelor’s program were four white women in 1837. Three of the four completed their degrees in 1841 (Oberlin College Website). Although approximately 140 Black women studied at Oberlin College between 1835 and 1865, only two Black women stand out in the early history of Black women in higher education: Lucy Ann Stanton and Mary Jane Patterson. The histories that follow for these women were retrieved from the Oberlin College Archives.

### **Lucy Ann Stanton (1831-1912)**

Lucy Ann Stanton Day, an educator and abolitionist became the first Black woman to graduate from the Oberlin College Ladies' Department in 1850 with a L.D. (literary degree) (Evans, 2007). She was admitted to Oberlin in the mid-1840s, and while studying there, she became the president of the *Oberlin Ladies Literary Society*. She

even delivered the graduation speech, an anti-slavery piece, which she entitled “*A Plea for the Oppressed.*”

Upon graduation in 1850, she moved to Columbus, Ohio to become principal of a school but two years later returned to Cleveland when she married Oberlin classmate William Howard Day, a librarian who edited an abolitionist newspaper, *The Alienated American* (archived at <http://ech.case.edu/cgi/article.pl?id=SLA>). In 1854, she became the first African American to have a fictional story published when she wrote a short story on slavery for her husband’s newspaper. Two years later, the couple moved to Buxton, Canada to teach fugitive slaves and in 1858 had a daughter, Florence. However, the following year William Day left on business for England, abandoning his family and requesting a divorce. Lucy returned to Cleveland, finding work as a seamstress to support her daughter but remained active as an abolitionist (Farkas, 2012).

In 1866 she was sponsored by the Cleveland Freedman’s Association to teach in Georgia and later Mississippi, where she met and married her second husband, Levi Sessions in 1878 (Farkas, 2012). The couple moved to Tennessee where Lucy Sessions continued her philanthropic work, including serving as president of the local Women’s Christian Temperance Union. She and her husband later moved to Los Angeles, California. Lucy Stanton Day Sessions died in Los Angeles in 1910 (Farkas, 2012).

### **Mary Jane Patterson (1840-1894)**

Mary Jane Patterson was an educator who is considered the first African American woman to receive a bachelor’s degree (Fletcher, 1943). It is believed that Mary Jane was born into slavery in Raleigh, North Carolina and her family later migrated to Ohio (Fletcher, 1943). She attended Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio and graduated with high honors in 1862 from a four-year program in classical studies, known as the

“gentlemen’s course” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2012). She opted out of the two-year women’s program.

Ms. Patterson had a commendable record of service in education, serving as teacher, assistant principal, and principal. The majority of her educational tenure was spent at the historic Preparatory High School for Colored Youth, which was at one time known as the M. Street High School and is now known as Paul L. Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. She was the school’s first Black principal from 1871 to 1874 (The World Book Encyclopedia, 1996). Patterson never married, but instead devoted her time and money to other Black institutions in Washington D.C., especially to industrial schools for young Black women, as well as to the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People (The World Book Encyclopedia, 1996). In addition, Patterson was apart of the Black Women’s Club Movement and she helped to found the Colored Women’s League of Washington D.C. (<http://www.examiner.com/article/mary-jane-patterson>). The club’s main focus was “racial uplift.”

Both Stanton and Patterson are a testament to the many strong, resilient, and radical women that participated in the first wave of Black women’s college attainment and American feminism. Despite the racism and sexism they experienced while pursuing their education, fighting in women’s rights campaigns and during the abolitionist movement they were able to help introduce Black women’s voices into the larger feminist conversation. Examples of other prominent African American women who participated in the first wave of attainment and the feminist movement were: Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, Frances E.W. Harper and Sojourner Truth.

By 1910, because of the large numbers of teachers needed and the feminization of teaching, Black women’s annual enrollment began to slightly outnumber Black men’s,

however their attainment of bachelor's degrees from top ranked schools was significantly behind (Evans, 2007). In the 1920's, after the return of veterans from World War I, twenty percent of graduates of Black coed colleges were women. In 1930, the number of graduates rose to forty percent and by 1940 graduating Black women outnumbered Black men (Evans 2007).

Activist Lucy Stowe spurred another important shift in Black women's education during this time. She argued that Black Women who had access to postsecondary education should protest all curricula that pointed toward training teachers and focus more on the professional labor force beyond the field of teaching (Evans, 2007). This is when there was a shift in seeing more and more women pursue careers outside of education.

#### **BLACK WOMEN IN EDUCATION & SECOND WAVE FEMINISM**

This wave of the feminist movement began in the mid-twentieth century and was characterized by the Civil Rights Movement (Taylor, 1998). More women began to interrogate the domination of patriarchy that pervaded all of society and gender equality in all walks of life. During this time, Black women felt as though they were being racially oppressed by the Women's Movement and sexually oppressed by the Black Liberation Movement (Civil Rights Movement) (Taylor, 1998). When Black women wanted to identify with the feminist movement, White women discriminated against them and devoted little attention to issues seriously affecting Black women. On the other hand, Black women were the backbone of the civil rights movement, but their contributions were de-emphasized by Black men who felt compelled to adopt patriarchal roles. The double oppression rendered them invisible.

In the face of oppression the Black Feminist movement began (White, 1984). Organizations like the Black Women's Liberation Committee (BWLC), The Third World Women's Alliance and the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) addressed Black women's unique concerns more effectively. Examples of Black Second Wave feminists were Shirley Chisholm, Angela Davis, Barbara Jordan, Florynce Kennedy, Audre Lorde, Jeanne L. Noble, Alice Walker, and Celestine Ware.

Black women's academic achievements during this wave of educational attainment and the feminism movement remained a story of struggle (Evans, 2007). In 1956 Jeanne Noble published *The Negro Woman's College Education* and by this time she had calculated that 106,470 Black women had attended four or more years of college (Evans, 2007). It was later discovered that much of the earlier research was faulty and inaccurate. However, the general consensus was that Black women were attending colleges in record numbers, outpacing Black men at increasingly higher rates (Evans, 2007).

In the 1960s, many northern colleges started recruiting Black students (Evans, 2007), but they often failed to identify and address the problems Black students might face, including isolation and discrimination by faculty and other students (Evans, 2007). The South was quite a different story. Many colleges were still resisting the integration of their state institutions. During this time HBCUs became significant because there were virtually no opportunities for Black students to attend state PWIs in the South (Evans, 2007). When students attempted to integrate southern White institutions, they were met with resistance and violence. For example, in 1961 it was documented in the University of Georgia's school newspaper, *Red and Black* that Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes were greeted by riots and protests at the University of Georgia when they were admitted. Also, upon James Meredith's arrival to the University of Mississippi in 1962,

riots erupted (*Journal of Black in Higher Education*, 2014). President Kennedy sent U.S. Marshalls and troops to end the violence (Levy, 2012). Again, in 1963, President Kennedy sent troops to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa to escort Vivian Malone and James Hood on campus (*Journal of Black in Higher Education*, 2014).

Still, Black students persevered and began demanding more from institutions (Evans, 2007). During this wave, Black women became the “firsts” to do many things in higher education. For example the “first” Black female student to live in a residence hall and the “first” Black student body president, etc. began to emerge. The “firsts” were far too many to list here. What is especially important was that Black women’s educational and career ambitions began to shift. Jeanne L. Noble, the “first” of many things herself (first African American board member of Girl Scouts, first to serve on the U. S. government’s Defense Department Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, first African American woman to be made full professor at New York University’s Steinhart School of Culture, Education and Human Development), was one of the first researchers of Black women’s experiences in college (Evans, 2007).

From her research she concluded that Black women deserved the right to study as individuals without the burden of race responsibility or gender limitations as so many Black women had done in the past as teachers and social service workers. Noble expressed during this time that learning for learning’s sake was not an option for Black women. However, she thought that this should be different for Black women. Like Lucy Stowe, she called for an equalization of educational and occupational opportunity (Evans 2007).

Black feminist scholarship, as we know it today, was born during the Second Wave, during the decades of the 1960’s and 70’s. As mentioned before, Black women were excluded from the social movements of racial and gender equality, which was the

genesis of Black feminist organizations and Black Feminism as a movement (Taylor, 1998). Some of the movement's earliest contributors (Angela Davis, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, etc...) began writing and teaching about the unique experiences of Black women in this country (Taylor, 1998). With so many Black women scholars contributing to this dialogue, Black Feminist Thought/Theory was born. Black Feminist Thought (used interchangeably with Black Feminist Theory) is the idea that Black women are marginalized and/or oppressed along the lines of race, gender, class and sexuality throughout society (Hill Collins, 1990). During this time the case for Black women's inclusion would continue to be built.

#### **BLACK WOMEN IN EDUCATION & THIRD WAVE FEMINISM**

Today, we are still living in the Third Wave that began in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Black women continue to exist in a peripheral manner in society. Black feminists are continuing the work and expanding upon the agenda from the Second Wave. Several issues still plague Black women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and some of those issues include the economic suppression of Black women despite educational gains, the disproportionate impact of the health gap, and the oppression of women's sexuality just to name a few.

Scholars across disciplines have addressed these issues and have set the agenda for the work that still needs to be done. For example, Angela Davis, one of the early architects of Black Feminist Theory has helped to revolutionize Black women's need to define themselves for themselves. Some of her feminist scholarship texts include: *Joan Little: The Dialectics of Rape* (1975), *Women, Class and Race* (1983), *Women, Culture, and Politics* (1990), and *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1999). Davis is recognized as one of the first scholars to introduce the concept of intersectionality in her book

Women, Class, and Race. However, Kimberlé Crenshaw, a prominent feminist legal scholar gave the concept a name in her essays *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine Feminist Theory and Anti-Racist Politics* (1989) and *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* (1991). Almost simultaneously, Patricia Hill Collins published her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990). In this book, Hill Collins placed Black women's experiences at the center of the analysis. The central question in the book is why are American women and their ideas not known and not believed in? More specifically, she asserts that Black women have created knowledge, but in many cases it is not known nor respected. The politics of Black Feminist Thought suggests that while Black women's ideas are suppressed, Black women continue to press on intellectually against oppression.

Another seminal piece by Hill Collins is her article *Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought* (1986). She situates Black women in the academy and refers to them as the outsider-within, which is a subordinated position where African American women's work and contributions are seen as less valued, less critical, and less deserving of compensation and/or recognition (Henderson, Hunter & Hildreth, 2010). Hill Collins argues that Black women possess a unique standpoint given their experiences. The use of Black Feminist Theory is important when telling the experiences of Black women, hence the reason it was used to guide this study.

The following sections are an attempt to contextualize and convey Black women's position on predominantly White campuses and within the larger context of society. Understanding the broader landscape of Black women in society provides the foundation for understanding Black women's treatment and experiences on



predominantly White campuses. The next section, “Black Women in Society” will discuss the reality of living with two or more subordinate identities, which is referred to in this study as “multiple jeopardy.” The following sections will discuss the social challenges that arise for many Black women in society.

### **BLACK WOMEN IN SOCIETY**

The inequities faced by African Americans as a group have been particularly oppressive for Black women (Lerner, 1992). White men, White women, and African American men in society have all traditionally preceded African American women in the workforce, in education, and in the procurement of civil liberties (Lerner, 1992). The experiences of African American women, therefore, are wholly separate from that of White women and African American men. Several scholars have written about the unique experiences of African American women (e.g., Hill Collins, 1990, 1998, 2002; Giddings, 1984; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984; Zamani, 2003) and agree that African American women experience “multiple jeopardy” by being African American, female, and in many cases, economically disadvantaged (King, 1988).

#### **Multiple Jeopardy**

Black women have always been subject to all the restrictions against Blacks as well as those against women (Lerner, 1992). To illustrate the point more clearly, white women are penalized by their gender, but privileged by their race and African American men are penalized by their race, but privileged by their gender. However, African American women are penalized both for their race and gender, which are inextricably linked (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). For example, during the suffrage debates it was proposed that only one group could receive the right to vote, either Black men or White women.

For Black women, the granting of suffrage to either group would still mean their disenfranchisement because of their sex and their race (King, 1988).

Depending on the context, an individual can be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously an oppressor and oppressed, but African American women fall under one category, the oppressed (Hill Collins, 1990). To further explicate the status of Black women in this world, not even socioeconomic status immunizes African American women from biased attitudes, prejudice, or racism. There have been countless intelligent and talented African American women who have shaped and who continue to shape the world we live in such as Madame C.J. Walker (first self-made female millionaire), Dr. Ruth Simmons (former Brown University President), Maya Angelou (poet, civil rights activist, and Pulitzer Prize nominee), Michelle Obama (First Lady of the United States of America), Ursula Burns (CEO of Xerox Corporation) and others. Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden (2003) assert that no matter how intelligent, competent, and dazzling a Black woman may be, in our country today, she cannot count on being understood or embraced by mainstream White America.

Melody Hobson, an investment firm president corroborates this point in a Ted Talk where she recalled an incident where she was mistaken for the kitchen help. Hobson admitted that she was caught off guard, but stated, “deep, deep, down inside, I was not surprised.” Hobson continued by pronouncing that of the thousands of publicly traded companies, only two of those companies are chaired by Black women (Matthew, 2014). Other examples include the past experiences of Oprah Winfrey. In 2013, Winfrey claimed that she was denied service due to her race at a local shop in Zurich, Switzerland (Thompson & Magnay, 2013). When she inquired about a handbag, the shop assistant refused to let her see it and remarked, “You will not be able to afford that.” This was not the first time Winfrey had experienced this type of discrimination. She had a similar

experience in Paris in 2005 (McKenzie, 2012). For Winfrey and others like her, the wealth endows them with privilege; however, their race is always salient.

The burden of living with multiple subordinate identities has been shown to create psychologically negative effects on African American women and girls. Robinson and Ward (1991) suggested that unless encouraged to do otherwise, many African American female adolescents may choose inappropriate psychological “resistance strategies” such as self-denigration due to the internalization of negative self images, excessive autonomy, and individualism at the expense of connectedness to the collective, and quick fixes such as early and unplanned pregnancies, substance abuse, school failure, and food addictions in their attempts to survive the negative influences of racism and sexism.

### **Social Challenges**

In addition to the psychological impact of their status in society, Black women experience a host of social challenges that continue to plague progress and marginalize in many ways. In America Black women are more vulnerable to be murdered, raped, and incarcerated (Jones-DeWeever, 2010). Black women disproportionately face a greater number of health challenges like obesity, diabetes or “sugar,” heart disease, and high blood pressure (DeWeever & Lewis, 2010). Black women are the most economically susceptible and less likely to recover. In this section, two challenges that tend to be a concern for many college educated Black women in society will be explored. These two challenges were mentioned in a pilot study conducted three years ago: Economic stability and the prospect of marriage. Many of the participants were concerns about being fairly compensated once they entered the work force after graduation and they had real concerns about finding compatible mates when they were ready. These concerns were

valid at the time of the pilot and unfortunately are still a concern for Black women in America.

### **Economic Suppression**

One major social challenge that continues to cripple the collective is the economic suppression of African American women. African American women are disproportionately affected by gaps in wages based on both gender and race (Jean-Marie, 2011) even though Black women lead all women in labor force participation rates (Henderson, 2014). In 2010, for example, Blacks were the only racial and ethnic group where women represented a larger share of the employed than did men (Table 1). More than half (54.3%) of employed Black people were women, compared to 46.3% women among employed whites. Even though Black women are employed at higher rates than Black men, Black women still earn less than employed Black men (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011).

As reported by the Black Women's Roundtable of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation in a new report entitled, *Black Women in the United States, 2014, Progress and Challenges* (2014), Black women are more likely than any group in America to work for poverty –level wages, thereby making them the most likely of all Americans to be among the working poor. Furthermore, largely due to years of pay disadvantages, decreased access to employer-sponsored pension plans, and a stunning lack of overall wealth accumulation, Black women over 65 have the lowest household income of any demographic group in America.

Lillian Bowie, Director of Economic Partnerships & Development for the NAACP authored *The Economic Status of Black Women in America* (2011) and reported that despite African American women having made tremendous progress and being the

most educated they have ever been, African American women still face significant barriers due to gender discrimination in the labor market. Bowie declared that African American women in the service sector remains around 25% compared to 15.4% of White women, which is the same rate and position where Black women were 25 years ago. In addition, African American women continue to be under-represented in management level and professional positions (Bowie, 2011).

Table 4. Unemployment, Employment and Earnings Characteristics by Race, and Hispanic Ethnicity, 2012 Annual Averages. Adapted from *The African American Labor Force in the Recovery*, Copyright 2012 by U.S. Department of Labor.

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Blacks</b>	<b>Whites</b>	<b>Hispanics</b>
% Employed (employment-population ratio among those 16 and older)	52.3	59.4	59.0
% Usually working part time	17.5	20.1	19.1
% Women (age 16 and over)	54.3	46.3	40.7
% College Graduates (age 25 and older)	26.0	36.1	16.9
% Working in the private sector (wage and salary workers)	76.3	77.8	82.6
% Working in the public sector	19.8	14.6	11.0
% Self-employed (unincorporated)	3.8	7.4	6.3
<b>Weekly earnings</b>			
Total	\$611	\$765	\$535
Men	\$633	\$850	\$560
Women	\$592	\$684	\$504

### **Marriage Decline**

Along with economic vulnerability, heterosexual Black women are faced with and are impacted by the declining rate of marriages in the Black community. Banks (2011) contends that Black women confront the least favorable relationship market of any group

because of economic and cultural forces that are not of their own making and Black women have exacerbated the situation by limiting themselves to just Black men. The joint social trauma inflicted by a poor educational system, mass incarceration, and massive unemployment among Black men has come together to create an unsustainable set of social outcomes (Beato, 2011).

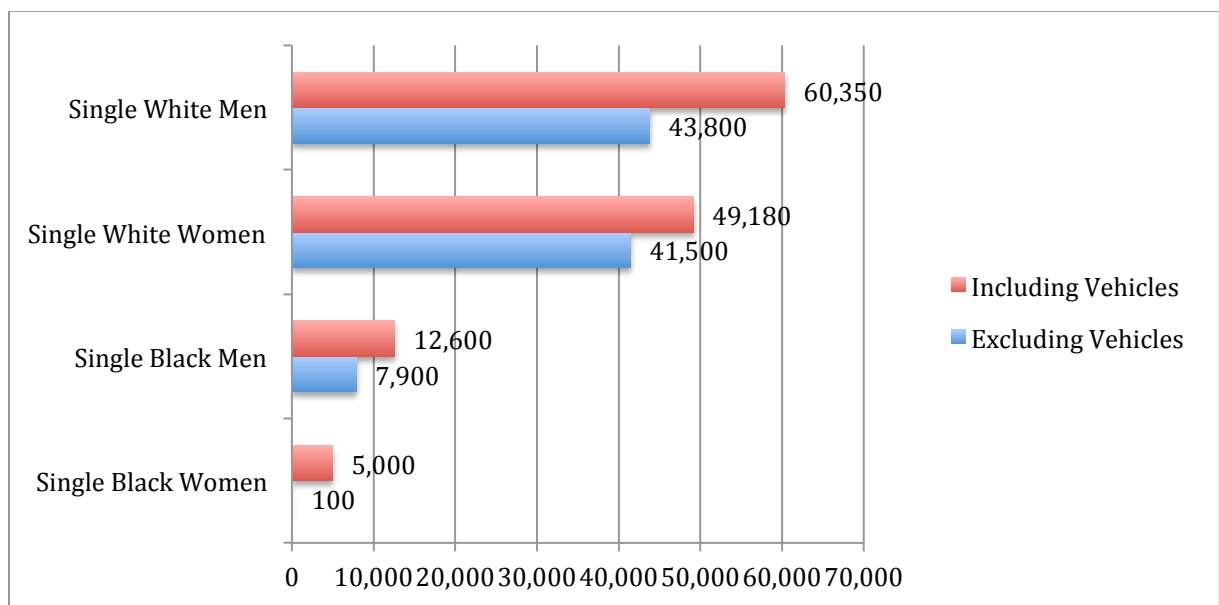
In the book *Shifting*, Jones, and Shorter-Gooden (2003) echo the fact Black women are dealing with a “stacked deck.” In addition to the economic and cultural forces, Black women outnumber Black men roughly 19 to 17 and they live seven years longer on average. More Black women are in the labor force and there is evidence that unemployment and underemployment affect Black men’s willingness to marry and stay wed.

Ralph Richard Banks, in his book, *Is Marriage for White People?: How the African American Marriage Decline Affects Everyone* (2012) concluded that the main culprit in the precipitous decline of Black marriage is the imbalance in the relationship market. Essentially, he contends that more Black women are ready to marry than Black men. He proposes that if more Black women would be willing to marry out that the imbalance would shift and even out. While many Black women have decided to “marry out” and choose partners who are not Black, the vast majority of Black women prefer that their partner to be of the same race (cite). The result of this “fall-out” is a class of single heterosexual Black women.

Whether by choice or circumstance, Black women who remain single are at greater risk of living in poverty. A report entitled *Lifting as We Climb* revealed a startling statistic about African American women and wealth stating that African American women had a median wealth of \$100 versus \$41,500 for White women with almost half of single African American women having zero or negative wealth. In addition, it stated

that only 33 percent of single Black women were homeowners versus 57 percent of White women (Insight Center for Community Economic Development, 2010). To further explicate this challenge, the *Black Women in the United States, 2014, Progress and Challenges* report (National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, 2014) also stated that while Black women are both less likely than other women to marry, and if married, are more likely to experience divorce, that while in retirement years they are more vulnerable to poverty. As retirees, Black women experience a poverty rate over five times that of a white man (U. S. Government Accountability Office, 2012).

Figure 1: Race and Gender Difference in Wealth, Ages 18-64, 2007. Reprinted from *Black Women in the United States, 2014, Progress and Challenges*, Copyright 2014 by National Coalition on Black Civic Participation.



Regardless of the reality of multiple social disadvantages, African American women are still convinced that education is important and critical for the uplift of themselves and the Black community (Zamani, 2003). Despite the position of African American women in society, African American women continue to push on

educationally, professionally, and socially. African American women, over a 16-year period, improved their college completion rate from 34% in 1990 to 47% in 2006 (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). In addition, Black women represent approximately 16.4% of the total undergraduate population in college and they comprise 64% of Black students pursuing a bachelor's degree (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). These gains for African American women are impacting them socially, positioning African American women in places where, at times, they are the "only one" or "one of a few." These are also places where few African American men exist or participate.

### **BLACK WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY HIGHER EDUCATION**

Currently, there are 2,670,000 Black women with a four-year degree or better in the United States. This compares to only 1,909,000 Black men (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2009). Therefore, it turns out that Black women account for almost 58 percent of all the African Americans who have completed four years of college or more in our country (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2009). Black women also have a college graduation rate that is higher than the rate for Black men as previously mentioned. Even at places like The University of Texas at Austin that fact holds true. Although this appears to be good news, the data still shows that Black students overall, still have a long way to travel to close the racial achievement gap between themselves and white students in higher education. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2009) reports that 32.6% of the non-Hispanic, white population over the age of 25 holds a college degree compared to only 19.6% of Blacks over the age of 25. Given that more Black students are enrolled in predominantly White institutions than any other type of institution in this country, it seems logical to explore possible reasons why the education gap is so persistent in predominantly White institutions. The following sections identify



challenges that Black students may experience and how those experiences impact student's attainment in higher education and it also describes the unique experiences Black women specifically have at these institutions and the challenges that might impact their success in these places.

In order to contextualize the challenges that Black female college students face at predominantly White institutions it is crucial to first understand the state of African American women in higher education. Prior to the Civil War, there was no structured higher education system for Black students. Public policy and certain statutory provisions prohibited the education of Blacks in various parts of the nation (Anderson, 1988). The Institute for Colored Youth, the first higher education institution for Blacks, was founded in Cheyney, Pennsylvania, in 1837. Two other Black institutions followed: Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania (1854), and Wilberforce University, in Ohio (1856) (Office for Civil Rights, 1991). Despite these educational breakthroughs, Black women were still barred from participating, similarly to how White women were also prohibited from attending college (Lucus, 2006). In response, private foundations were established for the education of African American men and women (Anderson, 1988). In the mid to late 1800's only a relatively small number of white institutions admitted African Americans and the majority of those institutions were in the north. The first of those institutions to admit African American women was Oberlin College in Ohio (Perkins, 1997). While schools in the north were more accepting of African Americans, the majority of African Americans lived in the South where there were fewer opportunities (Anderson, 1988).

Initiated in the South by the Confederate States, The Second Morrill Act of 1890 legalized the racial segregation of colleges and universities. This legislation established public land grant institutions of higher education for African Americans (Cohen, 1998). More specifically, the Act required states with racially segregated public higher education

systems to provide a land-grant institution for Black students whenever a land-grant institution was established and restricted for white students. 28 years after the passage of the first Morrill Act in 1862, public land-grant institutions specifically for Blacks were established in each of the southern and border states (Office for Civil Rights, 1991). Examples of Black Public Land Grant institutions are Alabama A&M University (University of Alabama), Florida A&M University (Florida State University), Prairie View A&M University (Texas A&M University) and Tennessee State University (University of Tennessee) to name a few<sup>1</sup>. Most African American women who attended these all Black institutions were still subjected to segregated curriculum. Most of the women were educated as teachers at these institutions (Perkins 1997). Scholars like Mary McCloud Bethune and W. E. B. Dubois endorsed the idea of voluntary segregation as an effective means of educational and economic attainment for African Americans, particularly African American women (Giddings, 1984).

For African American women, education has always been seen as a means toward social and personal empowerment (hooks, 1994). Indeed, African American women began attending college in the mid-1800's, Oberlin College in Ohio graduated the first African American woman, Mary Jane Patterson, with a Bachelor's of Arts degree in 1862 (Perkins, 1983). Between 1850 and 1890, schools were created for the education of African American women (Guy-Sheftall, 1982). Early efforts to develop educational institutions for Black women began with Myrtilla Miner, a white woman who established in Washington, D.C. a teachers' training school for Black girls in 1851 that later became known as District of Columbia Teachers Colleges-Miner Branch. This institution finally

---

<sup>1</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson* enacted "separate but equal" segregated facilities. The associated white land grant institutions are in parenthesis next to the Black land grant institutions.

became part of the University of the District of Columbia. Other early educational institutions for Black women also include Bennett and Spelman Colleges (Guy-Sheftall, 1982).

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and single-sex institutions have played a major role in the education of African American women (Zamani, 2003). Even today, a substantial number of African American female college students graduate from historically Black colleges and universities (Wolf-Wendel, 1998; Drewry & Doermann, 2001). For African American women, HBCUs foster higher degree aspirations and more positively affect academic performance than predominantly White institutions (Zamani, 2003). Indeed, HBCU's have graduated more African American women than any other type of higher education institution (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Other institutions that have done a noteworthy job of graduating African American women beginning in the late 1800's were women's college. Most notably, the Seven Sister colleges (Barnard College, Bryn Mawr College, Mount Holyoke College, Radcliffe College, Smith College, Vassar College, and Wellesley College) admitted and graduated approximately 500 African American women between 1880 and 1960 (Perkins, 1997). Even today, the Seven Sister colleges have the highest graduation rates for African American students (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2009). Approximately one in four Black women in corporate America attended a women's college (Kusimo, Carter and Keyes, 1999).

Women's colleges host more successful advising of African American women interested in math and have higher numbers of graduates who go on to the doctoral level (Zamani, 2003). In addition, African American graduates of women's colleges enter the workforce in larger numbers than their white peers (Perkins, 1997). Although women's

colleges have had great success in graduating a significant number of the women that they enroll, it is important to note that African American women are not admitted to these colleges in large numbers. Women's colleges educate fewer than three percent of all women attending postsecondary institutions (Smith, Wolf, & Morrison, 1995), so it is not inaccurate to assume that the enrollment of African American women at these institutions is small. Therefore we need to understand what is happening for Black women at coeducational college settings.

Along these same lines, one particular sector where African American women are least represented is in elite colleges (Zamani, 2003). African American women do not attend higher status institutions, such as research universities and Ivy League colleges in large numbers. As stated before, a higher number of African American women are enrolled at lower status and two-year institutions (Zamani, 2003). Although Black students are more likely to attend college than ever before, they are more likely than White and Asian students to attend a community college than a 4-year institution (Fletcher, 2012 & Zamani, 2003). Furthermore, even among those who attend a 4-year college, they are more likely to attend less-prestigious institutions than White and Asian students (Kao, 2003).

For those African American students who do attend the more prestigious and highly selective institutions Walpole (2009) found that they persist at higher rates than African American students who attend less selective institutions, Walpole explains that these highly selective schools are typically residential, liberal arts focused institutions, and these types of institutions have consistently produced more positive and affective educational learning outcomes. This discussion brings up two questions: 1) What are the characteristics of institutions that promote success for African American students and 2) how do they differ from other institutions?

## **BLACK STUDENTS AT PWIS**

Much of the research on African American college students at predominantly White institutions indicates that African American students encounter difficulty in social and academic integration (Chavous, 2002). Some of these difficulties may be common to most college students but Allen (1986 & 1992) suggests that some of these challenges are unique to Black students. On average, African American students who attend predominantly White colleges do not perform well academically as Whites (Allen, Epps, & Hanif, 1991). In addition, African American students at these campuses are seen as less likely to fit in, experience alienation, and adjust poorly to these campuses (Allen, 1992). Students on these campuses also report feeling hyper-visible due to their race and the lack of other Black students on the campus (Chavous, 2002). Black students at PWIs experience significantly higher attrition rates than white students at PWIs (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010).

In 2004, research showed that only 40% of Black students who began college actually finished in comparison to 61% of whites (Cross & Slater, 2004). Bowen and Bok (1998) also found that Black students at PWIs graduate with substantially lower grade point averages than white students. Even when they controlled for other variables, like SAT scores, high school grade point average, socioeconomic status, gender, selectivity of schools and field of study they found that African American students still had lower grade point averages. Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) believe that this data strongly suggested there must be something else at play rather than students not being academically prepared or their inability to do the work. They suggest that one reason could be that African American students who perceive discrimination or microaggressions from white faculty members or their white peers are less likely to ask for help from their professors or participate in curricular-related activities with their

White peers. In instances where students are not able to make these crucial connections, they are forced to find other strategies in order to survive on predominantly White campuses. In some cases Black students often create their own social and cultural networks in order to remedy their exclusion from the wider White oriented university community (Allen, 1992).

### **Microaggressions**

Solarzano, Ceja & Yosso (2000) define microaggressions as subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously. Pierce (1978) refers to microaggressions as “put-downs” of Black people. In their study, Solarzano and colleagues used critical race theory to explain how racial microaggressions influence the collegiate racial climate. They found that microaggressions happen in both academic and social spaces on campuses, which have a negative impact on how African American students experience campus. Microaggression come in many forms, including both verbal and non-verbal assumptions about, and lowered expectation for, African American students.

In academic spaces the students in their study spoke about feeling “invisible” in the classroom and recalled instances when faculty members maintain low expectations of them even when they showed evidence of high aptitude. The perpetual negative experiences in the classroom caused students to doubt themselves and also disengage (Steele, 1992; Steele & Aronson, 1995). In social spaces students reported experiencing more overt forms of racism. They recognized that there was different treatment from the campus police and campus officials. They also reported that sometimes there were different policies or regulations to govern Black student activities on campus.

The study found that that the racial micro-aggressions in academic spaces and social spaces had consequences for how Black students viewed the campus climate. These interactions created self-doubt, frustration and isolation for the students, which made their time on campus complicated in the sense that they had to try and be successful academically while simultaneously negotiating the conflicts arising from the disparaging perceptions of them (Solarzano et al, 2000).

In this same study the authors suggest that when discussing microaggressions that you must consider the cumulative effect of racial stereotypes. They argue that overtime the stereotypes interfere with Black students' abilities to achieve high scores on standardized tests that are supposed to measure aptitude or intelligence. Put another way, they are saying that microaggressions and constant stereotyping can create a phenomena called "stereotype threat."

### **Stereotype Threat**

Steele's groundbreaking work in this area has changed the way we look at the underachievement of minorities and women. Steele describes, "stereotype threat" as a process that occurs when individuals perceived that negative stereotypes about their group are salient in a particular situations or context. The problem or "threat" is represented when the individual believes that they may be viewed in ways that are consistent with these stereotypes (Steele, 1997). Then those beliefs may result in pressures that negatively influence the individual's academic self-perception and their academic performance (Chavous, Harris, Rivas, Helaire & Green, 2004).

Steele and Aronson (1995) studied how stereotypes may interfere with Black students' abilities to achieve high scores on standardized test. Steele and Aronson revealed that racial stereotypes are woven in the fabric of the United States society, yet

their daily effects are often misunderstood (Solarzano et al, 2000). They found that when African American college students were prompted to indicate their race before taking the GRE or Graduate Record Examination that their test scores were significantly lower than when they were not prompted to indicate their race. Their research found that for Black students in high stakes testing environments that if these students are reminded of stereotypes that they are intellectually inferior, their test performance declines.

Similarly, another study by Spencer and Steele (1999) investigated whether women were impacted by stereotype threat in their math performance. They hypothesized that it was actually the apprehension about their ability that caused the women in the study to not do well in math. The stereotype that women are not good in math and that men are much better, caused women to believe in the myth and then perform according to the myth. Spencer and Steele conducted two studies: the first study revealed that women underperformed when men were in the room and when they were informed that the test was investigating gender differences. The second study showed that women performed well when men were not in the room, therefore removing the idea of stereotype threat and when there was no mention of the test producing gender differences. Stereotype threat is another way that Black students experience challenges on predominantly White campuses.

### **Poor Faculty Relationships**

There is evidence to support that fact that faculty interaction influences the college development of students' of color (Allen, 1992; Hurtado, 1992), Black students at PWIs are greatly impacted by their relationships with the faculty. This is important considering African American students at PWIs report having less favorable relationships with their professors in comparison to their peers at HBCUs (Allen, 1992). Two reasons



why the relationships are less favorable surfaced from the literature: First, most African American students that have difficulty connecting and relating to their White faculty. One reason for their failure to connect with White faculty is that they often perceive White faculty as culturally insensitive (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002) and they report that their White faculty have lower expectations for them (Solarzano et al, 2000).

Another possible reason African American students have less favorable relationships is because of the absence of faculty of color, specifically Black faculty on these predominantly White campuses (Allen 2002, Evans, 2007). To begin with, in most cases it is difficult to find Black faculty members on these campuses. Second, for those few Black faculty members who are on campus, they tend to carry heavier services loads, because they are often sought after by Black students who go to them for advising, support, and guidance. Empirically and anecdotally, faculty of color operate with a more communal culture than their other colleagues (Evans, 2007; Griffin & Reddick, 2011). This constant pressure to serve often results in “burn out,” which may cause some to abate their interaction with students outside the classroom or totally abandon serving in order to focus solely on their academic endeavors.

This reality for African American students in PWIs is problematic; because, as Astin (1999) asserts, faculty-student relationship are strongly and positively correlated with student satisfaction. There is research to support that African American students who perform well on predominantly White campuses report higher levels of interaction with their faculty and they perceive the faculty as generally supportive (Nettles, 1988, 1991; Adan & Felner, 1995). In Cokley’s 2000 study on self-concept, he issues the call for professionals to help African American students develop and nurture positive relationships with their faculty, because it is an important variable that affects a student’s

academic self-concept and success. One viable solution could be through a culture of “othermothering.”

### **Othermothering**

As previously stated many PWIs struggle with the retention and graduation of Black students (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Creating an environment and campus climate that helps promote retention and graduation through inclusion is a highly sought after goal of these institutions (Harvey & Anderson, 2005). Those African American students who are academically successful and persist at PWIs have described many of their interactions with faculty members as positive. These students have recognized that these particular faculty members facilitated inclusion and encouraged their persistence (Guiffrida, 2005). Guiffrida (2005) considers these relationships as caring, because students cited that the faculty members listened to them talk about their challenges and personal and professional goals. The students recognized that they had advocates in those particular faculty members. In many cases what these students experienced was a concept referred to as the “ethic of care,” which is generated from a historical and theoretical framework of “othermothering” (Hill Collins, 2002; Mawhinney, 2012).

Previous research has shown that othermothering and the presence of care has been the “push factor” for African American students in college (Mawhinney, 2012). The concept of othermothering as a practice is defined as “women who assist blood mother by sharing mothering responsibilities” (Hill Collins, 2000, p.178). Othermothering has been a long-standing tradition in the African American community since slavery. The act of mothering others’ children reached beyond caring for the basic needs of children, it expended to the education of those children (Dubey, 2005). As slavery ended and

segregated schools began the practice of othermothering continued to influence the role of teachers in Black schools. This is why it is no surprise that othermothering has carried on and is trademark characteristics of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

It was already established earlier in this proposal that several Black students enroll at HBCUs and that HBCUs confer a disproportionate number of degrees to Black students considering they only represent 3% (Evans, Evans, & Evans, 2002) of all postsecondary institutions. This says something about the experience and culture at these institutions. Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters & Strayhorn (2008) suggest that perhaps the practice of “othermothering” from African American faculty and staff members is the “linchpin” of HBCU success. Students and graduates of HBCUs cited that their success was predicated upon the care and attention they received from the faculty, staff and administrators on campus. The concept of going “above and beyond the call of duty” helped to establish and solidify nurturing relationships for students at these institutions (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005).

Prior studies (Case, 1997; Dempsey & Nobilt, 1993; and Foster, 1993) have found that African American student achievement is enhanced when educators implement an othermothering approach, not only attending to their academic needs, but taking more of a holistic approach with supporting students. For African American students at PWIs, this type of relationship is “few and far” between. Guiffrida in his seminal work studying the practice of “othermothering” at PWIs found that African American students at PWIs do not glean the benefits associated with relationships with faculty. This is important and a huge misfortune considering that faculty/student relationships affect student satisfaction with college, academic achievement, and retention. In his study of African American students’ perspectives of student-centered faculty he found that there were two primary

factors that explain the disconnect between Black students and White faculty members on campuses. First, he states that Black students may experience difficulty connecting with White faculty members, because they do not perceive them as role models. In many cases there is a shortage of faculty of color or “like-person role models,” which is important to students of color (Tinto, 1993). The second factor is that Black students often perceive faculty at PWIs as culturally insensitive and unapproachable (Feagin, Vera, and Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984). In addition he found that the students defined student-centered faculty as those who go “above and beyond,” meaning they supported students with their academic, career and personal issues. These are characteristics that were mostly found in faculty of color so students purposely sought to connect with African American faculty whom they thought would better understand them and their struggles. His findings echoed the recommendation from other researchers that institutions need to hire more African American faculty to promote success for Black students at PWIs.

This has implications for Black female students who seek to connect with Black female faculty members. Black female faculty have historically been excluded and marginalized in academia (Evans, 2007 p.131), which has resulted in an underrepresentation of Black female faculty members on college campuses that could serve as mentors and “othermothers” for these students.

From this section of the dissertation it is clear that being Black on a predominantly white campus has its challenges, but imagine adding the identity of female to the equation. African American female college students have a unique story of negotiating both the race and sexuality under the same unfavorable circumstances, The next section attempts to tell the distinct story of Black women at PWIs.

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS**

Since the 1800's Black female college students have encountered difficulties in attempting to complete their degrees (Perkins, 1997; Winkle-Wagner, 2009) . Many have struggled with isolation, alienation, and neglect on their college campuses. Others have faced a lack of funding or have not had access to adequate financial aid to finance their degrees (Mortenson, 2000). In addition, Black women have had to learn to cope with not seeing themselves represented in the academy, as there is a great scarcity of Black, female faculty members at American universities and colleges (Evans, 2007; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Turner & Thompson, 1993; Williams, Brewley, Reed, White, & Davis-Haley, 2005). This is the experience of many African American female students at predominantly White institutions (Fleming, 1984).

There is little current literature on the African American female experience at predominantly White institutions in comparison to the growing body of literature about on the African American male college student experience. Most works were published in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Over the past thirty years, comparing the works of early scholars (e.g. Fleming, 1984; Carroll, 1982; Guy-Sheftall, 1982) from the 1980's to the works of contemporary scholars, not much has changed. African American female college students on PWI campuses continue to experience adversity and a cultural mismatch in comparison to African American female students at HBCUs (Constantine & Watt, 2002).

African American women at HBCUs experience cultural congruity where they have more opportunities to develop their leadership skills and report a greater sense of wellbeing (Watson & Kuh, 1996). At predominantly white institutions, African American females work extremely hard to overcome perceptions of incompetence (Grant et al., 1999) by over-preparing and over-compensating (Allport, 1954, Klinger 1975, 1977;

Miller & Myers, 1998). Sometimes African American women have low expectations for educational achievement due to the fact that they have internalized traditional beliefs and stereotypes about their role in society (Kusimo, Carter and Keyes, 1999). To provide more insight into the experiences of African American women on predominantly White campuses and due to the literature gap concerning this demographic, I explored the contemporary experiences of the African American female college students by focusing on how they cope in oppressive environments in order to contribute to the gap in the literature regarding their coping strategies. Shorter-Gooden (2004) found that understanding how people cope is an important avenue to minimizing the damaging health consequences of oppressions. In instances where students are not able to make crucial connections, they are forced to find other strategies in order to survive on predominantly white campuses. The following section highlights one of them.

### **Coping Strategies**

The realities of isolation, non-supportive campuses, and an invisible status have influenced African American female college students to become self-reliant (Fleming, 1983) and inventive when it comes to survival in predominantly white environments. The extant literature shows that African American women have a varied array of coping strategies to resist the stress of racism and sexism. Researchers such as Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) were early pioneers in increasing our knowledge of African American women in education and the coping strategies they employ when faced with challenges and adversity. In their study, they identified: silence, negotiation, and resistance as coping strategies used by African American female learners.

Coker (2003) discovered that African American women use a variety of coping strategies to thwart oppressive and marginalizing situations in academic settings,

including humor, silence, compromise, excellence, and confrontation. Humor was used as a clever means of getting the women's points across without appearing too aggressive, confrontational, or violent when addressing authority (i.e. instructors). Silence was another strategy used where they opted not to say anything at all and just let things go. Compromise was a means of accepting some things that one might be uncomfortable with, going with the flow, and strategically knowing that one needed to appear compliant at times. Excellence referred to the ability of the women to give their instructors their very best work. The women believed their academic excellence could counteract racism and injustice. Lastly, there was Confrontation, which was used sparingly by the participants in order to avoid being labeled the person with an attitude or difficult.

Shorter-Gooden (2004) identifies two additional coping strategies: Social Support and Religiosity. Social Support has to do with informal network of extended family and friends who provide advice, emotional support, and/or materials support. Shorter-Gooden (2004) found that relying on social support is a central coping strategy for Black women. The second central coping strategy that she mentions is religious faith and participation in a congregation or spiritual community. She designates social support and the external resource and religiosity as the internal resource and belief system that helps women overcome difficulty. This research solidifies that coping strategies are incredibly important for African American female students survival in college.

This brings up a conversation around other factors that may threaten these students' success and persistence at these institutions. While the absence of role models could be considered a crucial piece to students' satisfaction, it is an accumulation of several factors that make it very difficult for these students to persistent in this environment. The following section presents additional research on several factors that are classified as factors that discourage persistence for African American female college

students. At the conclusion of discussing some factors that might discourage, I also highlight factors that encourage persistence for African American female college students. These are all themes that emerged during an IRB approved pilot study in 2011, as well as themes that emerged from literature about Black college students in general and Black female college students.

### **FACTORS THAT DISCOURAGE PERSISTENCE**

The literature suggests several factors that discourage persistence and here four factors are highlighted: The “Impostor Syndrome,” Low Academic Self-Efficacy, Racial Hostility, and Lack of Mentors. All four themes are factors that the literature suggests discourages persistence in African American female college students.

#### **The Impostor Syndrome**

The imposter syndrome is a concept that was previously thought to be most common among women. However, more recent studies have shown that the phenomenon affects both men and women (Solarzano & Yosso, 2001). The impostor syndrome, also known as impostor phenomenon, is a psychological condition in which people are unable to internalize their accomplishments. Despite success and repeated accomplishments, those with the syndrome remain convinced they are frauds and do not deserve the success they have achieved. Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) bring to our attention that African American students experience the stress of feeling academically inferior and questioning their intellectual abilities. The student dismisses their success as luck, timing, or as a result of deceiving others into thinking they are more intelligent and competent than they believe themselves to be. Most of the literature on the Impostor Syndrome tends to focus on women and people of color, and, in the case of this study, the participants will fall into both social groups. According to Solarzano and Yosso (2001), women of color in the



academy are not commonplace; they are an aberration, outliers. Yosso demonstrates how the syndrome may impact an African American female student at a PWI:

They may ask themselves, “How is it that I arrived when so many others like me haven’t? Will someone discover that a mistake was made and I don’t really belong here? How long will it take for them to realize that I am an impostor, an other, I’m not one of them?”

The discussion centered on the impostor syndrome compliments the tenets of the Black feminist thought. The idea of feeling like an “outsider” and not “one of them” is a very strong sentiment among Black women at PWIs that will be explored and unpacked in my theoretical framework discussion. This syndrome is common and may be a discouraging factor for the women in the proposed study.

### **Low Academic Self-Efficacy**

Low academic self-efficacy is another factor that discourages persistence for this group. Self-efficacy is defined as a self-evaluation of one’s competence to successfully execute a course of action necessary to reach desired outcomes (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 1986). Self-Efficacy is a multidimensional construct that varies depending on context. Since this study will be explored in an academic context, academic self-efficacy is appropriate in measuring the experience of the participants. Low academic self-efficacy is a major contributor to the attrition of African American women. In young adults, higher levels of efficacy and esteem have been found to be associated with better academic performance (Steptoe & Wardle, 2001; Phillips & Gully 1997; Po Yin & Watkins 1998). Low academic self-efficacy, therefore, is problematic for the persistence of African American female students at PWIs.

## **Racial Hostility**

Racial hostility was another theme that was mentioned in the literature. Racial hostility at predominantly white campuses are more common than not. Incidents of racism and discrimination are issues that make existing on campus uncomfortable for students of color, and race issues are a major deterrent for students of color on predominantly white college campuses (Fleming, 1984). Minority students who attend PWIs encounter both institutional and non-institutional racism on their campuses, which suggests that students many times have no refuge and cannot escape the reality of being discriminated against or knowing someone who had experienced it on campus (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993).

The most common form of discrimination and racism today comes in the forms of micro aggressions. Microaggressions are subtle, stunning, often automatic exchanges, identified as “put-downs” of Blacks by those in other racial groups (De War, 2009). Solarzano, Ceja & Yosso (2000) define microaggressions as indirect, racially motivated comments that are delivered verbally, nonverbally, and/or visually. Students who experience racism and discrimination on the campuses of PWIs have a difficult time integrating into these campuses and in some cases, leave the campuses all together.

## **Lack of Mentors**

The last important aspect is a lack of mentors. Mentors are crucial to an African American student's success on a predominantly white campus (Braddock, 1981). Even more important is the access to mentors that identify racially with the students. Connections with African American role models and faculty impact self-efficacy (Hackett & Byars, 1996) and academic success (Sedlacek, 1987; Tinto, 1993). Some African American female undergraduate and graduate students cope by identifying

mentors and allies to learn how to maneuver successfully through oppressive academic environments.

Mumford (1996) found that African American women have a variety of mentors that include, family, friends, and professional colleagues who provide spiritual, emotional, and educational advisement. Mentoring has been a vital aspect in the retention and success of African American students (Reddick, 2009, 2011). However, because there is a shortage in the number African American female administrators and faculty members on campuses, students do not always identify women of the same race to mentor them (Patton & Harper, 2003). The implications for African American females who do not acquire mentors at 4-year, predominately white, research colleges and universities could be detrimental.

#### **FACTORS THAT ENCOURAGE PERSISTENCE**

This section will highlight factors that encourage persistence according to the literature. For the purpose of this project, I have highlighted four factors in this category: spirituality, involvement in Black student organizations, academic support programs, and future outlook.

##### **Spirituality**

It is important to the journey of African American college women. African American women are known for turning to religious and spiritual practices for support (Mattis, 2002). According to Watt (2003), African American women not only depend on spiritual guidance to cope but also use it as a psychological resistance strategy to deflect negative societal messages. Spirituality promotes persistence for African American women, because, it is used as a coping mechanism, as psychological resistance; it also facilitates identity development for African American women. This is especially

important because African American women have two identities that are traditionally devalued.

Watt (1997) found that there was a relationship between African American women's self-esteem, racial identity, womanist identity, and faith development, all of which are important to African American females and their collegiate success. African American college females often turn to their spiritual beliefs to cope with the everyday struggles that come with living in oppressive environments (Watt, 2003). African American female students have to negotiate their multiple identities (female and Black), which bear negative stereotypes, as well as focus on performing academically. It is not surprising that this constant negotiating can have a psychological impact bringing on high levels of stress and anxiety. In response, African American college women turn to prayer, bible studies, and other spiritual rituals to cope (Watts, 2003).

### **Involvement in Black Student Organizations**

Related to the same idea that where students are not able to make crucial connections, they find other strategies in order to survive on predominantly white campuses is students' connections to organizations of people who look like them and share similar beliefs. Belonging to student organizations that students connect to racially are integral for student's integration into college. Hurtado et al. (1999) & Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, and Treviño (1997) found that joining a racially/ethnically-themed student organization was positively related to a strong racial/ethnic attitude for students of color (primarily Black and Latino students). Gilliard (1996) specifically investigated Black student participation in racially themed student organizations on predominantly White campuses and reported positive findings. This study found that Black students with membership in such organizations were more involved with campus activities, interacted

more with faculty members, and were more apt to utilize available student support services (Gilliard, 1996). For African American women, student organizations served as counter-spaces where deficit notions of people of color could be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate could be established and maintained (Morris, 2007). According to Howard-Hamilton (2003), the survival of African American women is contingent on their ability to find a place to describe their experiences among persons like themselves. Some of the most common places for Black women are Black student associations, Black sororities, and Black female student organizations.

### **Academic Support Programs**

Academic support programs can also be important for this group's retention and support. Most of all academic support programs have some retention and persistence purpose behind them (Stewart, 2011). In some cases, academic support programs assist students from their freshman to senior years with services that are designed to encourage persistence and retain students. Examples of the types of services these programs provide include academic advising, tutoring, academic workshops and seminars, etc. (Stewart, 2011). For these students the programs encouraged persistence and academic success.

### **Future Outlook**

The impact of "future outlook" is best illustrated in an article about African American women who attended the Seven Sister colleges in the late 1800's and early 1900's: "African American graduates of these elite women's colleges valued the careers and professional growth their degrees provided and they minimized the discrimination in pursuit of this goal" (Perkins, 1997, p. 28). This quote shows that the end goal of attaining the degree is sometimes far more important than the adversity faced in order to accomplish the degree.

Another way of understanding future outlook is Yosso's (2005) Aspirational Capital paradigm. Aspirational Capital fits within a larger framework, but is a great way to connect future outlook in this section. Yosso (2005) articulates the six forms of capital that make up community wealth for students. Beginning with aspirational capital she refers to the student's ability to maintain a positive future outlook, despite the real or perceived barriers. Studies have shown that Chicanas/os and Black women experience some of the lowest educational outcomes compared to every other group in the U.S., but maintain consistently high aspirations for their future (Gándara, 1982, 1995; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992, 1994; Auerbach, 2001). The studies show that students who maintain high levels of aspirational wealth are more resilient and are able to persist in less-than-favorable environments (Yosso, 2005).

This concludes the discussion of factors found from a pilot study that students felt and identified that either promoted or threatened their success at their respective campus. This study will aim to uncover more personal experiences that will be analyzed through two theoretical frameworks. The following section will offer the theoretical frameworks to understand these experiences at a PWI.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

Finding and applying theoretical frameworks that are appropriate for explaining the experiences of Black females was a challenge. Even though I mentioned a number of conceptual frameworks used to explain Black college student experiences in the literature review, finding a framework that fit well with the three identities of Black, female and "college student" was even more arduous. Most traditional frameworks used in student affairs practice are very general and omit very important aspects that are relevant for students of color, particularly African American students (Zamani, 2003). For this

dissertation, two particular frameworks—Black Feminist Thought (BFT; Hill Collins, 1990, 1998, 2002) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) were used to aid in understanding and explaining the experiences of African American women at these institutions.

### **Black Feminist Thought (BFT)**

Given the unique experiences of Black women and their exponential growth of their participation rates in higher education, this dissertation was timely. It is a contribution to the small body of literature focusing on Black female college students at predominantly White institutions. When considering the appropriate frameworks for this dissertation's questions, it was of the utmost importance to choose a framework(s) that could accurately tell the collective story of Black women at predominantly White campuses, while acknowledging their differences. Black Feminist Thought seemed to be one of the few frameworks that fit nicely with this study. Other scholars (Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Stephens & Phillips, 2005) who research African American/Black women have cited Black Feminist Thought as an accurate method in explaining the experiences of Black women for the study of Black women. Using Black Feminist Thought enables Black women's voices to be at the center of the research in an effort to rearticulate subjugated knowledge into "specialized knowledge" (Robinson, Esquibel & Rich, 2013). It also encompasses theoretical interpretations of a Black woman's reality from the standpoint of the Black women who is living it (Hill Collins, 1991).

For many years, researchers have used westernized perspectives and retention models to explain the lives of Black women in higher education (Morris, 2007). Similarly, traditional feminist theory does not capture the intersection of identities or the oppression that Black women experience. Groves (1996) explains that White feminist

have generally avoided the race issue in their research, which has created a huge gap in women's studies. Recognizing this gap, Black feminist scholars Dr. Patricia Hill Collins began a movement that represented the voices and experiences of Black women. As a result she pioneered Black feminist thought (BFT) in 1985. This theory centers the voices and interpretations of Black women and makes visible Black women's oppression and acts of resistance (Hill Collins, 2000). Hill Collins wrote:

Black feminist thought stimulate[s] a new consciousness that utilizes Black women's everyday, taken for granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. Most importantly, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African American women and stimulate resistance. (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 32)

According to Hill Collins, there are four main tenets that make up Black Feminist Epistemology<sup>2</sup>: (1) "The Lived Experience as a Criterion of Meaning" explains how one knows what they know through episodes they have encountered within their life (Williams, Brewley, Reed, White, & Davis-Haley, 2005, p. 183), (2) "The Use of Dialogue" is the second component and it speaks to the use of dialogue as something that establishes bonds and relationships among Black women, which may lead to empowerment (Hill Collins, 2000); (3) "The Ethic of Caring" offers information on how expressions of emotion and empathy by Black women can provide a better understanding of the different and unique experiences of those in this population as oppressed individuals and groups (Hill Collins, 2000); and lastly, (4) "The Ethic of Personal Accountability (Hill Collins, 2000)" is the fourth component of Black Feminist Epistemology, the ethic of personal responsibility, Hill Collins

---

<sup>2</sup> In Black feminist scholarship, the use of Black Feminist Theory, Black Feminist Thought and Black Feminist Epistemology are often used interchangeably.



(2000) stated: “Not only must individuals develop their knowledge claims through dialogue and present them in a style proving their concern for their ideas, but people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims” (p. 265).

As Black women create or validate knowledge, they should assume full responsibility and accountability on their standpoints or positions. These tenets are the reasons why it was decided to extend the investigation beyond one-on-one interviews with the participants. To fulfill tenets two through four, it was necessary to gather the participants into a focus group so that the *use of dialogue, ethic of care and the ethic of responsibility* could be demonstrated.

According to Mary Howard-Hamilton (2003), one of several scholars who champion Black Feminist Thought as a framework when studying Black women, there are three major themes in Black Feminist Thought: First the framework is built upon the experiences Black women have encountered in their lives. This is very important considering that for many years others have created the narrative for Black women. The narratives of Black women tend to be inaccurate and marred with stereotypes. Second, while there is diversity in the stories and experiences women bring, there are intersections of experiences between and among Black women. Lastly, although there are commonalities, there is diversity in our socioeconomic status, religions, age, and sexual orientation that make our experience wholly ours. According to Hill Collins (2001):

Black American women in the academy differ in their experiences, backgrounds, appearances, educational levels, demographics, occupations, and beliefs. What connects them all is their struggle to be accepted and respected members of the society, and their desire to have a voice that can be heard in a world with many views. (p. 29)

What is intriguing about this framework is that it is a holistic framework that can be applied across many different experiences. African American women have been

marginalized in society for an extended period of time and the arena of education is no exception. This theory addresses the plight of Black women, specifically in the areas racism, classism, sexism, loneliness, microaggressions, marginality syndrome, and the status of the “outsider within” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

As students, faculty and staff members; African American women have been caste as the “outsider within,” which suggests that she has been given access into the places and spaces that the dominant culture occupies, however, she still remains an outsider (Hill Collins, 1984). In Michelle Obama’s senior thesis at Princeton University, she demonstrated the premise of the “outsider-within” for college students:

My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my “Blackness” than ever before. I have found that at Princeton, no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my white professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus as if I really don’t belong. Regardless of the circumstances under which I interact with whites at Princeton, it often seems as if, to them, I will always be Black first and a student second. These experiences have made it apparent to me that the path I have chosen to follow by attending Princeton will likely lead to my further integration and/or assimilation into a White cultural and social structure that will only allow me to remain on the periphery of society; never becoming a full participant. (quoted in Robinson, 1985, pp. 2-3)

Patricia Hill Collins clarifies that African American women remain outsiders because they are still invisible and have no voice when dialogue commences. A sense of belonging can never exist, because, there is no personal or cultural fit between the experiences of African American women and the dominant group. The dominant group holds erroneous and stereotypical notions about the African American female identity and their experiences, which positions African American women into marginalized spaces that are difficult to escape.

In some cases African American women believe and internalize the false characterizations and stereotypes about themselves, which can greatly impact an African

American woman's self-esteem and self-efficacy. Hill Collins argues that African American women can escape those places if African American women are empowered as agents of knowledge and reject internalized, psychological oppression. This construct encourages African American women to develop, redefine, and explain their own stories and identities through self-definition and self-valuation (Hill Collins, 1986).

Mary Howard-Hamilton provides insight into how college faculty and administrators might be more supportive and eradicate the oppressive environments of college campuses. She encourages colleges to provide course materials and programming that are relevant to African American women. She urges faculty to create spaces and design classroom experiences that facilitate continual dialogue, cross-cultural group work, and opportunities for individuals to step outside their comfort zones. Lastly, she encourages colleges to create counter-spaces (Black students associations, Black sororities, and Black female support groups) for African American women within predominantly White institutions; because, the survival of African American women is contingent on their ability to find a place to describe their experiences among persons like themselves. The BFT framework was a crucial "piece to the puzzle" when discussing and understanding African American women's experiences in college.

### **Intersectionality Theory**

While Black Feminist Theory has been the most prominent analytical tool in studying Black women, it is not the only tool available when studying Black women and their experiences. The second framework that served as a companion piece to Black Feminist Thought for this dissertation was Intersectionality Theory. An intersectional framework allows one to further explicate the experience of Black women at the research site. Intersectionality also enhanced this study because it provided an opportunity to

explore the socially constructed identities of both race and gender simultaneously. Most identity models use a single-axis approach to studying identity. Meaning they analyze one salient identity like race only or gender only. For example there are white identity development theories (Goodman, 2001, Helms, 1994, Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000) Black racial and ethnic identity development theories (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995; Jackson, 2001; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000) multiracial identity development theories (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1979, 1989; Phinney, 1989, 1990, 1992) and others.

An intersectional approach to understanding race and gender is one in which consideration is given to the unique positions that exists for people on the basis of the combination of their race/ethnicity and gender (Crenshaw, 1993, Hurtado, 1989 & Settles, 2006). This suggests that gender and race can only be experienced simultaneously within an individual (Settles, 2006). At this point, it is important to acknowledge that intersectionality refers to all subject positions (i.e. race, gender, sexuality, class, ability status, etc.; Nash, 2008). While this study initially focused on the intersections of race and gender, other identities emerged from the participants in the one on one interview and the focus group.

Intersectionality has become one of the most exploited analytical tools that feminist scholars utilize to discuss and theorize identity and systems of oppression. While there are many identity theories in existence, there are none that better help to interrogate the Black women's experience than intersectionality. The intersection of race and gender is particularly important for Black women because of the complex political and social context in which they live in the United States (Reid & Comaz-Diaz, 1990 & Settles, 2006). Isis Settles (2006) explains that Black women's varied experiences may lead them to perceive both positive and negative qualities associated with their gender and race group memberships. Intersectionality helped "tease apart" what women made of those

experiences in their lives. Intersectionality is the idea that individuals can simultaneously have multiple identities that create a unique experience. In this case we explored Black women who had multiple oppressed identities, which produced experiences that only Black women could identify.

Intersectionality theory has its roots in critical race studies and legal studies where Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), an early scholar with a focus on Black women in the legal system identified three ways in which race and gender intersect for women of color: Structurally, Representationally, and Politically. Structurally, “woman” and “Black person” are both considered being lower status identities in the United States (Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990 & Settles, 2006). The position that Black women occupy in society positions them to be subjected to both sexism and racism. This is interesting, because at times Black women are oppressed by members of their own social groups (i.e. they may experience sexism from others within the Black community and they may experience racism from other women). Representationally, Black women are most often negatively depicted in the media, which carries over to mainstream society. Unfortunately, some Black women subscribe and internalize these images, which can cause negative psychological implications.

Lastly, the third way that race and gender intersect for Black women is politically. For some time, Black women have been placed in situations where they might have to choose which part of their identity to identify with or to support politically. The Suffrage and Civil Rights Movements are examples of instances when Black women chose to support their race and temporarily push gender issues aside. These acts of racial solidarity on behalf of Black women have led some to believe that perhaps race is more salient than their gender identity (Gay & Tate, 1998).

## **Intersectionality Debates**

While an intersectional framework seemed like the second best approach to compliment studying Black women, there were some major critiques surrounding intersectionality theory that needed to be considered. The first critique centered on the fact that there is no defined intersectional methodology, which makes it difficult to study intersectionality (Nash, 2008 & McCall, 2005). The second critique centers around the use of Black women as model subjects of intersectionality and the dangers associated with it. Both arguments are critiques that continue to come up in conversations about the complexity and rigor of the method.

In reference to the first critique, researchers claim that intersectionality framework lacks a rigorous method of examining multiple subjects (Chang & Culp, 2002; McCall, 2005). McCall (2005) explains that the reason for this is that it is very difficult to craft a method that involves a subject that has multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis. In her attempt to resolve the “murkiness” of intersectionality and how it can be studied, she proposes three possible methods in which to study intersectionality.

McCall’s first argument is that the use of categories are inherently problematic and not that useful because they are socially constructed and insufficient. According to McCall (2005), categories like race and gender are too simplistic to capture the complexity of lived experiences (p. 1773). With this principle in mind, the first approach is *anticategorical complexity*. This approach is based on a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories and is considered the most complex and rigorous of the three approaches. McCall claims that:

Analyzing social life is too irreducibly complex-overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures-to make fixed categories

anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences.

Scholars who want to call attention to the social processes of categorization and the inner workings of exclusion and hierarchy would use this method (Nash, 2008).

According to McCall (2005) the second approach is *intracategorical complexity* (p. 1774). The method actually uses intersectional identities as the starting point. This is a method born out of a movement by feminist of color. Interest arose out of the failure of gender based and race based research to recognize the lived experience of individuals who had multiple subordinate identities. For example, there was a need to understand the Black woman's experience. Before it was not possible to study their experience from previous studies of gender combined with previous studies of race because the former focused on white women and the latter on Black men (McCall, 2005). The deployment of narratives by Black women was the answer to the often- neglected experiences of doubly marginalized subject (Nash, 2008). This approach does not reject the use of categories, however it problematizes their exclusionary functions and then uses them to demonstrate their inadequacy (Nash, 2008). According to McCall the drawback with this approach is that it only focuses on the dimensions across categories and not the dimensions within categories. She maintains that this approach gives a partial crystallization, focusing on only one of the many sides of a set of intersecting social relations for the individual.

Finally, according to McCall (2005) the third approach is *intercategorical complexity* (p.1773), which uses categories for the purpose of understanding inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions. She places relationship at the center for the analysis and acknowledges that inequality exists among already established social groups. The kind of scholarship exposes the relationships between inequality and the

categories themselves and uses the categories strategically to display the connections between categories and inequality (Nash, 2008).

The second debate is about the misguided use of Black women as prototypical subjects of intersectionality and the inability of intersectionality to capture the diversity of actual experiences of women of color. Nash (2008) cites two problems with the theoretical reliance of Black women's experience. First, she explains that in sometimes a well-meaning attempt to correct and underscore problems of exclusion within the broader feminist and anti-racist discussions that Black women are now treated as a unitary and monolithic entity. She stresses that the diversity and difference among Black women in terms of class and sexuality are omitted in the service of presenting the Black woman's experience. She reminds us that experience of Black women is not only comprised of their experiences of being Black and female, but class and sexuality complicate it as well.

Secondly, Nash (2008) reminded us that intersectionality was supposed to be a theoretical advance of Black feminism, It was touted as a new tool that would help analyze the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences. She argues that intersectionality did not add to or enhance Black feminism at all, but that it merely recycles Black feminism, which seeks to use Black women's experiences to demonstrate the shortcomings of the race-gender binary.

After considering the limitations of intersectionality it still emerged as the best approach for this particular piece of work. According to McCall this particular study would be an intersectional complexity methodology because it focuses on single social group and the intersections of identities across the categories of race and gender. Her qualm with this particular approach is that it perpetuates the generalizations about the group although there may be some diversity or other intersections within the group.



While this study focuses on two categories that intersect (race and gender), the use of phenomenology will help reveal other intersections (class, sexual orientation, nationality) that may be present to ensure that there is a comprehensive picture of the subjects' experience.

In response to the Nash's concern about using Black women as the prototypical subjects of intersectionality it is important to remember that Black women are uniquely situated in that they stand at the focal point where two exceptionally powerful and prevalent systems of oppression come together: race and gender (Hill Collins, 2000). Placing Black women at the center and understanding their social positions could open up the possibility of seeing and understanding how other social groups are oppressed. Hill Collins explicitly states that it is not her intent to place Black women's experiences at the center of analysis to privilege those experiences, but it is so that we can use Black women's knowledge to readily identify where systems of oppression come together.

As one of the theoretical frameworks for this study, intersectionality helped contextualize the experiences of the individual participants and examine multiple aspects of identity simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality served as a supporting "piece of the puzzle" for understanding not only what experiences were similar among my participants, but also in what ways were these women diverse and how their experiences were complex even though they inhabited the same space as members of the group. Only one other study (Robinson, Esquibel & Rich, 2013) has actually used these two tools to analyze Black undergraduate women in higher education. This dissertation was different in the sense that it expands the dialogue to how their experiences impacted degree completion. This work explored uncharted territory that could potentially change the landscape of how Black women are viewed in higher education and facilitate the call for more support of Black women in higher education.

## **SUMMARY**

Despite the fact that more and more Black women are entering into higher education, there is still small number of Black women attending selective, predominantly white institutions. For the unique experiences of African American women in higher education, there are aspects of their experience that both discourage and encourage their persistence. The information discovered through this dissertation will be used as a guide for practitioners and college administrators that will assist them in tailoring services and strategic initiatives for African American women in these institutions. This dissertation contributes to the body of literature and fills a critical gap in the research about African American women in higher education.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative research is the process of “studying things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). For this reason I chose to use a qualitative approach to studying Black women at The University of Texas at Austin. In order to highlight their experiences and tell their stories, I situated this study within the phenomenological tradition (Creswell, 2009). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the lived experiences of Black female students at a selective, predominantly White institution and to understand their pathways to graduation. To accurately capture their experiences, I plan utilized multiple means of collecting data: interviews, a focus group, a questionnaire and an observation. This approach allowed me to capture the unique, as well as, the collective or universal meanings of the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2009). More specifically, as I stated in the *Overview of Methods* section in Chapter 2, I hoped that this investigation would provide more insight into the phenomena that contributes to the participants’ ability to be successful (whatever that means for them) and to secure degrees.

Aligned with Black Feminism Theory, the study’s design sought to centralize Black women’s voices and experiences. To accurately reflect Black women’s standpoint, I employed a phenomenological approach to respond the following research questions:

1. What are the academic and social experiences of African American female college students at The University of Texas at Austin?
2. What institutional structures promote or threaten Black female degree completion at The University of Texas at Austin?

3. How do Black female college students' intersectional identities shape their experiences at The University of Texas at Austin?

This chapter provides an overview of the study's research design and methodology for understanding and explaining the experiences of Black women at The University of Texas at Austin. This section is organized into seven sections: 1) Research Design Rationale, 2) Site Selection, 3) Participant Recruitment and Selection, 4) Data Collection and Analysis, 5) Dependability, 6) Positionality/Researcher Bias, 7) Limitations and Delimitations.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN RATIONALE**

In order to further understand the lived experiences of Black women at a site I chose, I utilized a qualitative approach. The use of a qualitative methodology provided an opportunity to gather detailed descriptions of the participants' lives while considering the influence of the institutional context (Stage & Manning, 2003). According to Maxwell (2005), a qualitative study assists the researcher in understanding the particular context within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions. In the case of this study, the action was the students' ability to persist toward graduation.

In order to select the most appropriate means of conducting the research, a review of the five qualitative traditions of inquiry was essential (Creswell, 1998). The primary research traditions are derived from a variety of fields, which include anthropology, sociology, and the political sciences to name a few (Creswell, 1998). Each tradition is unique and distinct in their approach. The five traditions of inquiry are biography, grounded theory, ethnography, case study and phenomenology. The next section briefly discusses the traditions in more detail and justifies the use of phenomenology for this particular study.

First, the biographical study focuses on one individual's life story. Denzin (1989) defines this method as the "studied use and collection of life documents that describe turning points in an individual's life" (p.69) Its distinction lies in the researcher's ability to effectively tell the stories and then connect the stories to larger concepts to explain meaning, as well as, interpret the life experiences of the individual (Creswell, 1998).

I was intrigued when Creswell mentioned that the biography tradition was widely used in feminist scholarship. However, after more information, I decided this was not the best method for this study. While one of the main tenets of Black Feminist Theory is for Black women to be able to tell their own history and stories as opposed to outsiders doing it for them and the fact that the biography tradition would naturally lend to this idea, I elected not use this method, because I was more interested in studying several Black women and their stories. Thus phenomenology was best suited for the stories of multiple women in this particular context.

The second tradition mentioned by Creswell was *ethnography*. Ethnography is a description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system (Creswell, 1998). It involves a prolonged observation of the group, typically through participant observation in which the researcher is immersed. The researcher studies the meaning of behavior, language and interaction of the group's day to day lives (Creswell, 1998). In this study, a small portion of the data collection was be collected through the observation of two different Black women's student organization meetings, but not by any means enough to be considered ethnography. These observations were supplemental to the interviews and the focus group in order to gather any additional collective themes that inform the phenomena in question. Also, considering the extended amount of time a researcher would need to spend and devote to this tradition of inquiry, conducting ethnography

would not have been the best approach nor would it have been practical for the completion of this study in a timely manner.

Another qualitative approach is the *case study*. Case studies explore a “bounded system” or a case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). Cases tend to be programs, events, or individuals. A researcher may choose to do a case study because the case may be a unique phenomenon that requires study and explanation. For example, if a researcher was studying campus violence, he or she may study two or three sites where major campus violence has occurred (i.e. The University of Texas at Austin mass shooting or the Virginia Tech mass shooting). Again, due to the fact that I was not studying one individual’s story, but the stories of many to explain a particular phenomenon, case study was not an appropriate option.

The fourth possible approach to studying Black women’s experiences in college was *grounded theory*. The purpose of grounded theory is to generate or produce new theory (Creswell, 1998). Creswell (1998) goes on to explain, “This situation is one in which individuals interact, take action, or engage in a process in response to a phenomenon” (pg. 56.). Researchers using grounded theory begin with a theoretical approach and collect extensive data through interviews (typically 20-30 interviews). Once a point of saturation is reached, the researcher can begin building the framework for the theory (Glaser, 2001).

Prior research on African American women in college have used grounded theory as an approach to study everything from sexual risk behavior (Gibbons, 2010), to body image perception (Rubin, Fitts & Becker, 2003), to career development of highly achieving Black women (Ritchie, Fassinger, Linn, Johnson, Prosser, Robinson, 1997), but nothing on Black women’s experiences at a selective predominantly white institution

and degree completion. I did seriously consider a grounded theory approach for this study, however I chose not to pursue this method of study. When I reevaluated the purpose of this study, I really wanted to continue with my goal of contributing to the Black Feminist community through the use of Hill Collins' (1989) Black Feminist Thought and Crenshaw's (1989) Intersectionality Theories. Another reason for not choosing grounded theory was that while I did anticipate that there would be some universality among my participants and their experiences, I did not believe it would lead me to a point of saturation. I am more interested in their experiences, which I assumed would be varied. Grounded theory could be an appropriate method to use in the future.

The tradition of inquiry that I chose to work in for this study was phenomenology. According to Creswell (1998), phenomenology describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or a phenomenon. A phenomenological approach was best suited for this study for three reasons. First, this study did not attempt to examine an individual person or unit; rather, it sought to understand the lived experiences of several individuals matriculating at a selective, predominantly White institution. By studying several individuals I was able to incorporate multidimensional identities into the analysis. Second, a phenomenology study resulted in helping an outsider better understand what it was like for Black women to succeed in spaces that were not designed to facilitate their success. Thirdly, there is a precedent of prior research using phenomenology to address and explain Black student's experiences on White campuses (see Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson, 2004; Harper, 2009; Patton Davis, 2006; Stewart, 2002). This study added to the research about the experiences of Black women specifically. The next section outlines the research design for this study, beginning with the site selection and participants for this study.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

For this study, I used purposeful sampling or criterion-based selection to select the research site. According to Patton (2002), researchers should use purposeful sampling when selecting a site so the study will illuminate the research questions. Maxwell (2005) states that this is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that cannot be retrieved as well from other choices. Thus, the setting for this study was The University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin), located in Austin, Texas.

### **Site Selection**

UT-Austin is a large public research university in the South and it is representative of many large, predominantly White institutions in the United States. UT-Austin's elite status is marked by its membership in the Association of American Universities (AAU) since 1929, its consistent recognition as one of the top public institutions in the country by the *U.S. News and World Report* and its first rate faculty. In fall 2013, UT Austin enrolled 52,059 students (W. Powers, personal communication, November 1, 2013). Of that number, 39,979 were undergraduates and 12,080 were graduates students (including law school enrollment). The gender breakdown for the population was 49.3% male and 50.7% female (W. Powers, personal communication, November 1, 2013).

UT-Austin was an ideal site for this study, because of the relatively low undergraduate Black student population of 4.9% (1,941 Black students). This site was rich with experiences and stories, because Black students at schools with low Black student enrollments tend to feel more isolated and experience more prejudice and discrimination (Alexander Snow, 1999; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Cary 1991; Evans, 2007; Graham, 1995; Walpole, 2009). The demographic breakdown of other undergraduate



ethnic groups were: 17.8% Asian, 21.7% Hispanic, 0.2% Native American, 4.7% Foreign, 47.7% White, and 0.3% Unknown (Office of Information Management and Analysis, 2013). For the purpose of this study, the population of Black females enrolled in the fall 2013 was 1,424, which makes up 2.8% (including graduate students) of the total student population (Office of Information Management and Analysis, 2013).

I chose The University of Texas for several reasons: 1) The University Texas at Austin is the flagship university of the state of Texas and it has a more selective admissions criteria than many public and private institutions. Thus, UT Austin provided a unique balance between elite admissions criteria and a responsibility to serve the state's citizens. 2) There was a strong institutional commitment to diversity that was reflective through policy and practice such as the creation of the Division of Diversity of Community Engagement, a variety of support programs at both the institutional and department levels that encourage student success, and the university leaned toward making financial aid decisions that attracted a diverse student population (Laude, 2013). 3) It was similar to many other predominantly White institutions nationwide that struggle to recruit and graduate Black students. 4) There was a recognized African American male academic initiative on campus that created an interesting dynamic.

The African American Male Research Initiative (AAMRI) is a faculty-led academic initiative rooted in evidence-based practices to promote academic excellence among African American males. AAMRI also includes a research focus that informs public policy experts, practitioners, and concerned citizens on how best to create and maintain a culture of Black male excellence in K-16 settings. The research guides their hands-on practical approach to help AAMRI achieve its major goals: to increase the four-year graduation rate for African American males at The University of Texas and to increase the number of Black males attending four-year colleges and universities across

the state of Texas. (Archived at <http://diversity.utexas.edu/aamri/>). 5) Finally, because of my role at University of Texas at Austin, my insider knowledge was a reflexive advantage that helped me contextualize and connect the participant's experiences. Another advantage of my insider status was that I had access to institutional information and data, as well as easy access to the participants in the study.

### **PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION**

Participant recruitment included two phases. The first phase was "pre-selection" and the second phase was "final-selection." Similar to the way the research site was purposefully selected, the study's participants were also pre-selected in a purposeful manner based upon three criteria: a) They must have self identified as Black (African, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latina, etc.), b) They must have self identified as female, and c) They must have been enrolled and classified as a sophomore, junior, or senior. The recruitment strategy began by utilizing the following networks: the Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence, an academic support community on campus; the Texas National Panhellenic Council (NPHC) sororities (Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, and Sigma Gamma Rho); The Fearless Leadership Institute, an academic and professional development initiative on campus for women of color; and the MEC's Afrikan American Affairs Agency, which is an umbrella agency for all Black student organizations at The University of Texas at Austin. In addition, I contacted campus administrators and academic advisors via email, introduced myself, introduced the study and ask for their assistance in identifying possible participants. I anticipated that the initial recruitment effort would produce a "word of mouth" effect and a bit of snowball sampling (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, Patton, 1990). This is a process whereby additional participants are recruited through initial recruited participants. Members of the

recruited population were able to help identify more participants for the study because they were connected to others who were just like them. With the use of multiple sampling approaches, I was able to attract a diverse group of young women for the sample.

Upon completion of the initial phase of recruitment, I emailed all the potential participants of the study to start the second phase of recruitment. In the email I introduced myself, the purpose of the study and the criterion upon which they were recruited. I also deployed a questionnaire via Survey Monkey, which allowed me to further screen for “final selection.” The goal was to select a diverse sample for the study through the questionnaire, which also served as background information on the students before they interview. I assessed their generational status, socioeconomic history, cultural identity, and campus affiliations. I also gave some preference to the graduating seniors, because their experiences and perspectives were important in relation to the first and second research questions. Lastly, I also gauged their potential availability for participation in the study with the use of the questionnaire.

Creswell (1998) recommends recruiting up to 10 participants, Douglas (1985) recommends 25, and Seidman (1998) says pick “enough” to reflect the range of participants that make up the population so that others outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experiences of those in it. The other phenomenological studies that I reviewed varied greatly from eight to 20. In this study, I attempted to recruit between eight to 12 participants. After the participants were selected, I corresponded with all of the individuals who completed the survey about my decision on their participation in the study. The email provided details about scheduling their interview as well as the interview protocol.

## **DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS**

Before any data was collected, I submitted the appropriate paperwork to The University of Texas at Austin for IRB approval. As stated before, I used multiple approaches to collect the data needed for this study. I conducted two one-on-one interviews with all the participants, one focus group with all the participants, and observed at least two Black women's student organization meetings.

### **Interviews**

Interviewing was the most appropriate technique for collecting extensive data within a phenomenological inquiry. Since the study aimed to understand the students lived experiences on campus, a phenomenological interviewing protocol was employed. Seidman (2005) recommends three interviews of each participant, however I reduced the process to two interviews per participant, a modified approach to phenomenological research that has been previously employed in the literature (Reddick, 2007). I interviewed second to fifth-year University of Texas at Austin students who identified as Black (African American, African, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latino, etc.) and as female in order to capture the participants' unique experiences on campus. Each participant completed two rounds of interviews. All interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. The first interview did not exceed 90 minutes and focused on the student's life history. We explored background, upbringing, their high school experience and their college choice decision-making process. The second interview did not exceed 90 minutes and focused on the student's college experiences and how they made meaning of those experiences. At the conclusion of the scheduled interviews, I moved in the direction of hosting one focus group for all of the participants in hopes of enriching the data collection by gathering any additional collective or shared experiences as Black women on campus (Finch & Lewis, 2003).

## **Focus Group**

The focus group was conducted at the conclusion of the one-on-one interviews. There were multiple beneficial reasons why I included a focus group in my data collection process. According to Lewis (2003), focus groups are used because the group process will itself illuminate the research issue providing an opportunity to explore how the participants think and talk about the topic and how their ideas are shaped through their conversation with others. Secondly, group discussion allows the participants to hear from others, which in turn gives them an opportunity to reflect and refine, which deepens their insights into their own circumstances, attitudes or behaviors (Ritchie, 2003). One last benefit of incorporating a focus group is that the participants get to vividly display their differences, which will create an opportunity for differences to be discussed (Finch & Lewis, 2003).

The goal was to have all participants represented at the focus group discussion. I did foresee some possible scheduling conflicts that made it difficult for all of the participants to get together. However, I moved forward with 75 percent of the participants represented. The focus group was led and mediated in a semi-structured format to provide a more fluid and adaptable group discussion that allowed the participants to connect with and validate one another's experiences in an authentic manner, utilizing themes that emerged from the individual interviews. The focus group did not exceed 120 minutes. In addition to the interviews and the focus group, one last method was employed to collect data.

## **Participant Observations and Field Notes**

I attended two student organization meetings whose missions focused on Black college women. Participant observation is when the researcher joins the constituent study population or its organizational community setting to record actions, interactions, or

events that occur. This not only allows phenomena to be studied as it arises, but also offers the researcher the opportunity to gain additional insights through experiencing the phenomena for themselves (Ritchie, 2003). I chose “participant observation” as a method instead of “observation,” because I was not considered an outsider to the study participants. In full disclosure, I was very active participant in the Black female student community. I have served as an advisor and confidante to many of the members of the population. “Observation” on the other hand is a method for researchers who are not a part of the study population (Ritchie, 2003).

I attended the organization meetings of Sankofa and Pi Kappa Theta. Sankofa met every week for about one hour in the center of campus, in a residence hall. The focus of the organization was to inspire women of color at The University of Texas at Austin to be politically and socially proactive, culturally responsible, and resolute in empowering women according to their organizational mission statement on their website (2014). Pi Kappa Theta met monthly for approximately three hours focusing on the academic, personal and professional development of Black women in college. Because of my prior participation with these organizations, I was privy to the fact that issues related to Black women’s experiences on campus, and the juggling of multiple identities tend to be a constant theme in these meetings. This was an additional opportunity to acquire any additional collective or shared experiences of Black women on campus from the participants.

I kept records and detailed, descriptive field notes from my visits to the student organization meetings. Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler (2010) assert that “descriptive field notes summarize what the researcher sees and hears in the setting” (p. 118). They also advise when the researcher is describing their observations in their field notes that the researcher should add as much detail as possible, cautiously paying attention to any

subjective commentary. For this reason, I carefully went through the recording and written data with a “fine-toothed comb” to ensure that no subjectivity was reflected during the analysis.

### **Analytic Memos**

Throughout the entire data collection process, I kept a detailed informal journal where I could readily record thoughts, questions, and emergent themes and concepts (Ely, 1991; Maxwell, 2005). I reflected after every one-on-one interview to help me remember subtle nuances, gestures, demeanor and the body language of the participants while being interviewed. I memos were helpful when I needed to refer back in order to paint a complete picture of the participants’ experiences and stories.

### **Data Confidentiality**

Multiple measures were taken to ensure participant and data confidentiality. All participants were assigned a pseudonym or code name to protect their identity. The code name was used to label several of the research instruments, including the pre-selection surveys/questionnaires, the digital recordings, the interview transcripts, and field notes. Any documents with the participant’s real name were destroyed at the completion of the interviews and once transcriptions were complete. All consent forms, surveys/questionnaires, supplemental documents, recordings, field notes and analytic memos were scanned and digitally stored in a password-protected file and on a password-protected computer to ensure additional security. During the entire duration of this study, I was the only person who accessed this data. All files will be kept a total of six years and then destroyed.

## **Data Analysis**

After the audio files from the interviews and focus group were transcribed, the data from the interviews were analyzed using a general inductive approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because the data from the focus group was considered supplemental and supportive in nature for this study, I did not employ a comprehensive, technical analysis; however, I used simple content analysis to identify emergent themes that came up in the focus group and used content analysis to support themes that may have already emerged from the individual interviews (Stewart, 2006). To conclude the analysis of the focus group, I wrote a summary of the conclusions that could be drawn (Stewart, 2006). The observation field notes were also considered supplemental and supportive, thus the notes were used to vividly describe the Black women's everyday discussions, actions and experiences (Ritchie, 2003).

The analysis of the interview data began with open coding and was then followed by axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding is the process in which the researcher forms initial categories of information about the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998). While coding, I was constantly analyzing the emerging categories against the frameworks (Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality Theory) and the research questions. To begin the process of open coding, I used Dedoose, an online qualitative software program to assist in identifying the first set of codes and themes. Dedoose assisted me with reviewing the transcripts line by line and assigning codes to the data. From there I began the axial coding by taking the initial codes that Dedoose helped expose and identified more themes and subthemes. The axial coding provided an even deeper understanding of the students' experiences.



## **Dependability**

It is sometimes referred to as reliability and validity, which are concepts that were developed in the natural sciences (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). However, the qualitative community would rather refer to it as dependability or trustworthiness. In order to promote these principles while conducting research, Creswell (2007) recommends the following practices when conducting qualitative studies: prolonging engagement and engaging in persistent observation, triangulating the data with other sources, debriefing with other researchers, locating a negative case study, explaining positionality/researcher bias, member checking (checking the finding with the participants), providing rich/thick descriptions of the findings, and conducting external audits. For this study I employed four of these methods to ensure dependability: triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, and acknowledging positionality/researcher bias.

## **Triangulation**

Triangulation, according to Richie & Lewis (2003), assumes that the use of different sources of information will help both to confirm and improve the clarity, or precision, of a research finding. Patton (2002) states “It is in the data analysis that the strategy of triangulation really pays off, not only in providing diverse ways of looking at the same phenomenon but in adding to credibility by strengthening confidence in whatever conclusions are drawn” (pg. 556). It is for this reason that I triangulated the data by using multiple sources of information for this study. I had already built into the research design: in-depth interviews, a focus group, observations, field notes, and analytic memos.

### **Peer Debriefing**

The second means of ensuring dependability for this study would be the process of debriefing with my professional and student colleagues. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain “It is the process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the researcher’s mind” (p. 385). I consulted with three colleagues who were unfamiliar with the topic and the paradigm regarding research methods for this study.

### **Member Checking**

The third approach to ensuring dependability was member checking (Creswell, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). Member checking was used to confirm the accuracy of transcription and the participant’s reflections. All transcriptions of the one-on-one interviews were shared with all the participants to ensure accuracy. The summary of the focus group was also shared with participants, and all participants had an opportunity to provide feedback or edits.

### **Positionality/Researcher Bias**

This portrait of African American female success gave me a sense of pride and a feeling of connectedness. I reflected on my very own experience attending a predominantly White institution and my journey to completion. The pride that I felt stemmed from the fact that I came into the University labeled as “not college ready,” but managed to still complete my degree in four years. I was recruited through an opportunity scholarship from an inner-city high school in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex. Back then, the campus had an International Baccalaureate (IB) program even though it was a Title I campus with a student body, faculty and staff of predominantly African

Americans. Today that campus is 42% African American, 7% Asian, 48% Hispanic and 3% White. 71% of students on the campus are considered disadvantaged, 17% are English language learners, and 12% are in special education (Texas Education Agency Report Card, 2013).

As a student who ended up graduating sixth in my high school class, I did not realize that my former education had not prepared me for the rigor of a large tier-one, research institution. Even after receiving the results of my standardized test scores that were severely below average, I still had no idea how ill prepared I was. When I arrived on campus, I remembered feeling like an outsider, always the last person chosen for group projects and study groups. I was afraid to speak up in class for fear of not sounding smart enough or sounding “too Black.” In spite of the challenges, I learned how to cope and survive through to graduation. With the help of success programs and campus resources I was able to prosper despite the odds. Like mine, what is missing from “The Successful Black Woman” narrative is the story behind the success. What is often omitted is that Black women overcome great odds to achieve their college degrees.

I was inspired by the fact that these women had gone on to complete degrees, sometimes multiple degrees at the very places that are supposed to be dismissive and unwelcoming to Black female students. In higher education research the Black female student experience at a PWI is ubiquitously depicted as negative and filled with challenges and obstacles. Article after article and report after report, the reality is that many African American students often experience isolation and different forms of racism in white elite educational settings (Alexander Snow, 1999; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Cary 1991; Graham, 1995; Walpole, 2009), which impacts some students’ ability to complete their degrees. If this is the case, then where do Black students experience the most success? Researchers and academicians like Jacqueline Fleming (1984) and Eboni

Zamani (2003) assert that for many African American women, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) fostered higher degree aspirations and more positively affect academic performance more than predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Fleming (1984) found that small populations of African American students in elite colleges tend to remove themselves from mainstream or majority settings and that African American women are also socially isolated at PWIs.

After reading this article and recalling what I knew about the African American female experience in higher education and society as a whole, I wanted to know more. I felt as though a more thorough investigation was needed on the highly successful African American women on these elite, selective campuses. To date, we should know more about how this particular population of college women copes with feeling isolated or how their interactions within the college environment promote or threaten their success.

## **LIMITATIONS**

As previously stated in chapter 2, the results of this study provided an opportunity to understand the stories and experiences of Black college women at a selective institution and it provided critical information for these women, the college and university personnel who work with these women, other researchers, and policymakers. When it comes to research, limitations are inevitable. Limitations refer to the restrictions of the research design or methodology (Patton, 2002) and there are three potential limitations for this study.

First, it should be noted that I did disaggregate the diaspora<sup>3</sup> subgroups for this study. This study included one student who identified as native African and one student

---

<sup>3</sup> For this study diaspora is defined as people of African origin and communities through out the world that are descended from the historic movement of peoples from African, predominantly to the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, among other areas around the globe (Ade Ajayi, 1998). The research

who was Afro-Latina. In addition to African American female participants, I predicted that a substantial population of West African American female participants would be in the study, but there was only one. The University of Texas at Austin has a significant West African American student population and I thought that this diversity would present a challenge in terms of identifying themes that were common among all groups. But it did not, because the student embraced both identities of being West African and Black American.

Secondly, my insider status with the participants did not impact the data collection. Initially, there was concern that the ways in which the women interacted with me would compromise the data. Also, the ways in which I might interpret their statements was an area of concern. Patton (2002) states that “interview data is subject to recall error, reactivity of the interviewee to the interviewer, and self-serving purposes” (p. 306). I was careful to check my own bias, prejudices, emotions, and/or anxiety while conducting both the interviews and the focus group (Patton, 2002). I also utilized techniques such as member checks and sharing my preliminary coding and findings with members of the research community before writing this.

Lastly, my presence at the student organization meetings was a potential limitation. The study participants may have behaved or interacted differently, because they knew they were being observed (Patton, 2002). However, I am a familiar figure in the community of Black women at UT-Austin. My affiliation in a Black Greek-letter organization (BGLO), as well as my roles as an advisor and staff member on campus created a dynamic where the young ladies were comfortable speaking and engaging even

---

site has a significant population of first and second generations of Native African students and Afro-Latino students.

though I was in the room. Many of the members even had exchanges with me. While I believed that they were comfortable, I have no way of knowing if my presence impacted their behavior. In an attempt to combat this possible limitation, I purposefully selected members of the organization that I had no prior relationship with to observe.

## **DELIMITATIONS**

Delimitations are the boundaries that the researcher strategically sets to the study (Patton, 2002). There are multiple delimitations for this study beginning with the single site approach. This study and research was conducted at The University of Texas at Austin, a four-year, selective research university. The use of one site restricted the ability to generalize the findings across other populations, sites and institution types.

In addition to the single site study, the qualitative approach also limited the extent to which the findings could be generalized to other Black female populations and contexts. In quantitative traditions, the goal is to be able to generalize across populations and context. However, in qualitative research the idea is to provide rich descriptions and promote the participants' voices. The potential for generalizability in a theoretical context was possible with this study.

Lastly, this study utilized a phenomenological approach. There were four other traditions that could have possibly been used to study the topic. The decision to use phenomenology was made based on the fact that this particular design allowed the participants to describe their lived experiences, which is philosophically aligned with the main ideology of Black Feminist Theory, one of the conceptual frameworks of this study. A phenomenological approach helped to best illustrate these women's experiences and how they pressed forward on to success and graduation.

## **SUMMARY**

This chapter explained the methodology that guided this study. The chapter began with a brief introduction of the five qualitative traditions of inquiry and a rationale for why phenomenology was best suited for this study. Then, there was a discussion about the site and participant selection process. The third section outlined the data collection and analysis plan for the study, followed by issues related to dependability, and the study's limitations/delimitations. The next chapter will introduce the participants that took part in this study highlighting their backgrounds and how they made the way to the University of Texas at Austin.

## **Chapter Four: Participant Introductions & Pre-College Experiences**

The data gathered is divided into two chapters. Chapter four will introduce and document the pre-college experiences of eleven young Black college women whom this dissertation study is based upon. In phenomenological studies it is important to capture the participants' life history. In this chapter each woman shared information about her family background, pivotal and life changing moments, as well as, her academic and social experiences in high school. In addition to the information gathered in the one-on-one interviews and focus group, a pre-selection survey was utilized during the recruitment phase of this study to gather more information about the demographics of each participant's high school, her academic performance and her participation in high school co-curricular activities.

When designing the pre-selection survey, special care was taken to ensure that the information gathered coupled along with the information from the interviews and focus group would provide a clearer picture of whom these women were. The survey also aided in the selection of a diverse group of young Black women. The sample represents socio-economic, first generation status and cultural diversity among other things. The pre-college experiences of students are extremely influential and impact a student's college experience (Bonous-Hammarth, 2000; Hurtado et al., 2011; Museus et al., 2011; Reddick & Saenz, 2012). The young women in this study have high school profiles fit for individuals receiving a superlative recognition of "Most Likely to Succeed." By all accounts these women were the "cream of the crop" of their respective high school communities. According to their high school profiles they are the best and brightest of young women coming out of Texas high schools. In the following profiles is an introduction to each participant.



## **FAITH**

Faith grew up in a large Texas city and her adolescent life was less than ideal. By all accounts her story could have been a very different one, but she has managed to persevere and find her way to The University of Texas at Austin. She spent her early years living with her mother. At the age of five she and her siblings were removed from their home and separated due to their mother's substance abuse problem. The next time she would see her siblings again was 10 years later in 2009. When she was removed she was placed with her father and stepmother to live, with whom she remained with until her senior year in high school. When asked how this circumstance had impacted and shaped her, she replied:

I like to look at it in a very beneficial way of just like going through life experiences and learning how to channel them and weather them, but I believe that it was both beneficial and hurtful in a way because it did cause setbacks in my life.

She also articulated that those years with her father weren't the easiest either. When she decided to "come out" and tell her family that she was a lesbian she was kicked out of the house during her senior year of high school. She went to live with a friend and struggled up until she entered college. While it was hurtful that she had to leave her home, she was taught a very valuable lesson:

I kind of had to learn how to fend for myself. I had to go live with a friend and I struggled all the way up until I entered college. That is when I finally had a stable place to live and I didn't have to worry about where my next meal would come from, and stuff like that. I try not to look at it in a negative light and more so in the light of like I'm just glad I'm still standing on my two feet.

These were two events she described as pivotal moments in her life. These experiences have shaped and colored her experiences as a young adult in college.

Faith attended to a predominantly African American high school. When asked how her peers, school administrators and faculty would describe her in high school she enthusiastically responded:

In high school I was pretty driven from freshman year all the way up to senior year. My peers, I recently learned, were very motivated by me. When they see me now they tell me that they know I will be successful in life. They think I am smart, as well as my teachers, who also pushed me because they saw the potential inside of me. Everyone just like ... I don't know. I guess they saw my potential.

She was driven and she inspired her peers. So much so that in her senior year she was voted "Most Likely to Succeed." While in high school Faith was involved in several extracurricular activities: She was in the National Honors Society (NHS), student council, she played volleyball and she was involved in NASA HUNCH (High Schools United with NASA to Create Hardware) where she was able to intern at NASA as a high school student. Her teachers believed in her success and potential.

As a first generation college student she didn't really have the support of her parents, so she relied on her high school teachers and counselor for guidance, when it was time to begin thinking about college she was at odds with her parents about what she should do:

I guess this goes into my family background too, because my parents, well my dad, he didn't get past a high school education, and my step mom didn't go past middle school. They didn't encourage me to go to college; they more so encouraged me to join the army or go that route because it would be more beneficial to not just me but also them. She (step mom) kind of pushed me in that route.

With her parents telling her one thing, she was being encouraged from school officials to pursue higher education. From her many conversations with her college and career counselor she decided that college was best for her and that she wanted to major in biology. With cost at the forefront of her mind, she decided to remain in the state of

Texas for college. Her top Texas choices were: The University of Texas at Austin, The University of Texas at San Antonio, Prairie View A&M University, and Texas A&M University. At first she was planning on attending UTSA:

It's based on my circumstance of like trying to take care of myself all by myself, I began to think about cost and which school would like offer me the most money, and I nearly didn't come to UT because I was being offered more money from UTSA. It was the morning after my prom night. I got a phone call about additional scholarships, which put it over the top and allowed me to come here because the majority of my school, it was being paid for, and I was being offered the most money from here. It was like the best call of my life because I really did want to come to UT, but it was going to be like unfortunate if I didn't have the money to pay for it.

Ultimately she chose The University of Texas at Austin. In addition to acquiring the funds necessary, she recognized that The University of Texas at Austin was a top tier institution and she considered it a privilege to attend: "I think that UT is ... To be here is to be privileged, no matter your race. That is an advantage of coming here." In addition to considering the prestige, one of her older estranged siblings was already a student at The University of Texas at Austin. And finally her last reason for choosing UT was because of a last minute decision to attend a campus visit sponsored by the SPURS (Students Partnering for Undergraduate Rhetoric Success) program:

The only kind of college experience or college tours that I got to go on was with UT because at my high school I was with SPURS program. I think the guy's name is Derrick who's like over it. I got a lot of experience. We had tours and stuff like that, and they showed us around the campus. It kind of like opened my eyes up to college, and that was like the only experience had. It was really the only school that I knew much about, so I felt most comfortable coming here.

Since enrolling into The University of Texas at Austin Faith has changed her major and is currently majoring in the humanities with post-graduation plans to go to graduate school.

## ASHLEY

Ashley grew up in a large Texas city in a loving two-parent home where she was the youngest and the only girl of three children. Her father was a top executive of a major oil company and her mother was a homemaker. Up until the eighth grade she was a student in an urban inner city school. Concerned about Ashley's educational opportunities, her parent's decided to move from that area so that Ashley could get a better education. With this decision the family relocated to an upper middle class suburban area outside the city and a predominantly white and competitive schooling environment. Ashley discussed the culture shock associated with a this move:

So even at that age, so much is going on at that age anyway. And my parents thought it was best that they move from our old neighborhood just because of better schools systems, better books, better teachers. So we ended up moving over there and it was a shocking change. I mean I'm used to being around everybody who looks like me for so long so I had to adapt. And one thing that was very interesting was that I always made straight A's at [Removed] no matter what grade and I got over there and \*chuckles\* I thought I was smart and at my new school I was making B's and C's at my first year. Oh and the first thing I thought when I looked at the building that I came from in my 8th grade or 7th grade middle school and it was this 'ol wrinky dink thing and I go over there (to the new school) and I was like 'is this a college?' All of the schools look like that and I'm like 'why have I never been over here before?' And even interestingly, I've never heard of Chik Fil-A before I had moved over there. And so I was just immersed into this new world. So I just realized that my education level, even though we're in the same grade, same age, theirs was a heck of a lot higher than mine was. So I had to start over almost.

She discussed in great detail how she could see the stark differences in the two schooling environments. She expressed that when she talks to her friends from her old neighborhood that many times they are not able to really relate to the educational experiences and opportunities Ashley had been afforded since moving, like having the opportunity to study abroad in Spain for six months. She was able to conclude that the educational gap between her old friends and her was attributed to "exposure." In her new

environment she was exposed to different opportunities and these are opportunities she did not get when she was living in her old neighborhood:

I still talk to my friends back home and I'd see where the opportunities that I was getting, like studying abroad or going out of town for a field trip and the things that they were getting or the stuff I was learning and the stuff that they were learning was different. We are the same people, I'm no better than them, they're no better than me and so I watched over time as I got older, we graduated from high school and the places I'm going and the places I've seen and I think it's all about, what I've realized, it's about exposure. I didn't get that exposure living in my old neighborhood. So moving over there, everyone has grown up like this. They have seen a heck of a lot more than I have seen so I think the main difference between people is what surrounds you. An example is I was looking for an internship 2 summers ago and I was in a predominantly white neighborhood and so my neighbor was like 'oh hey, give me your resume. I can shoot it to my friend.. CEOs and stuff like that and that would have never happened to me over there. So...you know...

This experience really impacted how Ashley thought about the inequities in our schooling system and it has shaped how she thinks about education and access. So much so that wants to some how give back to Black communities:

I think right now I'm looking to see what I can do for the Black communities. I feel that we should not have to move outside of our communities to get the same education as everybody else. So one, I would want my kids to feel comfortable around their surroundings but also at the same time I think me switching from all Black to all white kind of prepared me for the real world. You know, for the jobs that I want because I'm not always going to be surrounded by people who look like me. So I think that that change does help but at the same time I think everybody deserves the same quality of education. But if I can't have it by the time I have kids then I will move to a place that has better education. And people didn't have the opportunity I had like my parents to move. You know, they didn't have the finances to do that so they were stuck there. Not because they wanted to be there but they had to be and I don't think that's fair for anybody.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades Ashley said that the people at her school would describe her as the "sporty girl." She was on the debate team, played varsity basketball, participated in track and field and anticipated going on to a Division I basketball program once she

completed high school. Her mother, however, who did not want Ashley to be an athlete and derailed that dream. She explains:

So basketball was my main focus. But I really didn't feel like my mom supported me in that just, because she didn't like that type of stuff, so she made it known she didn't support me with the whole basketball thing, so I got out of basketball and I did drill team and I was, yeah. I did dance from Pre-K all the way up to whenever. So I knew she'd like that so I was like 'okay let me do some dancing and whatever'.

Looking for her mother's approval, Ashley gave up on her dream, quit playing basketball and joined the drill team. To leave basketball was really hard, because her whole life was basketball and her friends were other basketball players. When she joined the drill team, her reputation as the sporty girl changed. She commented, "So going to the whole 'girly-girl' thing you know, it was a different scene." During this time, Ashley was trying to come to terms with her identity as bisexual. When she tried to have a conversation with her parents about why she didn't have a boyfriend, she could see that her parents would never be open to her living as a lesbian or bisexual woman. In high school she maintained a secret relationship with a girl who is still apart of her life today. Throughout Ashley's narrative is the story of a young woman trying to negotiate her own life goals and decisions while at the same time balancing the wishes of her family and the needs of a longtime girlfriend.

Once Ashley was fully transitioned to the drill team, she also decided that she wanted to perform better academically. She noticed that both the school's valedictorian and salutatorian were on the drill team and she felt that if they could do it then she could do it. So she buckled down:

So there were only three Black girls on the team including myself. And so then, I didn't realize it, that the first person in my class, the valedictorian, she was on the same drill team as me and the second person in the class also on the drill team and I'm like 'okay if y'all can do that, I know who I am and you know better than me,

you may be a tad bit smarter, but I shouldn't be where I am. I should be making these grades if you're doing it.' We're on the same practice schedule and so something clicked for me and said 'if you're getting into Harvard why can't I do that too?' And so... As high school progressed, so junior and senior year I'm like 'I need to get on it'. And I think, accompanied with my mom and my dad always being on my butt like 'get your homework done, blah blah blah blah blah.' And at the time I wasn't listening to them but a combination of that and seeing other people, same as me, doing better than I was, you know, I had to get my stuff together and buckled down. So I think junior and senior year people would've classified me as like "most likely to succeed" because of the stuff I did. Something clicked for me after having my mom and my dad on my butt for so long and seeing that...

While her transition from varsity basketball to drill team seemed to be a very unfair and unfortunate circumstance, her transition forced her to find a new identity in high school that was geared more toward academics and academic achievement. This new mindset positioned her well, just in time to have some great opportunities in higher education.

With her National Achievement Scholar designation and performing within the top 25% of a large competitive high school, Ashley was admitted into an Ivy League school and a large public university in California. She also caught the attention of two private institutions, one in Texas and one on the East Coast although she had never applied to those institutions. Initially she was interested in The University of Texas at Austin, but because many of her high school peers would be attending there the next fall she wanted to do something different:

Okay so it was between two private schools. And the private on the East Coast gave me a full ride and my parents are more than capable of paying so I've been blessed with financial-able parents. But for me, I've always been a little different in regards to my parents' money. I think, well I know for a fact that some people in my shoes would be a lot more dependent, but for me I've always been a little different in that area like I want to make sure I can save my parents money or I want to make my own. So I said okay let me go with this full ride here at the private school on the East Coast. And also I wanted to be on the East Coast. ...

At her new school on the East Coast Ashley met life long friends and had some good time, but she was unchallenged and looking for more. She described the student body as mediocre and she likened the curriculum to that of which she experienced in high school:

I didn't feel challenged, it was too small, it was a small Catholic school and I didn't care about the Catholic part. But it was just too small and I didn't have to study. I didn't have to do anything. I had friends there, I loved my friends but I didn't feel challenged. I felt like everybody there was mediocre and I didn't want to be surrounded by mediocre people because I think over time you spend enough time around people doing one sort of thing in life and not really having, you know high goals for themselves, I think you start to adapt that and I felt that that was not for me. So I wanted to go to a place where I felt like I could be challenged.

Seeking more of a challenge and wanting to be closer to home she eventually applied and transferred to The University of Texas at Austin. When she was probed on whether she was happy that she chose to attend The University of Texas at Austin, she replied:

No. Because it was between U.T. and St. Johns. And again, I put myself in the position of should I save my parents' money and they're not asking me to do that so I shouldn't listen to them. Or go to St. Johns, which is in New York. So at the time, I had a relationship here in Texas so it was long distance. And I think the best decision was to save my parents' money and I like UT, so I thought, so I'll come back to Texas. But now I kind of regret it. I had this vision of what UT was going to be and I was thinking the football games because my old school didn't have a football team. So I had this idea of football games and just, Texas. So you know, being in the Northeast you miss your people and so I'm like okay. For some reason, I thought a little about diversity. If I did drill team and a lot of my friends from drill team goes here so it would be an easy pick up. But it wasn't, its not. Coming here made me realize how much diversity I had at my old school or how much there was at St. Johns that I'm missing here. So yeah it's not what I expected.

Currently Ashley is majoring in the humanities, doing well and her post graduation plans are to work on Wall Street in the finance sector, where she has already been offered a summer internship.



## **MONIQUE**

Originally from a large Texas city, Monique were born to Caribbean immigrant parents. When Monique was seven years old her parents separated and eventually divorced. Monique's dad would move back to the Caribbean. Her mother made the tough decision that she and her sister should move to live with their dad while she took some time to get back on her feet. This would include her going back to school to complete her physical therapy degree. Monique described going to see her dad every summer as something she and he sister looked forward to and then one summer she went to visit her dad as she always did, but this time her mother did not send for them to come back to Texas:

My mom kind of tricked us into it because normally every summer we would go and visit him. Then one summer we just didn't go back home and she started sending all our stuff. I cried every day for the first month when I realized I'm going to school here. I was like, "Okay Daddy, are we going to the airport now?" He was like, "No Steffi, you're going to be here for awhile." Then my mom explained to me ... After her and my dad separated she realized she had to go back to school. When my dad was there she didn't work. She just stayed home and took care of us. She went back to school to finish her physical therapy degree so she could provide for us. That's what she did and when she was done we went back.

For the next four years of her life she would live and go to school in the Caribbean. Although she was unhappy in the beginning about living in the Caribbean full-time, she later grew to love living there. She identified this time in her life as the time where she grew the most spiritually and acquired many of the values and ideals she lives by today. At eleven Monique's mother was ready for Monique and her sister to come back to Texas.

Once she was back in Texas, she immediately noticed that there were differences between the schools she attended in the Caribbean and those in Texas. Monique described her previous schools as being very strict, which trickled down and produced

disciplined students. Back in Texas she expressed being shocked that the students “talked back” to the adults and had somewhat of a disregard for their educational experience. Because of how she was raised in the Caribbean she was very reserved, quiet and focused in school:

I was a more reserved person. I was really shocked by how children were acting when I came back. In the Caribbean we were so disciplined. You couldn't talk back to a teacher or administrator. You did what you had to do because you didn't want to get in trouble. If you did, then that was another story. I was really surprised. I was really reserved. I did my work.

Monique’s reserved demeanor followed her through middle school on into high school. She admitted that part of her meekness was due to being bullied in middle school and into her early years of high school. Monique attended a predominantly African American high school in a large Texas city. She explained that her time immersed in the Caribbean culture molded her into a very confident and self-assured young woman, but that she was mistaken and singled-out as being “stuck up” and “high sady” when she returned to Texas:

I had some conflict when I came back. Girls thought I was really stuck up. I ran into that a lot. All my friends who I became really close friends with, when they first met me then they were like, “Steffi, I would have never known this is how you really are. You just walk like you're so high and mighty, you think you're all that.” I was just like, "I don't know why I give off that impression but I'm really not. I'm just going about my business.

Her last couple of years in high school Monique was a bit more social because she had found a small group of friends who were very close. She was involved on campus playing volleyball and running track. She was also in a fashion club and served as both a junior and senior class officer.

Her junior year, Monique had a brief scare when she found a lump in her breast. She kept the secret to herself, because she was afraid of it compromising her college dreams. She was emotional when recalling this time in her life:

To be honest, I didn't think I was going to make it to see college because during my junior year I found a lump in my left breast and knowing my history in my family, I had my aunt who was diagnosed with breast cancer and she fought it and she beat it. My cousin was diagnosed with breast cancer as well and she fought it and she beat it. I was just so scared. I was like, "What if I do have breast cancer and what if I don't beat it? Am I going to make it to see college?" I was discouraged from that, and plus school had got really tough. I was in all AP classes and I knew that if I applied to any school in the state of Texas I would get in because I was in the top 10% of my class. I also really wanted to go to LSU at first because back when I was a freshman and sophomore, my mom sent me to summer camps at LSU. It was this engineering summer camp and I would stay there for 2 weeks and do all kinds of engineering projects and I really liked it.

Monique would live with this lump through the rest of high school.

When it was time to apply for college, Monique applied to Louisiana State University to major in engineering, the University of Houston, Texas A&M University, and The University of Texas at Austin in engineering and environmental sciences. After a campus visit, Monique was convinced to come to The University of Texas at Austin even though they did not offer her enough money. For her, taking out student loans to support her education at The University of Texas at Austin was worth it. That fall she arrived to campus and decided to tell her mother about lump she had been living with for about a year and a half:

I found the lump and didn't want to tell her. I don't know why I thought I should keep this from her but I was going off to college and I was like, "Am I really going to go or am I even going to make it?" After I got here, shortly after I got here, I called her one day. I was like, "Mom, don't be mad at me, please." I told her. She was like, "Come home and we're going to the doctor and you're going to get an X-ray, do all that." So I did. This was towards Christmas. It was towards Christmas break.

The results revealed that the lump was non- life threatening. Monique was relieved. Currently she is majoring in an applied field. Her post graduation plans are to go to graduate school to study epidemiology and health promotion.

## **PRINCESS**

Born in a small rural town in Texas, Princess is the youngest of three girls. She had the fortunate benefit of growing up with both her loving parents who cared a great deal about her education and about her going on to college one day. Princess was influenced a great deal by her two older sisters. She always wanted to be with them, which caused her to grow up too quickly:

Since my sisters were older, when I hit a certain age, of course I wanted to be around them a lot. Any time they would go out, I wanted to go and my mom tried to keep me home as much as she could, but at a certain age there was really nothing ... there was, she could have kept me home, but she just started letting me go with them more. Because of that, I feel like I grew up too fast. Whatever they were doing, I was doing as well.

Attending a very small high school, Princess was very popular. Most of her friends were seniors when she was only a freshman in high school. Since she hung out with her sisters, their friends were her friends. In hindsight she now regrets hanging around with older people because she grew up too fast and she blamed her sisters. Once her sisters graduated from high school, she began to have her own identity. She did a lot of things just because her sisters were doing them:

At that age, I was just following them, doing whatever they were doing, but when my sisters graduated, I had to start learning things for myself and ... I don't know how to word it ... I guess becoming my own identity instead of theirs and a reflection of what I saw them as and just becoming myself.

In high school Princess was involved in several sports: captain of the volleyball team, point guard for basketball, on all the relays in track and field and ended her senior year as

a state finalist, and made a regional appearance in tennis. She was also captain of the cheerleading squad, a member of the National Honors Society (NHS). To round things out she served as the senior class president. In high school she maintained a 4.0 GPA and eventually graduated third in her class.

For college Princess wanted to attend a historically Black college or university (HBCU) over attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). Her heart was set on Spelman College, but her mother objected because of the distance. In addition Princess applied to Texas Southern University and Prairie View A&M University. After some nudging she was convinced by her best friend and her older sister to apply to The University of Texas at Austin:

I definitely wanted to go to a big, all Black school. Of course I didn't go to Spelman because of the distance from my mom and ... I got accepted into Texas Southern, but it was ... and the only reason I applied here was because my best friend was coming here and my sister had already lived here, because at the time she was still attending HT. It was nothing personal that made me want to come here, it was just them two. I just applied. When the acceptance letters came, it was like ... and other girls in my class, they had applied to Texas Southern as well and they got accepted, so I was like ... I want to be different. I feel like it's bad to say, but coming here will look better on paper when I go to get a job and things like that.

Once she received all of her acceptance letters, she ultimately choose The University of Texas at Austin, because she wanted to do something different from her other friends in high school who were all going to Texas Southern University and she also thought that coming to UT would “look better on paper.” Other than that she did not have any other particular reasons for applying and attending The University of Texas at Austin. When she made her big announcement to her teachers and other school officials. She felt that she got a variety of reactions. Most of them were positive but one reaction from a teacher stood out most to her:

I remember a teacher, my senior year, he told me it's one thing to get accepted into UT and a whole other thing to graduate. I'm waiting to get my degree to take it to him, but I not sure he's there anymore, so he's the first person I want to go find when I graduate.

This particular interaction made Princess feel as though she had something to prove to naysayers. There were other moments in her experience where she sited similar encounters. The running theme of her interviews was about the pressure to succeed and prove to people that she could get her college degree from The University of Texas at Austin. Now, Princess is in her third year and she is currently majoring in the humanities with a minor in an applied field, with post graduation plans to pursue a graduate degree in social work with a focus on relationship counseling and working troubled teen girls.

#### **CELESTE**

Raised in a single parent household in a large Texas city. Celeste had to grow up really fast. Because she was the oldest of all her siblings she was charged with the responsibility of helping her mother raise her brothers and sisters. Her mother had to work a lot to support the family so she became a mother figure to her siblings. She describes her relationship with her siblings as motherly as opposed to just being their big sister. While Celeste took on a leadership role early in life she missed out on a lot as a young girl. No one was around to raise Celeste, so she made some poor choices that are still impacting her today.

Despite what was happening at school Celeste was quite the personality in high school:

I got voted as the class clown in twelfth grade for the yearbook. I would just say my peers from high school they would say that I was real funny. I was in the choir. I was in dance. I was in a lot of sports. I was real interactive with everybody and everything. I won Miss [high school name], which is, I don't know, for homecoming. I don't know, I was just a fun person to be around. My teachers on the other hand ...

When asked how the faculty and staff from her high school would describe her she replied that in high school most of them might describe her as a “troublemaker,” “class clown,” etc... but that there were a few others that saw her as smart with the potential to be successful. She admitted to being on her best behavior with the teachers she liked and misbehaving with the teachers she did not like. The difference was that she could tell which teachers and administrators really believed in her and wanted the best for her and she could tell which teachers and administrators did not see much in her. She shared that she was suspended and chastised a lot in high school:

Most of my teachers considered me to be bad, I guess, so disrespectful and stuff. I just feel like they always tried to put me in this category as if I was a bad person. They used to always tell me, "Oh you ain't gonna never be nobody 'cause you got a bad attitude," and they just didn't understand. If the teacher pushed me to the point where I had to stand up for myself then that's what I would do. Sometimes I just felt like they tried to make me feel like I was stupid. Instead of helping me to understand what problems I was causing in the classroom they didn't, they'd just send me to the office. I got suspended often, but my mom didn't say anything, I didn't get in trouble for it, so I continued to do it if they made me mad. It was a way for me to not be at school. I could be at home so I was fine with it.

Despite the suspensions and bad reputation Celeste was still a top performer in her predominantly African American high school. Even though she liked having fun in class, she still did her work. In high school she was also involved in her school's gospel choir, “Madams,” basketball, softball, soccer, the National Honor Society, and student council. She was even voted “Miss High School” during the school's Homecoming celebration her senior year, which stirred up quite the controversy between the students and the school's staff. The students voted and the school staff did not agree that she should be “Miss High School”:

One teacher, who was never my teacher, just didn't like me. I don't know why. When I was on the committee, you know you have to, I guess, campaign and stuff to be “Miss High School” and she's like, "Oh ..." But it's based on the school, it's

school wide. They take the survey of who they want for whatever you was applying for. I won, but she was going to the administrative people or whatever and she was like, "No, she's not a good look for this school. She don't need to do this and she don't need to do that." It's not based off of that. It was based off of the poll, who won, who got the most votes. It was just little stuff like that.

During the same time that this Homecoming vote was taking place, Celeste was focusing on applying to college and she admitted to being worried about getting into colleges. Celeste was in the top 5% of her high school class, but her SAT was in the 700-800 point range. She knew that getting into out of state schools with that SAT score would be tricky. So she decided to apply to one historically Black college or university (HBCU), Xavier University, and one PWI, The University of Texas at Austin. The University of Texas offered her a spot and a need-based academic scholarship. Celeste was placed in an academic support program that was attached to the scholarship. Her first semester did not go well at all. She attributed her troubles to a bad advising experience from her academic support program mentor who advised her to register for classes she was unprepared for like Biology, Psychology and French:

We had a, I guess you could say advisor, but they didn't ... It just started off all wrong because they are the ones that made our schedules, well for the people that didn't know how to do it. I don't remember who it was, but whoever helped make my schedule put me in these classes that I didn't need for my major. It was a biology class, but it was not the basic biology class that I could of passed. They put me in French, and it's like, well I guess common sense will tell everybody else you go with the language that you took in high school, which I took Spanish. She just made it seem like, "Okay, it's going to be cool." I had to drop two classes and I think that semester, I don't remember what other classes I took. Oh yeah, I do remember. I know that I failed all but one of my classes. It wasn't because of them, but I failed it just because I failed it. It just made my GPA go low and I've been on academic probation since I've been here.

At the conclusion of her first semester she was placed on academic probation and after the following semester she would eventually be dismissed from university. Since then she has struggled to stay in "good standing" with the university and has a projected



graduation date of December 2015. Currently she is majoring in the humanities with a post graduation goal of going to graduate school in psychology in order to pursue a career in child psychology.

### **DANIELLE**

A North Texas native, Danielle grew up with her mother, father and two sisters. Both of her parents are college educated and in her family college is an expectation. Her mother is a registered nurse and her father who has a degree in biology has worked in sales for many years. Danielle's two sisters have degrees as well. Her middle sister has a degree from Texas A&M University and her oldest sister is a licensed vocational nurse. Her dad is a no non-sense motivator who often reminds her of the importance of finishing her degree. Her mother is more relaxed and is confident that Danielle is on the right path and will do what she is supposed to do. When Danielle was seven years old her mother and father divorced. The divorce impacted her and she spent her earlier years very sad about the separation between her mother and father:

But you know when you are 7, 8, 9 and you are a daddy's girl. Yes very much so and it was sad but I really am and so we had to deal with the whole go see one parent ever other weekend kind of thing so I would be with my mom one weekend and the next weekend I would be with my dad and they alternated weekends and my dad made sure he was still around... that was really important to him and so yeah he was always very "hey... its my weekend." I'm coming to get my girls like he was always, always there. Um if we had games or anything, I played basketball for a little while, my sister did too, when I started cheering he made sure... hey give me a schedule to your games so I can come so he's always been an integral part of me growing up despite them being divorced. So yeah I definitely appreciate that because he didn't have to do that and I know a lot of people who don't do that.

Although her parents are divorced she expressed that the family still remains close although her mother has remarried. Because of her family dynamic Danielle is extremely family-oriented. She acknowledges that her family is her biggest supporter. They have

been her motivators and best cheerleaders. In addition to her family, it was also very clear that her faith is a huge part of who she is and she uses it for comfort and motivation:

Faith has definitely shaped my life as well because without that background without some type of faith going I feel like I would be a little lost too. I feel like if I didn't have that it would be really hard to keep going some days. Even when my family can't completely fill that void of I need something pushing me or I need something to remind me that everything is going to be okay that I'm going to get through this that this is just a minor glitch in the plan.

In high school, Danielle attended a predominantly African American high school in a large Texas city. Her peers and the administrators at that school would describe her as sweet, well behaved, and well-mannered. She considered herself in the "top group of students" at her high school. She was active as a varsity cheerleader, in ROTC, Link Crew (mentor program), *Sophisticated Ladies* and she worked in the textbook room. She talked at length about her five friends that were the "top group of students" she kept referring to. Of the five friends, three are finishing college this year, one friend went to the military, and another left The University Texas at Austin their junior year after experiencing a sexual assault.

When it was time to consider colleges Danielle applied to Texas Christian University, Texas A&M University, The University of Texas at Austin and Texas State University. She had always wanted to attend The University of Texas at Austin:

Actually, I always wanted to be in Austin. I don't know where it came from. In all honestly I don't remember but I always talked about going to UT ever since my sophomore year in high school like "maybe I want to go to UT" Umm I don't remember why that happened, but I do remember being in class with a friend named David... He's at the Mizzou now and he just graduated actually, and he was a year older than me. He played football and he was of course getting all these football recruitment offers and stuff and he said I'm coming to UT with you and I was like OK David and so yeah ever since then UT has always been my set school. The only time I thought about not going is when I started to apply for a community scholarship through TCU and started going through the interview process and I was like well if I get a full ride I'm not going to turn it down. So

yeah, then after that didn't happened, I was like well I'm obviously supposed to be in Austin so lets do this.

Danielle began at UT in the fall of 2011. Currently she is a graduating senior majoring in an applied field with post graduation plans to immediately join the workforce. She plans to use that time to begin thinking about what she wants to study in graduate school. She is heavily considering pursuing a Ph.D.

### **ELLE**

One of five children, Elle was raised in a large Texas city by her biological mom and stepfather until the age of ten. Due to her parent's problem with drugs, she was placed in the foster care system for a while until her great aunt adopted her:

Um well, like I said when I was 10 my mom began to heavily use drugs and began to neglect me and my siblings and I think it was my aunt who she was concerned and she contacted CPS but wasn't aware that they would take us. So we were placed in CPS for a few months or so and then were placed in the care of my great aunt and were later adopted by her. It was a tough time. Yeah it was interesting to say the least.

She considered this experience as the pivotal life moment that has shaped her into who she is today. This experience made her stronger and more aware of differences. She also expressed that it made her vulnerable in certain circumstances, especially in the area of trust. Her choice to study social work had everything to do with her early childhood experiences.

Elle attended high school on the north side of large Texas City and described herself as really quiet and withdrawn the first two years of high school. These were years of self-discovery and transformation for her. The first student organization she joined in high school was the "Madams," a service and social club founded in 1960. Their mission is to positively impact the lives of teenage girls through: Building self-esteem, preparing them for the future, providing services to the community, being positive examples and

mentors and helping the club flourish. She was able to find sisterhood in that organization that then led to her joining other student organizations, doing the school's morning announcements and soon after she was described as the student who was "so smart and involved in everything." At the end of high school, Elle, the shy freshman, was named "Miss Congeniality" at her senior prom.

When she was preparing for college she was not deterred by cost. Because she was in the foster care system, she could go to school tuition free. In addition, she accumulated over \$76,000 in additional scholarship money. \$40,000 of that was all from one essay she wrote about her mom and her past life. The ability to pocket that money created a very comfortable quality of life for Elle while pursuing her education:

That money made all the difference for me. I was able to pretty much go through all four years here and never had to ask my aunt or anyone for that matter to help me. That gave me a real sense of pride to not have to ask my family for something I already know that they would not be able to provide.

After securing the funds to attend any college she wanted to she started looking at several historically Black college or universities (HBCU) like Dillard University, Clark Atlanta University, Spelman University and Xavier University. When it was all said and done Elle only ended up applying to one college, which was The University of Texas at Austin. Initially, The University of Texas at Austin was not her first choice, because she was concerned about the class sizes at such a large institution. Elle felt she would need to go somewhere where she could get more individualized attention. One day the Longhorn Scholars Program (LOS) came to her high school for a recruiting visit and in her words, "They were great! They did their job." They were so influential that Elle changed her mind about attending The University of Texas at Austin. Currently Elle is a graduating senior with a degree in an applied field. Her post graduation plans will be to pursue a dual masters degree in public policy and social work.

## **GRACE**

The youngest of three children, Grace was born in a little country town right outside of Dallas, Texas. She grew up with her mother, father and two sisters. At the tender age of four, her parents divorced. As a result of the divorce, Grace's mother received custody of she and her sisters. This caused great tension between her mother and father, because her father was determined to not be a "weekend dad":

When they got divorced my mother got custody of me. My mother had custody of all 3 of us. She had a lot of traumatic experiences because my dad was convinced that he wasn't going to be just a weekend dad, he was going to be in our lives even if it meant tearing down my mother in the mean time. That's what he did.

One day Grace's mother decided to move to California and she did not tell Grace's father. When he finally did discover that they had moved, he was furious and trucked his way to California to retrieve two of the three children. Grace's sisters went back with their father and because Grace was not old enough to decide, she stayed in California with her mother. This would be the beginning of a tumultuous custody battle over Grace. The older two sisters had determined that they wanted to love with their dad, but Grace was too young to make an educated decision about which parent she would rather be with. So she stayed behind with her mother, but that did not mean that her dad wanted her to be with her mother permanently.

In South Central Los Angeles, life was unstable for a year. They spent a significant part of that year in a shelter and the rest of the time moving in and out of relatives' homes. At the end of the year in California, Grace and her mother moved back to North Texas to help care for Grace's ailing great grandmother. Once she was back home she started spending weekends with her dad again. One weekend her dad kidnapped her and hid her from her mother. At the time at such a young age, she thought she was on vacation with her dad:

When we moved back, my dad came to pick me up. It was supposed to be a weekend visit but he ended up kidnapping me and taking me to his house. I found out now, I thought I was on vacation but I was being hid from my mother so she couldn't find me so he could sue her and get custody of me. He took me to his wife's sister's house and left me there while my mother was looking for me.

Grace's father ultimately won custody of she and her sisters. Grace likened the custody battle to something like a smear campaign against her mother. Grace described the claims her father made against her mother. He said that she was psychologically unfit and unemployed. Once her mother was able to gather enough money to hire a lawyer, Grace's father "tricked" her into signing a statement about living with her dad:

Then he began to sue my mother and at the time she didn't have money to have proper representation. She finally got the money together to fight him in court and get custody of me. He always made more money than her, he works for the post office. He sat me down one day and was like, "Hey..." In the meantime, I had no idea any of this was going on. I was in the 3rd grade at this time, so I had no idea what was going on. I just know I'm going from house to house and I'm like, "Cool, this is fun." He sat me down around the table and was like, "Do you enjoy living with me? Do you like living over here?" I was like, "Yeah, of course. I love my dad." He was like, "I just need you to sign this form saying you like living over here." I was like, "Okay." I'll sign the form. Come to find out that was a form saying I wanted to live with my dad and fighting everything my mom could bring to court because he had my signature saying I wanted to live with him. I had no idea. She had spent all her money trying to get a lawyer. That's when everything started going downhill. She was tore up. She was like, "Why would you do that?" Of course I was young, I didn't know. She was just broken hearted because the situation happened.

Grace's dad ended up with sole custody of Grace and her sister and she lived with her father until she finished high school. The separation from her mom affected her a great deal. Today she has some resentment towards her dad, but she is torn because he was a great dad to her:

I have a lot of resentment with my dad because I didn't always know what happened with my mom. As I started to find out more of how much he put her through to try to be in my life, it was a lot. It still is a lot. This is all new since I've been in college. She's never felt comfortable telling me everything that happened. I found out when they were in court he tried to make her seem like an unfit

mother, like she was mentally unstable. All kinds of stuff like that. Realizing all the stuff he did to her, but also realizing he did it to make sure he could be in my life is this weird, awkward correlation. I think the most difficult point in all of that was my mom, she lived in a lot of regret of not being able to raise me. I felt a lot of that. Every time I talked to her I could hear her saying how bad she wanted to be there and all this. It was just difficult.

In high school Grace was very successful and active despite everything that was going on in her personal life. She attended a competitive magnet school in North, Texas. When asked how people would describe her in high school, she said that she was a leader and that her Christianity set her apart from everyone else:

I was definitely a leader in high school. I know it's mostly because of my Christianity, it made me so different from people that I just stood out in that aspect. I stayed on top of my grades because I was so scared of my dad. That's what pushed me to do a lot with school, was the fear of my dad. I was a good student for pretty much all of high school. I never was in any drama or any trouble or anything. I remember one boyfriend I had, and I got caught kissing him in the hallway and the teachers were like, ... It was the end of the world for me because they would never expect that from me or want anything like that. I don't know how to put it into words, but I definitely was never in trouble or anything like that. Always doing my best to be a leader in my classes and organizations.

Her grades were really important to her because she feared her dad. She was in the top 5% of her class and she was involved in several campus organizations: she was student council vice president, National Honors Society member, Ambassadors Club, captain of the drill team/band, a member of the Business Professionals Association where she was voted Ms. Business Management Center, and participated in DECA. Because of who she was in high school she was voted "Most Likely to Succeed" by her peers.

When Grace got ready to go to college her heart was set on going to Clark Atlanta University, but they lost her application. She was also considering Baylor and The University of Texas at Austin. She did get into Baylor, but her drill team coach was key in helping her decide not to attend Baylor:

I applied to Baylor but my drill team coach discouraged me from going to Baylor and their small scholarship package. My drill team coach, she sat me down with the most serious face I've ever seen her with. She said, "If you go to Baylor, you are not going to be able to fight off racism."

In addition Baylor did not give her enough money to attend. The University Texas at Austin ended up becoming her top choice for several reasons: her mother and sister had recently moved to Austin to begin a career with the IRS and she thought it might be cool to finally be close to her mother. Secondly, she went on a campus visit and she loved it, even though she visited on a cold and rainy day. Lastly, the icing on the cake was that they gave her scholarships to attend. With that she chose to attend The University of Texas at Austin. Currently, she is a senior, applied field major. Her post graduation plans are to pursue a graduate degree in social policy and social work and ultimately get a Ph.D.

#### **REBECCA**

Rebecca was born in West Africa and is from a family of seven. Her mother is a homemaker and her father is an engineer. She has a twin brother who is a student at an HBCU, an older brother who is now deceased, and two older sisters who are living in other parts of the United States. As a young child Rebecca and her family moved a lot due to her father's upward mobility as an engineer. Their first move was from West Africa to Europe. At first her father moved to Europe alone and left the family behind so he could make a home for his family. Soon after Rebecca's father sent for the family and they too moved to Europe. Soon after her father's job sent them all the way to a suburb of a large Texas city. Rebecca had an interesting way of describing her family and how these moves have shaped the way the family sees the world:

Our life has been very interesting. We are very West African, but we're also very American. Like there's a dual nature in our family. I think maybe it's because we are born in West African but we didn't live there for that long. I think my sister



has the most memory of West Africa because she went to school there. One thing I've seen in a lot of people is that if you lived in America for a long time, you identify more as being American or strictly Black. I think that in my family, there is a very strong sense of "Americaness." We're very interested in pop culture and we're very up to date of what's going on in the country, but because our parents are traditional, pretty traditional West Africans, we can never get away from that. We talk about being back home a lot, and we speak in African accents when we're together, and we eat African food all the time, so it's not like we're completely American.

This would be the first of a few times that Rebecca would identify dual aspects to her life. Rebecca attended a large predominantly white high school. She was an artsy student and she admits that she took some Pre AP/AP courses, but did not take all Pre AP/AP courses. She hated math and science, so for those courses she took the regular advanced options. When asked how her peers and the schools administrators would describe her she replied:

It would vary, depending on which class I was. I was an AP honor student, but there are times when ... Some classes I had to take, I guess, advanced or regular classes because I'm not really good at math, I don't like science. All of the arts, I was in all these classes, but when I was in my advanced classes or my regular classes, I didn't know any of the people, so I wasn't very talkative. I was doing my work and I guess they saw a different type of work ethic that would be reflective of an honor student. So, a lot of people are like, "Oh, she's really smart and I don't know why she's so quiet," but the people in my honors classes would never describe me as being quiet because I knew them so well from being the same classes with them from elementary school all the way up to high school. Teachers, depending on which classes, would either describe me as being really quiet or being really, not rowdy, but talkative...

She went on to describe how her friends and honors class teachers would also describe her as outgoing. She also spoke about this experience as a duality because of her ability to move back and forth into different spaces and for people to not really know how to categorize her. Rebecca was a Top 10% student who was active in three honors societies: National Honors Society, the Spanish Honors Society, and the English Honors Society.

She also participated in a group called Invisible Children, volunteered in a student chapter of Habitat for Humanity and she was a member of the school's drama club.

When it was time to go to college Rebecca's top choices were The University of Texas at Austin, Notre Dame, University of Southern California and Pepperdine University. She also applied to some other Texas public institutions as alternative schools. Her top choice was The University of Texas at Austin, because she wanted to follow in her older sister's footsteps. She admired her sister's college experience at The University of Texas and wanted her experience to be just like that:

Our sister right above us, she attended UT from 2007 to 2011, so we were very involved in her college life because she was an RA and she was always doing stuff. She was really involved and she loved UT. I always wanted to have the college experience that was really fun and engaging because I never had school spirit when I was in high school, so I wanted to change that. UT seemed like a great place for someone to grow as a person and to be really involved. Probably, in 2008 was when I decided I really wanted to come to UT. Everything that I did from that point on was so that I could get into UT.

Currently, Rebecca is a graduating senior in an applied field, but her experience has been nothing like she thought it would be. Out of nowhere Rebecca said, "I think, honestly, that if I could go back in time, I would have gone somewhere else just because I think that UT is totally not what I thought it would be." Up until this point as a senior she has not been happy with her decision to attend The University of Texas at Austin. She had thought about transferring, but was afraid of going through all of that work and possibly not being happy where ever she landed, so she resolved to make the most of the rest of the time she had at UT. Her post-graduation plans are to pursue a doctoral degree in media studies with hopes of becoming a Ph.D. and academic possibly at a historically Black college or university or somewhere that is different from The University of Texas at Austin.

## **SHEILA**

Sheila is the only University of Texas at Austin legacy of all of the participants in this study. Both of her parents are alumni of The University of Texas at Austin and she had an older sister who graduated from The University of Texas at Austin as well. Sheila is from a middle class suburb of a large Texas city where for many years she was the only Black child or one of couple in school. Her mother worked up until she was five years old, but has been a homemaker since then and her dad is a fireman with the fire department. Sheila's parents really emphasized education and its importance. They knew that where they lived may present some problems for Sheila and her sisters as they matriculated through school so her dad in particular starting having conversations with them very early:

Education is definitely, the value of it, instilled from very early on. Even the racial component in that, my parents obviously knew given where we lived that most of the time I would probably be one of if not few Black students in the class. The expectation being higher in that you're going to have to work twice as hard to get half as far. My dad was, he really didn't sugar coat that at all. My dad's not one to sugar coat a lot of things and that was one, even at an early age, he didn't. Even in early elementary school, we got the race talks and there was no filter within those. This is how it is. It's going to be like this even when you get older, so here's what you need to do on this end. Adapt to it.

The only other thing just as or more important than education was their faith. The emphasis that her parents put on education and faith single handedly shaped Sheila into who she is today. She jokingly shared that the two things that would really get you in trouble in her house were if you were acting up in church and/or in school:

I saw how religion can shape the day-to-day grind in life for the better. I think where a lot of people would see it in the home life and get embittered toward religion, I had the opposite experience. I would say that was a big shaping, molding factor. Also with that, the fact that the only thing that was almost on par with that was education, so they instilled in us very strongly, even from very early, the importance of education and acting right. Acting right in the classroom. The biggest thing that would get you in trouble in my house was acting up in

church or at school. I got a call home. One of my teachers called home one time and that was the one time in my life I got spankings from both parents in the same day.

All of her schooling prior to college was in majority white schooling environments. When Sheila was growing up, the city of was experiencing great growth as well. Because the city was building new schools and institutions to keep up with the influx of new residents it turned out that she ended up going to all brand new schools at every single transition. For example, her elementary school was brand new when she enrolled. When she went to middle school, she attended a brand new school and the same went for high school:

My age lined up with the town's growth so one of the results of that was that I actually ended up going to brand new schools for every transition. Elementary, middle school, junior high, high school were all brand new schools. With that came stuff like good teachers, brand new textbooks, new equipment. All the stuff that a new school has that the district gives it so it can start well. Had I would say a very good experience with teachers. Always had ... I only had maybe one experience of having a teacher that was an actual bad teacher. I might not have liked all of them, but at least the teaching quality was good when I was growing up.

She also recalled being the only one or one of two Black students in all of her classroom experiences. In high school she was in a brand new resource-rich high school and she described her experience as “token-like.” She expressed that she experienced micro-aggressions committed against her in high school very often, but never any blatant racism:

In terms of in school ... I probably had a lot of the token experiences. Everything from being called the N word to those awkward moments in Uncle Tom's Cabin where it comes up and you have those kids who are a little too eager to say it in English class. Or when I was in high school, Obama got elected my sophomore year, so that was very interesting. You saw, I don't know if I want to say a different side of white friends because that implies that they were all racist, but you definitely saw an added layer that until then kind of was swept under the rug. I don't think anything was ever bad enough to make me bitter in regards to race. I

think part of that was because there was always other races around. I was always a minority unless we went to church. My parents went to a Black church, so that was really the only time while I was around only Black people. Outside of that, I was always a minority. I was always used to it. Then my best friend growing up was white. You know that not all white people are like that because you have experiences when people aren't. Then ... A lot that I can identify with is more the micro-aggressions as opposed to blatant racism outside of being called the N word.

In high school Sheila was in the top 25% of her high school class and her teachers would describe her as quiet, driven, and smart. Sheila did not have a specific peer group that she hung out with on a regular basis; rather she just floated between groups. She took all Pre AP/AP courses and she was active in clubs and organizations in high school: volleyball, band, a Christian organization, the National Honors Society and a medical shadowing program. When it was time to decide where she would attend college her choices were dependent upon cost, because she knew her parents would not be able to contribute much. She submitted applications to The University of Texas at Austin, Baylor University, The University of Houston, Texas Tech University, The Ohio State University, and UNC Chapel Hill. She was accepted to the Ohio State University, but the cost was too substantial. She also got into all of the Texas schools and The University of Texas at Austin offered her a place with the Coordinate Admissions Program (CAP)<sup>4</sup>. Since she really wanted to be at The University of Texas at Austin, she opted to attend another UT system school as a part of the CAP program, and then transferred to The University of Texas at Austin her sophomore year. Now Sheila is a graduating senior with a degree in the humanities, with post graduation plans to begin working fulltime.

---

<sup>4</sup> The University of Texas System developed the Coordinated Admission Program (CAP) to expand the admission options available to students interested in enrolling at The University of Texas at Austin, the System's flagship university. If a Texas resident student is not eligible for admission, some students may be offered the CAP program, which will allow them to automatically transfer into The University of Texas at Austin after they complete 30 hours of approved coursework and maintain a 3.2 grade point average.

## TONI

Like many of the other participants Toni grew up in a large Texas city with her mother, father and sister. Toni is of mixed heritage, where her father is African American and her mother is Mexican American. Her sister from a previous marriage is Mexican American. Without probing, Toni immediately asserted that while she is biracial that her African American identity is more salient and she identifies more readily as African American. Toni describes her experiences and family's experience as being mostly influenced by Black culture. Toni's early education began in a neighborhood preschool where the majority of the students were African American. For middle school her mother and father decided to diversify her school experience. She ended up applying to middle school on the other side of town. She describes this as one of the pivotal moments in her life, because up to that point she had only been in predominantly Black schooling environments. Her new school was truly a diverse experience and all students who went there had to apply. No one was zoned to that particular school. She describes her experiences:

I went to a school called Westover Brook Village, it's in an urban area. Which is also where I went to high school. You know mostly Black, you know school, you know we had a few Asian students. We had a few white students. But it was mostly Black and then I ended up going to this really uh diverse middle school called Pine Brook which was in a really super nice part of the city. And, I think that was like the first pivotal moment because you know, obviously I'd only been to school with like mostly other Black kids and at Pine Brook it was only uh it was a school where you can only get in if you applied but so you couldn't be zoned there so everybody was smart, you know, we all had to apply to get there but it was like, it was like, legit 30% Black, 30% white, like 15% Asian, and just super super diverse. And it was some of the best years of my life I was only like 10, 11, 12 but it was great because like no one could really like talk down on nobody cause "oh you you're, you know, you're not that smart because your Black or because your from a certain area" like we were all smart. So I had plenty of friends from like a legit wide range of places (breaths deeply) and then I went to this high school called St. Elizabeth it was like the number 2 high school in the city. You know you had to apply to get in and that was a different environment

because it was like 85-90% white um I think in my freshman class there were probably only, there were probably less than 25 Black freshman.

Toni really enjoyed this experience. She commented that her time in middle school was where she grew the most. Because of everything that she had gained through her middle school experience she believed St. Elizabeth would give her the same or an even better experience. It ended up being a vastly different experience from what she had in middle school. Because it was a college prep campus she expressed that she felt as if she went straight from middle school to college. Toni admitted that she was not ready and that she went from being an “A” student to making C’s and D’s. Towards the end of her freshman year in high school she began thinking that she did not want to stay there. She wasn’t doing well and she wanted to be somewhere where she could be successful. That summer, before she had a chance to express these thoughts to her parents, her dad was diagnosed with stage 4 lymphoma cancer. This was a particular difficult time for Toni and her family. Their financial circumstance drastically changed:

And so the summer, but, but then, the summer after my 9th grade year, my dad got diagnosed with cancer, with stage 4 lymphoma and it’s the most advanced form. So he started getting chemotherapy treatments and with that came, you know, we were affected uh financially so like we had to give up a lot of stuff like we had to cut off our cable. We had to cut off our phones—like cell phone bill. Um, sometimes we wouldn’t have enough money to like go get groceries. So I remember, at least twice, um, me and my mom had to go to the food bank to like go get food. You know, so that we could go eat. But, its funny cause my mom, like she always had too much pride to like go apply for food stamps. She’s like na, you know, you know, we don’t need that.

With all that was going on Toni’s mother decided to transfer her to a high school closer to her job because it was easier. It would save them time because they were spending most of their time at the hospital and money because she would not have to drive Toni back and forth across town for school.

When Toni changed schools, she ended up going from a predominantly white space, back to a predominantly Black school. She said that people would describe her as several things: a good girl, kind of weird, smart and extremely involved on campus. She took all Pre AP/AP courses, she was the class historian, she played softball, and she was in the choir. Given the influences in her neighborhood and everything that was happening around her she intentionally tried to make herself different and distance herself. At that time she liked heavy metal music and hardcore rock music. She wore beanies, Vans and a bunch of bracelets, which was a stark difference from everyone else that wore Jordan tennis shoes and only listened to rap music.

As a senior Toni was voted “Most Likely to Succeed” by her peers in high school. She was in the top 2% of her class, so she knew that she was guaranteed admission to any Texas public school. She narrowed her choices to four Texas universities: The University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University, The University of Houston and Texas Tech University. The first application she completed was The University of Texas at Austin. She was almost done with her Texas A&M and The University of Houston applications when her acceptance letter from The University of Texas at Austin came. In that moment she decided that she did not need to complete the other applications:

I was like well I mean I visited UT, I like the campus. I went to A&M I didn't really like the campus. I went to U of H it was alright, you know, it was you know second choice but UT already gave me this letter so I guess I'm going to UT and um yeah so after I got my acceptance letter I just stopped applying everywhere else because UT was like alright you in, cool.

Currently Toni is a graduating senior majoring in the humanities and her post graduation plans are to go to graduate school next fall in the Midwest to study Counseling Psychology. There she will train to be a researcher and academic.



## **SUMMARY**

The introductions along with Table 5 summarize the key characteristics of each participant. The eleven women in this study represent a variety of academic, cultural, geographical, and socioeconomic backgrounds while they share the same racial identity. This illustrates that while Black women are alike in some ways, there are many more aspects that make them different and non-monolithic. A few other characteristics about this group not mentioned above or in the table below include: 10 of the 11 participants are African American women and one participant was West African. The majority (8) of the participants are from the same large Texas city. While the other three were from other parts of the state, seven of the participants are first generation college students or first in their families to attend college. All but two participants said that their high schools did not prepare them for The University of Texas at Austin and that they had to “catch-up” or use additional services and resources to stay competitive at the university. While all of these students ended up at The University of Texas at Austin, for many of them The University of Texas at Austin was not their first choice. As a matter of fact, many of the participants cited historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as their first choices, but later opted for The University of Texas The University of Texas at Austin because of the perceived prestige and privilege associated with having a degree from there.

Exploring each young woman’s pre-college background was crucial to understanding how she navigated every day life at The University of Texas at Austin. Everything from their home environment, their primary and secondary school experiences and college choices provided a clearer picture of how they experience college as a Black woman. The following chapter will discuss how these women experience The University of Texas at Austin. The findings retrieved from the analysis of

22 interviews, a focus group and an observation will be presented and framed using the Black Feminist Thought and Intersectionality frameworks.

Table 5. Participants' Demographic Information

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Class</b>	<b>Area of Study</b>	<b>First generation Status</b>	<b>SAT Range</b>	<b>High School GPA/Current GPA</b>
Faith	20	Sophomore	Humanities	Yes	900-1000	3.5-3.8/2.2
Ashley	21	Junior	Humanities	No	1100-1200	3.5-3.8/3.0
Monique	20	Junior	Applied Field	Yes	900-1000	Above 4.0/3.0
Princess	21	Junior	Humanities	Yes	800-900	3.8-4.0/2.2
Celeste	21	Senior	Humanities	Yes	700-800	3.5-3.8/1.97
Danielle	22	Senior	Applied Field	No	1000-1100	3.5-3.8/2.4
Elle	22	Senior	Applied Field	Yes	1000-1100	3.8-4.0/3.4
Grace	21	Senior	Applied Field	Yes	1100-1200	3.5-3.8/3.5
Rebecca	22	Senior	Applied Field	No	1200-1300	3.5-3.8/3.1
Sheila	21	Senior	Humanities	No	1000-1100	3.3-3.5/3.3
Toni	22	Senior	Humanities	Yes	1100-1200	3.8-4.0/3.2

## **Chapter Five: Findings**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the salient themes of each research question that this study is based upon. The themes are the core essence of the lived experience of Black female students at The University of Texas at Austin. Creswell (2013) states that in phenomenological research the core essence is the central understanding of a shared experience among the participants. To frame the conversation, a reminder of the research questions are appropriate here: 1) What are the academic and social experiences of Black female college students at The University of Texas Austin? 2) What institutional structures promote or threaten Black female degree completion at The University of Texas at Austin? And 3) how do Black female college students' intersectional identities shape their experiences at The University of Texas at Austin? The first two questions and data will be analyzed within the *Black Feminist Thought* framework and the final research question and data will be analyzed within the *Intersectionality* framework.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION ONE**

This section focuses on the themes derived from the research question. "What are the academic and social experiences of Black female college students at The University of Texas at Austin?" The academic and social experiences of the participants were a significant part of how they felt about and how they related to being a student at The University of Texas at Austin. Positive academic and social experiences translated into higher confidence levels, higher levels of integrated activities and confirmation that they made the right decision to attend The University of Texas at Austin. Negative academic and social experiences translated into thoughts of being inadequate and some questioned whether or not they should continue their education at The University of Texas at Austin

or transfer to a “lesser” institution or to a historically Black college and university. The overwhelming majority of the participants reported having negative academic and social experiences. Data gathered from interviews and a focus group informed the analysis of this research question and four frequently mentioned themes were revealed: 1) academic challenges, 2) isolation, 3) faculty interaction and 4) racism/perceived racism.

### **Academic Challenges**

For this study negative academic experiences were synonymous with academic challenges. Almost every young woman expressed that she had been challenged academically at some point during her college career. Everyone except for one participant (Sheila) cited challenges in the first semester of their freshmen year and many of them continued to experience academic challenges well beyond their freshmen year. In general, the research shows that African American students who attend predominantly White colleges reported higher grades in high school, but lower college grades and less favorable relations with their professors (Allen, 1992, p. 37). All of the young women in this study (with the exception of one participant because she was a transfer student) were admitted into The University of Texas at Austin as top 10% graduates. In the state of Texas it is law that all Texas high school graduates who finish within the top 10% of their high school’s graduating class are eligible for admission into any public state institution of higher education (Texas House Bill 588). Approximately ninety percent of all students enrolled at The University of Texas at Austin are top 10% graduates, so it came as no surprise that the study participants had good grades and exceptional high school records. However, something happened when they began matriculating at The University of Texas at Austin.

The academic challenges described during the interviews ranged from stories about being academically unprepared to stories about academic probation and/or the threat of probation. Some participants mentioned instances where they felt inadequate and at times felt like an impostor. An appropriate example of this came from Danielle:

Okay. I will mention that another hump I had was the end of my first semester. When I was taking calculus and chemistry. I knew my preparation for chemistry was not where it needed to be and so I struggled really hard in chemistry. And then calculus I struggled a little more in there too. And so that semester was hard for me because everyone stressed so much how important your initial GPA was. I remember coming home from a test one day and I walked out knowing I failed. Like I just know I did because I knew I didn't understand any of the material and I went to my room and I cried like almost an hour because I was like "oh my gosh I can't do this, I'm going to get kicked out of school, I'm going to be on academic probation, my GPA is going to suck." I was just having a serious moment of I can't do this. I really cannot, like I don't think I belong. I don't think I'm supposed to be here.

Many of the young women felt that their academic challenges were a result of not being prepared by their high schools for the rigors of University of Texas at Austin. During the interviews each participant was asked if they felt as though their high schools prepared them for The University of Texas at Austin and 9 of the 11 participants gave a resounding "no" for their responses. To further explicate the particular feeling Monique discussed how she was not prepared and what her freshmen year was like:

It was a complete shock and it was different. It was something I wasn't used to. Though I struggled in the beginning, my first year, my freshman year, when I was a natural science major. It was terrible. It was so bad. I dropped a class, failed a class, did bad. I was almost on academic probation. When I first got here I was like, "I'm not prepared for UT. My high school did not prepare me for this. The only reason why I got in was because of the top 10% rule." I really felt like I didn't belong here. When I first got here, I came here with a lot of friends from my high school. Most of my friends were here. Everyone was doing so well, making good grades and I really felt like, "I'm not smart. I don't fit in. Maybe I don't belong here. Now I'm so proud because I actually have above a 3.0. I don't know how I did it. I worked really hard at it and it makes me feel good to know that I'm capable of this too

In hindsight Monique recalls that she knew she was not ready for the rigor of The University of Texas at Austin. She recalled that when she would speak to her peers in her college classes it became even more evident how much she was not exposed to at her high school. In our one-on-one interview she gave her honest and detailed account:

I went to [removed] high school. I took all AP courses throughout high school, and even that was fairly easy. I know that I was being spoon-fed. Teachers, they weren't really challenging us. I did not feel prepared. It felt like the work was too simple. I would go home, I didn't study. I know now that I never studied until I got to UT. I would just do my homework on the bus on the way home and when it got done, I was done. When I got here, just hearing other students talk about, "In high school they did this, that, and that. I worked on this science project." I'm like, "We didn't do that! We didn't do none of that! I'm sitting down at orientation talking and trying to make new friends. I'm hearing them talking about their high school experiences. I'm just like, "I don't know what you guys are talking about." I just felt like I don't think I'm really prepared for this but I'm going to make it. I'll make it through anything. From those interactions, I realized I did not know how to study, so I had to learn how. Initially I did not feel prepared at all.

The same question was asked for a second time in the focus group and Celeste wanted clarification on the question. She wanted to know if the question was asking if she was prepared for college in general or if she was prepared for UT Austin? She made it clear that she thought that there was a distinction between generally being prepared for college versus being prepared for The University of Texas at Austin. Most of the other participants shook their heads in agreement with Celeste. It should be noted that the exchange with Celeste was conversational, so the following quotes are of Celeste, Faith and myself, the author of the study:

Celeste: Was I prepared for college or UT?

Faith: Thank you. I was just about to say that, "like okay did they prepare me for UT?"

Interviewer: Oh okay wait... so, there's a distinction between being prepared for college versus being prepared for UT?

Celeste: Yes! I mean for UT. I mean I could have been at PV (Prairie View A & M University), U of H (University of Houston) or TSU (Texas Southern University). I mean I used to go to TSU so I could have done that. It would have been easy, but I like a challenge... so I came here. I just feel like my high school didn't prepare me for UT.

Celeste's comment seemed to resonate with rest of the group and it illustrated that the participants' were aware that there was a difference in quality across institutional types. All of the participants seemed to believe that The University of Texas at Austin was more rigorous and more competitive than other institutions they may have considered attending in the past.

Beyond feeling like high school didn't prepare them for The University of Texas at Austin the stories of academic challenges were overwhelming. Many of the participants were able to express that they had challenges that they had not yet been able to overcome. They expressed how they had continued to struggle well into the junior and senior years at UT. Celeste, a senior talked about how she had been on academic probation since her freshmen year. Again, the exchange with Celeste was conversational, so the following quotes are of both Celeste and myself, the author of the study:

When I first got to Texas I was in an academic support program and they helped me register for my first semester courses and it was ALL WRONG! We had mentors that helped us register. I had to drop two classes. I know that I failed one of my classes.

Interviewer: Which class was this?

Celeste: Psychology.

Interviewer: 301?

Celeste: Intro, yeah.

Interviewer: All right, and then what else?

Celeste: I don't remember what other class I had. Oh yeah, I had another course and it was Positive Psychology.

Interviewer: So two psych classes?

Celeste: I passed. I got an "A" in that one, I just failed everything else.

Interviewer: Okay so you dropped two, failed one, and got an A on one your first semester?

Celeste: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Interviewer: All right. How did that first semester impact you? Like what happened then?

Celeste: It just made my GPA go low and I've been on academic probation since I've been here.

Interviewer: Since you've been a freshman?

Celeste: Yep.

Interviewer: Okay, all right.

Celeste: I had to sit out a semester too.

Interviewer: When?

Celeste: Sophomore year. The first semester of sophomore year, fall.

Interviewer: You sat out a semester? What did you do during that time? You just sat out or did you go take classes at ACC?

Celeste: Yeah, I took classes at ACC.

Interviewer: Oh good. So you didn't miss ... you missed but not really. You still got credits. Okay. How has you been being on academic probation or dismissal since you got to UT, how has that impacted your overall perception of UT or your overall experience at UT? Good, bad, ugly, how does it make you feel?

Celeste: I just feel like they should, being that I was in the Centennial Scholars program, I feel like they should have helped us more like they said they were going to do and they didn't. They put me in this other program when I was on the verge of getting kicked out to help me. I don't know, just coming from the high school that I came from it wasn't a college prep school. UT was just real hard. It just made me not want to be here.



Celeste's account is an example of how negative academic experiences impacted student's sense of belonging to the campus. Because Celeste was unhappy with herself as a student she ventured down a path of alcohol and substance abuse to deal with what was going on on-campus. Fortunately, Celeste was able to persist in spite of her academic probation status and personal challenges. The second semester of her senior year is when she was finally removed from academic probation and eligible to graduate. The institutional structures and factors that promoted her eventual success are addressed in a later section of the findings chapter.

Princess was another student who continued to experience academic challenges late into her collegiate journey. She too, like Celeste wanted to leave campus after her first semester of college but she was still here trying to finish. She elaborated on her grade point average and how she was not able to get over the hump:

I'm not on academic probation but my first semester... I just hated freshman year and I wanted to go home... I never actually went on academic probation but I remember my first year was horrible because like I said, high school was totally different from this. My first year I had like at a 2.1. Then I started building it up to a 2.45 coming into my junior year. Then last semester it went right back down so now I'm at a 2.3.

The story of overcoming and persisting semester after semester was a motivational tool for the participants, but it was especially motivational for these two participants in particular. The story that they would have to tell later is what inspired them to continue and press forward. They wanted to persist and continue because of what it meant to have a degree from The University of Texas at Austin. Princess was probed more in her interview about why she decided to stay at UT and pursue her degree despite the challenges. She responded that she was pleased with her decision to stay at the University. To follow-up she was asked why and to elaborate more:

I guess because the same reason that I chose to come here, because when I graduate. If I would have went to a predominant Black school and I would have graduated, it was just sort of like, "Okay, that's good." But I feel like graduating from here is like ... it puts the sprinkles on the icing, it's just the cherry on top to come here and do something that... that Black women are looked at like we can't do it. It's just bigger, I guess.

Princess's comments are an example of aspirational capital, which was a prevalent sub-theme among most of the young women in the study. Yosso's "Aspirational Capital" is defined as a type of cultural capital that African American and Latina female students exhibit most. These young women continued to have high hopes and dreams (aspirations) despite persistent educational inequities and challenges.

The youngest student in the study, Faith, also struggled academically, which generated feelings of self-doubt, which caused her to be discouraged. She was not doing well academically and she was trying to decide whether or not to continue majoring in biology:

I became very discouraged like my freshman year of college, which is why I don't think I did so well academically. I began to lose faith in myself, especially looking around here and seeing all of these people who ... I don't know. I just went back into the ideology of a hegemony, like thinking like I was less than others and I was born to fail.

Faith referred to "hegemony" a couple of times during her interview. Faith's comparison of the University environment with that of hegemony was surprising and unexpected. The first time she used it, she was expressing that being a Black female in America was a handicap and that all other cultures superseded Black women. In that moment she was displaying a very low academic self-efficacy as well as a subordinate disposition. Late into our conversation the issue of race finally began to surface when she said, "I began to lose faith in myself, especially looking around here and seeing all of these people who ... I don't know." The issues of isolation and perceived racism were a constant sub-theme

throughout the study and according to the participants was a constant reality in both their academic and social experiences.

### **Isolation**

Despite the progress made to create campuses that are more welcoming and friendlier to students of color there are still instances where isolation and alienation arise. This is a topic that has been researched and written about since institutions of higher education began integrating and still some 60 years later Black students on predominantly White campuses still report feeling isolated and alienated. Research indicates that African American students who do not have supportive communities at PWIs often experience feelings of discomfort, social isolation, and stress, which can lead to student attrition (Guiffrida, 2003). Grace recalled her experience in a course that was supposed to promote open dialogue on social justice issues like race and racism. She often felt singled out by one of her classmates and she became uncomfortable going to the course week after week. Grace recalls:

I think I mentioned the Race and Racism class that I took in my last interview. I took it last year. The class was an inter-group dialogue class and that's why I took it. Actually I only took it because of the professor, but I found out that she was not facilitating the discussion. The students were. We had different topics each week and the co-subject this particular week was race and racism. There was this one guy who was convinced that all Black students were here because of affirmative action and affirmative action was the worse thing that ever happened. I think I spent that whole semester trying to convince him different, and that is all I remember learning in that class because it was so difficult to focus on the work when I felt his presence every class and his judgment every time I talked and him wanting to debate everything that I said, whether it was about that topic or not. There have always been people like that. A lot of the classes I find my own separate study group of people of color because it's harder to integrate yourself into white study groups if you don't.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Grace: I feel like unless your talking out in class every time proving to them how smart you are then you're not an automatic pick for study groups or you have to invite yourself. I'm not the type of person to invite myself into places that I don't feel like people want me, so I'd rather make my own space.

Grace's experience is an illustration of how Black female students sometimes felt isolated and discriminated against in the classroom. Experiences like what Grace described impacted classroom performance and overall campus satisfaction. Grace was not the only one. Students in this student were reluctant to engage and participate in class for fear of judgment and it was an extremely isolating experience that eventually impacted their grades and success. Monique put in most succinctly:

I have been the only one in class. That was mostly in my natural science classes. In the beginning I was the only Black girl in a lot of my science classes. It made me feel scared to raise my hand and ask a question; because, for fear of sounding stupid. Ultimately, that did affect my grades.

Monique shared that she would sometimes wait to ask questions in private or not ask at all for fear that her teaching assistants and professors would judge her as well. When I asked her what made her comfortable enough to ask some professors and TA's versus others and she replied,

It just depends.... Sometimes you can just tell who is open and who is not. I pay attention to the social cues of my professors. Like if they make eye contact with me or if they smile when they see me. Those sorts of things.

Unfortunately, those occasions were numerous in the College of Natural Sciences according to Monique. Eventually she switched to the College of Education.

Before I could transition, Rebecca chimed in with her experience being a student in the College of Communications. Rebecca was a senior and she discussed the fact that she had been in classes with the same people day after day and year after year and her peers still acted as if they didn't know whom she was. In addition she mentioned that her major was an extremely small major, so it is very easy for individuals to get to know one

another, as well as, remember those who are fellow majors. This was not true for her as a Black female in in the major. Rebecca shared her experience:

Especially being the only Black person in your classes, it's like we have the same classes with the same people, but because we've had the class with the same people, they've already formed their groups, and usually, the Black person is the odd person out. There might be an Asian girl or a Latino guy or something like that, but for the most part, you're just left to fend for yourself. You just get put into a group of people who have already connected without you who are not really trying to connect.

Being able to connect with your peers and study together is a proven practice for student success and when these Black female students were unable to engage in that way then they did not benefit from a system that was specifically designed to help students be successful in courses. When they could not take advantage of the system they became vulnerable to failure. Even for those students who were able to break into a study groups, there were sometimes intergroup challenges that prevented Black female students from getting the most out of the experience.

Rebecca expressed in her interview that her experience was very lonely, “It’s a lonely experience when you know that you are one of the few and also that people are not super excited that you are there. Or that you are so different that people are not even interested in like connecting with you or like even acknowledging our existence.” For example both Grace and Rebecca concluded that sometimes it was not even worth trying to connect.

### **Faculty Interaction**

Another practice for success is being able to connect with the faculty. Research indicates that faculty/student relationships affect student satisfaction with college (Astin, 1984, 1999). Also, Black students who perceive discrimination from faculty avoid interaction with them inside and outside the classroom (Chavous, 2002). This means that

Black students are less likely to go to office hours or interact in other ways with faculty when they believe they will be stereotyped. In this study there were a couple of participants who were able to positively connect with their professors, but the overwhelming majority revealed that sometimes connecting with faculty as Black women was a challenge. Two participants in particular spoke about feeling belittled in their interactions with their professors. Monique spoke candidly about her experience with a chemistry professor:

I've always had a hard time talking to people, especially older people that I don't know. My faculty didn't really seem very welcoming and friendly. I had this one chemistry professor...she would make me feel like I was stupid. I went to her office hours once and I didn't go back. The way she talked to me, I didn't feel comfortable answering her questions. I just found it extremely uncomfortable and humiliating. I ended up having to drop the course, because I didn't feel comfortable going to office hours to ask questions because I didn't want her to think that I was dumb.

Research also indicates that students often perceive faculty at PWIs as culturally insensitive (Fleming, 1984). Many also perceived them as unapproachable because of stereotypical comments they make, for being insensitive to African American culture and making generalizations of students' opinions as representing those of all African Americans (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996). Because of their experiences the participants in this study actively sought Black faculty (and/or staff) with whom they felt they could relate. Once Monique changed majors she shared an interaction that was opposite of her incident with her chemistry teacher. This experience was with a teaching assistant who was Black:

I feel like someone (faculty) who's my color can relate to me, just a little bit. Someone who knows what I'm going through, what's going on. Now, I'm in anatomy and this is one of the hardest classes I've ever taken. My TA, a lady named Brooklyn, she just graduated from Baylor, she's going to grad school here, and I can relate to her. She's Black, she plays sports, she likes health promotion.

Outside, when I'm in office hours, not only am I talking to her about this, the actual work, but we're actually conversing and connecting. It just feels natural, like we're having a regular conversation. With Dr. [removed], for example, I'm just asking her a question and she's just like, this, that, and that, and the way she speaks to me is like inappropriate.

This is an example of how positive experiences with the faculty or teaching assistants can impact as student's sense of belonging and make challenging courses enjoyable.

Elle, the second participant who felt belittled by her professor had a very damaging experience as well with a government professor. Although reluctant, she shared her experience.

Um I think I've had a pretty normal classroom experience. There's only one time I can remember feeling, well not one time, but specifically I remember feeling I don't know... like, I don't want say dumb but I just felt like I wasn't smart enough to be in that class. And it was a government class. I remember I failed both of the tests and this was my third year so this wasn't even that long ago. The course was on globalization and I went to the professor and I just remember leaving there in tears like I was just like, I can't even remember what she said. I was like so distraught but that's the only class I ended up dropping like I don't know it was just the way she was talking to me. Like I was little. Um but yeah I think all the other classes have been normal.

Elle's encounter with her government professor was a shock to her, because she had gone her first two years of college with relatively "normal" experiences in the classroom and with her professors. She expressed that she had the expectation that the professor would be supportive by suggesting how she might be able to help Elle do better or give her advice on some things she could do to improve. Instead she was met with what she defined as a belittling experience, much like what Monique described.

Participants were also asked to discuss any positive classroom experiences they had at the university. Almost all of the participants cited that their positive experiences were with Black faculty and other faculty of color. This was an interesting fact for the study considering there are not very many Black faculty members at the University of

Texas. This suggested that Black students were actively seeking opportunities to be with the Black faculty on campus. At The University of Texas at Austin many of the Black faculty members are appointed in or are affiliated in some way with the African and African Diaspora Studies Department (AADS) and most of the experiences that these women had with Black faculty happened to be the AADS department. Elle commented that she was always excited when she had Black teachers. The following conversation illustrated why she felt the way she did about having Black faculty:

Elle: Yes. \*laughs\* I get happy when I get Black teachers.

Interviewer: So when you, oh say that again?

Elle: I said I get happy when I get Black teachers.

Interviewer: Why?

Elle: Because I just feel like I can relate or they can relate um, I don't know it just gives me joy to know that these people are coming from, not even necessarily the same background but there are some commonalities.

In Rebecca's interview she described her experiences with Black faculty as easier for her to connect to. In her particular major, she was the only Black person in most of her classes and connecting with the faculty there did not happen often. Outside of her AADS classes she had never even gone to office hours. Here Rebecca describes why she was more comfortable with Black professors.

In terms of professors, I never really connected with any of my professors except for my AFR professors just because I found that it's easier to approach them and talk to them just because I guess they kind of understand where I'm coming from and the circumstances around my situation as a student.

Faith echoed Rebecca's sentiments. She felt that she could relate more to her professors when she changed her major from Natural Sciences to Liberal Arts.

Yeah it was bad. I actually struggled like really bad. I wasn't reaching out for help. I almost got dismissed from the University myself with my GPA being like



really low, but I felt like that was me kind of like me isolating myself. When I changed my major I began to reach out for help and talk to people about my situation and what was going on. I actually became more involved in class and talking to my professors. I think it had everything to do with being a Sociology and AFR major. It just felt more natural and easier for me. For one, the professors they seem more relatable. Yeah like the environment is just different I feel like.

The general consensus among the participants was that the Black faculty they interacted with were willing to go “beyond the call of duty” to help them succeed. While listening to several participants it was clear that some of the participants were “other-mothered” by the Black faculty (and staff). Data from this study were consistent with prior research indicating that African American students perceived Black faculty as more likely than White faculty to be supportive.

Some additional discussion about positive experiences with faculty came up when Celeste talked about her dismissal from the university. The research states that African American students at PWIs who perform better academically report perceiving faculty as supportive (Nettles, 1988, 1991; Adan & Felner, 1995; Chavous, 2003). In one of her interviews she was asked her a series of questions: First, I asked her to describe her experience before she was dismissed. Secondly, I asked her to compare what was different now and lastly I asked her to specifically describe what she was doing differently in order to be successful. One aspect about herself that she changed was to interact with her professors more:

Oh well before I left it was harder. Before I got dismissed the classes were like harder. There weren't many Black people who looked like me and I didn't have any friends in my classes. I didn't really talk to the professors. Now, since I came back I have like, like I've had conversations with my professors and I have more friends in the classes. It's more easy I guess to understand what they expect us to learn when you go and meet with them.

When Celeste starting going to office hours, even if she felt uncomfortable, she started to perform better in her courses. As she stated in the quote, going to office hours helped her

better understand what was happening in the course, which in turn improved her performance in the course. Her experience affirmed the research in that going to office hours could positively impact students' performance.

### **Perceived Racism**

In addition to students feeling isolated, the participants spoke a great deal about their encounters with racism in their academic colleges and on campus in general. The rate at which the participants perceived racism was substantial. This study revealed unfortunately that both implicit and explicit bias and racism is still a harsh reality for Black female students at The University of Texas at Austin. Racism was present to the extent that they perceived it as a daily obstacle. The levels of racism-related-stress is higher for Black students at predominantly White campuses than it is for any other groups at PWIs or for their Black counterparts at historically Black colleges and universities (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). Stress related to racism can foster a negative campus experience.

The discussion on race and racism began when the question was posed, “What it was like to be Black and female at The University of Texas at Austin?” There was a resounding “It sucks!” The participants were asked to explain their position on why they felt that way. During this portion of the focus group there was frequent consensus and similarities within their stories and experiences. This section highlights their responses.

Rebecca took this time to speak more on her experience of being a Black woman in a particular applied field:

Um... so I am in [applied field] and I don't know if you guys have ever been over there. [It] is a beautiful new building, like the facilities are really great but the worst thing about it is walking in and knowing that you're going to be the only Black person that's not one of the two or one of the three. So I'm in a small major. I changed my major officially the fall of my junior year—so last year. And

Um I've seen the same faces from my whole 4 years here and I've never become friends with any of those people. So we've all been taking classes together but it's so lonely because I'm always the only one by myself and if we have—we always have group projects; we never take tests. So we will have like, “OH, this is your team,” and so people will know each other, and they'll be like, “OH what's your name?” We've had class together for the last 4 years. And they won't want to get in the group with you, even though your professor is like, “Oh yeah, Rebecca has like really great insight,” and stuff. I'm in the internship class and I walk in because we have these meetings, and I walked in and there were like 2 other Black people. And one of them was a Black girl and she was just looking at me like, “I don't know you,” and I just went and sat by her and we were just talking. We were just getting together and people kept looking at us like, “this is so weird.” Black people are never together in class. Like, “What are you guys doing here?” I've been here. I pay tuition too. I've been taking these same classes. You know? Doing the same presentations. And it's kind of—it's really lonely. I would say especially in [applied field], I don't know if everyone feels the same way. It's a lonely experience when you know that you are one of the few and also that people are not super excited that you are there. Or that you are so different that people are not even interested in like connecting with you, or like even acknowledging our existence kind of.

When Rebecca made that statement the entire room of participants shook their heads in agreement signifying that they have had similar experiences like Rebecca described. With Rebecca leading off with her comments the other women began to share their own individual stories of isolation and racism on campus. Unfortunately, one academic college was mentioned multiple times by different participants who were also students within the college or had been at one time..” Grace chimed in next to share her experience in the college.

I was in the college first before I switched to my new major so I have 2 experiences as far as academics go. The college sucks! Umm I left for a reason probably because of people like me who left. But umm you walk into the school and they look at you like “why are you here” and it's like uhhh because I go to school here (laughs). So freshman year I thought I was going to try out for the college council. I was like, “I was in student council in high school so this council is you know jus like high school council.” You know it just sounds right. So I went to this little meeting, it was in this little dungeon—hard to find. And all of us—it was like 50 people going in the same direction and I'm looking lost I ain't ever been in this building and they're not trying to help me and I'm like clearly

we are all going to the same place because what other meeting is at 9 o'clock in this dungeon. But everyone literally was acting like I wasn't going to the same place as them (laughter) so I just kept following them anyway. So I get to the room and all the seats were taken so people were starting to sit on the floor. I wasn't really keen on sitting on the floor but I was like I'm going to try it you know squeeze in one of these little holes. NOPE. Nobody was trying to make a hole for me to sit in (laughing). "Y'all really not going to close y'all's legs?" Like this room fits more people. Anyways, and then I got there. They were like joking around and stuff. And so I was like okay this is not really my type of humor but I can get with it (laughing) and I just remember I tried to hop in on a joke and they looked at me like "did you just open your mouth. And I looked at myself like "did I just open my mouth?" (laughing) and at that moment I realized that particular academic college experience was going to be a little weird for me and I decided not to try out and 2 years later I switched my major.

As soon as Grace finished talking about her experience in that academic college the other participants wanted to know why it took her two years to make the decision to transfer. She replied that she was torn because she loved her major, however it was the social experiences that caused her to leave. She shared another disappointing experience about her time in the same academic college She explained that she was working for college and doing the newsletters.

When a young teenage boy named Trayvon Martin was shot by a neighborhood watchperson, Grace went to the editors and pitched the idea of doing a story about the Black male experience and the recent shooting. The all White staff of student colleagues shot the idea down, because they did not think it was a good idea or "good news." A few days later when the story began to attract national attention, her colleagues then wanted to run the story. They appointed Grace in charge of the story. And the story went off without a hitch. At the end of the year when it was time for the college to present awards for impactful stories, the Trayvon Martin story that they ran was recognized. However, the editor, a white girl received all the credit for the story and the award. Not one person from the team mentioned that the story was Grace's idea or that she had done all the work

to make the story happen. That experience was hurtful for Grace and was the “final straw.” She then made the decision to change her major.

Monique told one last story about the same academic college. After hearing from Rebecca and Grace she too recalled a time that she took a course in that academic college. She explained that she felt isolated and sensed that there may be some racism present:

To go back on that you were saying about the that academic college... It just came to my head that I remember my sophomore year. Instead of me taking two six-hour foreign language courses, I could take three other courses and one of them was a communications class. I forgot the name of the class, but I dropped it; because, the first day I went to class I discovered there were no tests, no quizzes and that you had to just work on a group project. At the end of the semester you had to do a sales pitch to a company and your grade depended on that. They had groups of four or five, four whatever. Mostly men and everybody was picking their groups. This was the first day of class. We begin the groups. I don't know anyone in there. No one wanted to have me in their group, so I'm asking around. I see this group of three guys. I'm like okay maybe they just need one extra person. I can join them. The guy was like oh we already have my friend. He's not here in class today, but John's going to be in our group. I was like okay. At the end of that class I walked out. I dropped the class. I was going to take another language course. Okay, I'm not going to be in the class. I don't know if the guy made up that on the spot. Was he lying? Even if he wasn't, that was really hurtful. I was really hurt by that. I didn't even want to be in the class anymore. You're making people feel like they don't belong in a classroom. Why are we being forced to get into these group projects and nobody let's us in the group?

The last three accounts focused on the one particular academic college, but these issues were not confined to one space or college on campus. Bias at the university was pervasive in the sense that these Black women had similar experiences all over campus. In the previous section Grace discussed how she felt being in a class where she was singled-out by a classmate. She also expressed that she felt that the individual was racist even though he made it a point to defend the fact that he wasn't racist and that his sentiments were actually noble. For this section on racism, a more detailed account of

what happened to her is appropriate here. Grace explains a more detailed account of her experience in the course:

We get in the class to find out that the inner-group dialog topic is “Race and Racism.” Of course, I'm the only Black person. I spent a semester trying to convince a group of White people that I am not here because of affirmative action and that affirmative action is not as bad as you think because you're benefiting off of it more than I am. There was one guy in the class who loved to take his shoes off in the class. I looked down at his toes every time he talked to me, because don't talk to me. He was convinced that affirmative action was the worst thing to happen to The University of Texas and that he's not racist for believing that Black people should have a level playing field. They should get in on their own and it's not our fault they don't get accepted (Okay). That was one of the most difficult periods. It was a three hour class. I would come home after those 3 hours and be drained because of it. I don't know how I could forget that experience.

The other participants chimed in on the topic and expressed that there was a false assumption among mainly White students on campus that all Black students are there because of affirmative action or because they play some type of sport. For Grace she felt her experience in the course was exhausting and unproductive, because she felt as though there was nothing she could say to convince the fellow student that not all Black students were there because of affirmative action and that affirmative action could actually be a good thing that benefits other groups of students, not just Black students.

Another compelling story came from Princess. She wanted to give an account of a time when she too was faced with what she described and a race tinged event. A year prior a white woman reported her to the university's judicial office over a classroom dispute. It all began with Princess and another student having a follow-up conversation about what the TA had just assigned for the course. She recounted her story:

A white lady, she's in the front of the room, she turns around, she starts yelling at the top of her lungs to the point where the whole class just gets quiet and she's making direct eye contact with me, yelling to be quiet and that she's trying to learn and this and that. I respond, "Okay, learn." "I'm trying to, y'all are loud, blah blah blah." She's screaming at the top of her lungs. At the time I was taking the

Black Power movement with Dr. Moore and then I went to South Africa the summer before, so I'm just being ... more aware of my Blackness. I just lose it. I get out of my seat, I went to her desk and I'm talking to her the way you and I are. And I said calmly, "Don't you ever speak to me that way." The class is still quiet, everybody's watching, the TA is just in shock and she does not say anything. I said okay, and I go back to my seat. After class I walk out and I'm sitting outside and I'm waiting on her to come out to talk to her. Coincidentally some of my friends were walking by and they stopped and I tell them what happened. There were lot of them, so they're out there with me and when she walks out, the TA is like, "What's going on?" I was like, "I just wanted to talk to her." We started talking and long story short, she just didn't understand the fact that like, my mother doesn't even speak to me that way. You could have easily just told the TA to ask us to be quiet. Later on she goes and she files a report with the Dean of Students. I go in and I have to talk to the Dean of Students office. Thankfully she understood, thankfully she was a Black woman, she understood. She told me what the white girl had reported. I was told that the young lady added things like she said that I said, "I'll go zero to one hundred real quick." Ha! She was just adding stuff that she had heard from Black songs and stuff like that. It was just so crazy to hear what she reported and for her to try to flip it. For me it was a racial thing, because the whole class was talking. If she had addressed the entire class, I wouldn't have said anything. But you're looking directly at me and you're yelling. It was definitely racial and for her to start the whole thing and then feel the need when I defend myself to go report it, I feel like that's something. I've had not many but a few ... a few words with people like her.

Princess felt lucky that the judicial officer was a Black woman. She explained that she could not help but think that if the university official was a white person that she could have been falsely accused and expelled behind a misunderstanding. Princess's experience led to a discussion about the importance of having other Black women on campus as faculty and staff members. As previously stated, Princess was relieved and in her words "blessed" to have had a university official who was also a Black woman that actually listened to her and considered all the facts before sanctioning or issuing a penalty. From that interaction with the university official she built a mentor relationship that she still has to this day.

During the focus group another question incited great discussion. The discussion topic was about campus climate and whether or not the participants felt that the campus

was welcoming and/or friendly. Their comments were disparate. Some participants felt that overall, the campus was welcoming despite some shortcomings and others felt that that campus was unfriendly and hostile. Grace commented:

I think it's welcoming at first look but I do feel like once you get more integrated into campus you start to truly see the aspects that are not so welcoming. The underlying racism...“covert,” is the professional word. You start to see it more but I think it balances out because you have faculty and staff who are there to motivate you and to help you through it despite what you go through in the classroom. I think at times it can be hostile but we have a Black community that is strong, for lack of better terms, that's growing closer together. That helps us to be able to cope with things that are going on because we have one another.

Grace’s comment silenced the room. A few moments later the students began reflecting on some of the racial events that had occurred on campus in the recent past. Most of the conversation focused on the West Campus Bleach Bombing incident. It was still fresh in their minds. The incident resulted in the community banding together. There were meetings and a city-wide march that demanded that The University of Texas and the City of Austin to take action against the supposed suspects. Elle made a compelling comment:

I think depending on what community you run in, it could be different for each person. And because I surround myself around a lot of activism stuff then I maybe could sometimes describe it as hostile but if I chose not to put myself in that situation then I could be totally blind to what’s going on. So I think we adapt a lot by who we’re hanging around and the situations we put ourselves in as students. As a Black student, I can say sometimes it felt unwelcoming. I worked at Gregory Gym and there were a lot of white patrons who weren’t nice or maybe they didn’t even realize what they were doing like I would have to swipe cards and they would throw them (ID cards) down and expect me to pick them up and hand it back to them. That was rude! Or people who are just ignorant. Like there was this guy who was looking at my natural hair and he was like “how did you design your natural hair like that?” and I was like...I didn’t know what to tell him. He was looking at me like he had never seen Black women’s hair. So it was just interesting the people you meet.



Elle's story and many of the other participants sounded a lot like the same. Reinforcing that racism was a constant force that these students faced even now as they traverse college campuses.

There was one perspective from Shelia that seemed to take the other participants by surprise. Shelia's way of thinking about the campus, her Blackness, and the world was a bit divergent from the rest. Shelia was a legacy with both of her parents graduating from The University of Texas at Austin. She had grown up in predominately white schools and institutions her entire life. As the conversation about race lingered she stated, "I mean in all honesty when you live in America, there are going to be issues regardless." When she made that comment the other participants in the room awkwardly paused. Some began shifting in their seats, others made eye contact, but didn't comment and one person actually "rolled her eyes." From the body language in the room it was clear that the other participants didn't share her viewpoint. When reviewing Sheila's background it was clear that her extended history of interacting with White peers before coming to the University had everything to do with how she approached the conversation. It was a different, yet relevant viewpoint, which spurred a conversation about how not everyone's experience is the same. Being able to capture this kind of diversity among the academic and social experiences of Black women on campus was a goal of this study.

### **Fight or Flight & The Power of Faith**

After hearing about all the negative academic and social experiences of the participants, it occurred to me that two things kept coming up: (1) The subject of faith and its role in the participants' success and (2) secondly whether or not being at UT was even worth it? In the focus group another set of questions were posed, "Does everybody in here practice a faith? Is your faith important to you in your survival here at UT? Does

it help you persist?” What followed was a conversation about how faith played an important role in many of the participants’ academic journeys. They discussed how they prayed often, went to bible study and church, sang in the campus gospel choir and tried to invite his (Jesus) presence in throughout their day.

Researcher Dr. Sherry Watt teaches us that African American college women use spiritual understanding to cope, to resist and develop their identities. African American women also use their spirituality as a psychological resistance strategy to deflect negative societal messages (2003). Several of the participants said that if it were not for their faith and God’s grace that they did not believe that they would have made it as far as they had come.

The second theme in this section had to do with whether or not all of the negative experiences were worth it? On top of that students expressed that they received pressure from their families. One example that stood out was from Rebecca who was West African. Rebecca said:

My parents are like.... bachelor’s degrees in my family, that’s nothing. My parents are like, “that degree is mine.” This isn’t even my degree so that’s why I’m going to grad school. I mean when I chose my major my dad was like “that’s what you’re choosing for my first degree?”

The other participants of the focus group reacted loudly with, “Dang!” Rebecca continued:

Not like that. I mean my dad, he has a masters so he’s there. But he says ‘all my kids your first degree that’s standard. I’m under a lot of pressure and there are some times where you can’t press forward without that faith. Yeah it’s true, like I struggled a lot, I literally landed in the hospital twice for two blood transfusions because of school related stress. And so it was like at that point when I’m in the hospital and watching somebody else’s blood enter my body and I’m like ‘maybe this isn’t really worth it’. Not school in general but UT.

On top of the pressure from her dad, the added pressure of trying to survive and perform at the University had caused her to rely on her faith to get her through. It also made her wonder if the toll it was taking on her was even worth it. She figured that it might be easier for her to transfer to the University of Houston or an HBCU like Howard. Her stating this out loud prompted a conversation and the most interesting thing happened. Rebecca “struck a chord” with the group. Her comment shifted the discussion from faith into whether or not what they were facing was really worth it and if they should have considered HBCUs (historically Black colleges and universities) because of the more welcoming and safe environment it provides.

Participant after participant they expressed that they had the same feelings and thoughts. First Rebecca, then Ashley, then Danielle and Grace. By the end of the discussion the majority of the focus group expressed that they had had the thought, at least once, of what it might be like if they had gone to an HBCU. Out of all the participants Grace seemed as though she regretted her decision not to go to an HBCU the most. She told the group that Howard was her first choice, but that they lost her application. Because of that she decided to attend the University of Texas at Austin. During the discussion she jokingly said, “Can I still transfer?” and the group laughed. She followed up to justify her question:

Like seriously, all of my friends from high school go to HBCUs or U of H. I’m probably one of the only ones at a PWI. I don’t know what y’all consider U of H... it’s not an HBCU but it’s not full white. So my best friend goes to U of H and everybody else goes to HBCUs and 2 of my closest friends go to Hampton and Howard, which is an HBCU on some extra stuff. So it’s like difficult seeing them tweet and post stuff and I’m sitting here in this PCL where it’s cold dark and lonely and I know this studying that I’m doing still ain’t gone matter while y’all out here doing this Black stuff, enjoying Black stuff. Black stuff is important. It’s not like y’all don’t have BSA because everyday is BSA for y’all. And I’m looking at that like I should’ve been a Black Fox and ruling PV right now. I should be there doing this and this and this and this and I feel that my life would’ve been

so...I do not discredit this experience at all. I know I'm at the place I'm supposed to be but for 3.5 years because I don't count this semester, I looked at that like right now I would be president of PV, of Black Fox and enjoying my life in the...like minding my own business. And it was hard going to class everyday with all these white people and every time they got on my nerves I was like "I shouldn't even be here. I should be at Prairie View. Or Hampton. Or Howard."

It was important to point out that their experiences led them to the interesting paradox of "fight or flight." The determination to "fight on" using their faith to help them press-on and endure the discomforts associated with being a Black woman at The University of Texas at Austin or take "flight." That perhaps they would be happier and more comfortable going to an HBCU or university that was more accepting and less of a daily fight. However when it was posed to them, "Why stay here? Princess spoke for the room and said:

I guess because of the same reason that I chose to come here. If I had gone to a predominantly Black school and graduated it would be like, "Okay, that's good." But I feel like graduating from here (UT-Austin) is like ... it puts the sprinkles on the icing, it's just the cherry on top to come here and do something that ... that Black women are looked like we can't do it. It's just bigger, I guess.

## **Summary**

The women in this study provided rich accounts of their own experiences being Black and female at the University of Texas at Austin. The academic and social experiences were not unfamiliar. However, the depth and breath that these women provided was not expected. The academic challenges, isolation, negative faculty interactions and perceived racism would be enough for many to leave and go elsewhere. But these women demonstrated grit and determination in spite of the pressure from their families, people back home, peers, and faculty to succeed and achieve a degree. The next research question explored how they did it? What were the points of access that helped

them move forward and what were barriers that they perceived while trying to obtain their degree.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION TWO**

The participants in this study identified several points of access and some institutional barriers at The University of Texas at Austin. They shared their experiences about university policies, programs, services, student organizations and individuals that they felt either promoted their goals to graduation or were liabilities or hindrances to their goals of graduating in a timely manner. In each of the following sections the aspects that promoted timely graduation were explored first and the aspects that did not encourage timely graduation followed.

### **Student Organizations**

For these young women student organizations were cited as critical influences that impacted their retention and eventual graduation. For this group in particular the student organizations that had a primary focus on the Black community facilitated the type of social integration that was “critical” to their satisfaction and retention at The University of Texas at Austin. The African American/Black student organizations that the students discussed included religious groups, women’s groups, political organizations and professional organizations to name a few.

Their experiences for the most part supported Tinto’s (1993) *Theory of Student Departure* and were consistent with the findings of Guiffrida’s study on *African American Student Organizations as Agents of Social Integration* (2003). Tinto stated that both academic and social integration are necessary for the retention of all students in colleges. Tinto (1993) and Guiffrida (2003) both found that for African American students social integration impacted their persistence decisions more than their academic

integration. However, this study not only revealed that Black student organizations helped these women connect socially, but that Black student organizations on campus played a significant role in their academic integration on campus. At times these organizations provided support and were the surrogate academic advisors, faculty mentors and mental health professionals for these women on campus.

For many of them it did not take long for them to become involved in culturally relevant student organizations and communities. The participants mentioned that the Black community (students, staff and faculty) introduced them to the university, Black student organizations and campus resources like the Multicultural Engagement Center and the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement. Every summer, all incoming Black students are invited to attend activities related to New Black Student Weekend, which involves an organization fair and an off-campus lock-in where upperclass Black students, faculty and staff share their experiences as Black individuals on campus. Many of the students who attend the welcome activities connect and identify which student organizations they plan to join when the semester begins.

One of the first organizations Toni joined was BSA (Black Student Alliance), which is a political organization on campus. Toni mentioned that BSA had a special committee just for freshmen students that she felt was most helpful in her academic integration and acclimation to The University of Texas. Toni recounts:

I got involved with BSA's freshman action team (FAT) and we had a good person over FAT because she like broke down the basics. She was like, "Here is the GPA calculator; here is how you get organized. Go buy a desk calendar and go put all your important dates on the calendar; go talk to your professors!" So like she really helped me to be able to just to come and really know what I needed to do. I needed to go talk to my professors and she showed us how to send emails. It was just like all the little things that we like maybe take for granted now, but I didn't know how to do them. And with studying she would kind push us to go and find

people and make a study group. She was like, “Even if you don’t know them and they don’t know you it’s important to connect.”

Several of the participants in this study had at one time been active in a very popular Black women’s organization whose mission was to inspire women to be politically and socially involved. The theme of their experiences was about the helpfulness of the organization. It was also about how encouraging and empowering the members were. In this particular organization the young women prided themselves on academic achievement.

In the observations that I conducted of their meetings it was apparent that academics was a prominent theme of their weekly meetings and individual conversations with one another. Monique described an occasion when an older member encouraged her to believe in herself academically. From that interaction she had a shift in the way she approached academics:

I’m the kind of person who sticks to myself. I just try to figure things out on my own, the “I can do it” kind of attitude. I joined Sankofa and that really helped. I had this conversation with Elle and she’s like, “Girl, I told you about what I went through!” She told me that I needed to get out of the mindset of telling myself I cannot do something. After that conversation I just had a more positive outlook on things. I started working harder. I went to office hours more my sophomore year. I sought tutoring. I would talk to the TA after class and asked when I could meet up with them. I didn’t like to do it in front of large groups of people, so I would stick around after class and ask how I could get help.

In a one-on-one conversation with Princess she confided that she wanted to leave UT during her freshman year, but she did not because of this organization. She said that before she found her organization she was just lost. She did not enjoy her classes. Before joining she had no clear academic direction, because her academic advisor was not very helpful. The organization became that for her. The organization also gave her an opportunity to connect with other Black students, which she did not have the opportunity to do in other spaces like the dorms or her classes.

For Rebecca in particular her student organization helped her connect with her African culture in meaningful way. A significant portion of the University's Black student population identifies as native African students. Many of these students are second and third generation African students where the parents and grandparents have immigrated to the United States with them when they were young children. For example, Rebecca's parents emigrated from Nigeria to London and then from London to a large city in Texas. So for her, finding a community of individuals with the same customs and ideals was very important to her. It was one of the reasons why she decided to remain at the University despite being unhappy with her academic experience. In her own words:

When I came to UT, I was looking forward to joining ASA. I had heard so much because my sister was involved in ASA. So, I was really excited because I considered they type of people I would interact with in my decision to attend this university. So I was excited to meet other African people who would align with my values.

Comfort was a constant sub-theme when they were discussing student organizations and that was exactly what Rebecca wanted out of ASA. A place where she could take off her mask and be herself.

More than half of the participants in this study mentioned being apart of a faith based student organization as mentioned in the previous section. Here is an example of how Danielle felt about her experience in Inner-Visions Gospel Choir.

My fondest memory was the year I joined IVGC before I was on any exec board or anything. I don't know it was just the people there. They were great. I was doing something I love and it was really a place for me just to go release stress from class and just chill like even though we are just working on stuff and focusing on our crap it was like it's such a chill environment every Thursday. I was like "oh thank you Jesus it is Thursday!" I can laugh, I can joke it's like it's almost the end of the week. You know that was definitely my release. I could be myself.



Many of the women in this study had stories about how their student organization impacted them positively. For some of them it took some searching before they finally arrived to these organizations.

For some of the students they had ventured out to be apart of the more traditional campus student organizations before joining culturally relevant organizations. They described instances where they did feel welcome into those spaces. They shared that it was a huge “pill to swallow” when they pursued organizations that didn’t necessarily want them in return. Some of them tried predominately White honors fraternities and other organizations that did not call them back. For those who were actually able to join predominantly White student organizations where they had to work hard to facilitate cultural change. Grace was a member of a very competitive and prestigious women’s organization on campus and she shared how she felt it was her mission to educate the white women on Blackness so that they would be more sensitive and culturally competent during “selection.” While Grace was up for that challenge, some of the other participants did not want the challenges that came along with being apart of mainstream student organizations. Despite the tough challenges all of the participants where able to find supportive organizations that helped facilitate their retention at the University.

While meeting a speaking with each participant there was one aspect about student organizations that came up several times as a negative, in the sense those student organizations could be a liability to academics and overall retention. In the focus group the students talked a great deal about being over-committed or “doing too much.” Many of them regretted being involved in too many student organizations as freshmen and sophomores, which caused them to make some sacrifices for the sake of their academic livelihood. Princess recalls not doing well academically because she was so involved in her student organization:

My third year, I think it was my best year as far as being involved, but my worst year academically, because I was ... Starting off the semester I was the pageant mom for Umoja theater scholarship showcase, like a guy pageant. The guys did a pageant to win \$1,000 scholarship and I was over it. I was over the guys as well as over all the backstage type things. I only had one girl helping and she was helping me but I was pretty much over everything. Once that was over, I was the step master for the Umoja step team. Then I was also on the executive board for Umoja. I was doing all of that and other things, trying to work. Then the grade! It really just showed up in my grades. I started off well and I just, I just couldn't catch a break. I don't know what happened. It was just bad.

As mentioned before Princess was not a unique case. Other participants in the study echoed this trend of being over-committed or involved. The women in this study were leaders across campus and many of them led Black student organizations. In these organizations is where they experienced many of their personal successes, they were able to use their special gifts and talents and in-turn they were rewarded and recognized. Many of them developed their identities around these leadership opportunities, so it made sense that they would focus much more attention and effort into these spaces where they felt successful and appreciated as opposed to most academic spaces. According to Tinto, social integration along with academic integration is necessary for retention. The women in this study turned that concept “on its head” because while they did find support and belonging in these student organizations, for some of them these beloved student organizations became a threat to their retention at the University.

### **University Programs & Services**

One of the most appealing benefits of The University of Texas at Austin is the vast number of resources available to students. Many of the programs and services were established to facilitate student success and four year graduation. Each participant was asked if they participated in academic success programs, if they utilized any university academic services and if they have interacted with individuals who made a difference in

their success. They were also asked if they felt that the success programs, services or individuals helped promote four-year graduation. The responses were mixed, however the majority spoke very highly of various programs, communities and services. Participation in success programs were mentioned the majority of the time. For context there were ten freshmen academic success programs on campus. Eight programs were attached to academic colleges and two programs resided within another division.

Two participants specifically “called out” their academic success programs for negative experiences during their freshmen year and two participants said that they were not apart of any special programs or communities. However, those two expressed that they wished they had been apart of such communities. They described hearing about the benefits of such programs from their roommates and other student colleagues and wished that they had been selected for university success programs.

Rebecca gave her account of how she wished she were a “scholar” so that she could have flourished in her first semester like many of her friends. In this context “scholar” is a term used to describe students who participate in many of the academic success programs at the University. For example, a student in the Horizons Scholars Program would be referred to as a Horizons Scholar. Most scholars are recipients of scholarships, dedicated services and resources that are designed to help them transition, acclimate and graduate in four years. These programs offered additional advising (academic and non-academic), tutoring and academic coaching, restricted courses just for the scholars of the programs. Some programs even paid for additional services outside of the scope of the program like counseling and mental health services and career exploration services.

Rebecca recounted that it felt as though everyone except her was a scholar. All of the other Black students she knew where scholars. She could not understand why she had

not been aware or “scouted” for these programs and she expressed that she felt isolated.

She stated:

Because everybody was a scholar, they already had these groups. If you weren't a scholar, you didn't know anything, or if you wanted to find something out, you had to do it on your own. That was something that was really difficult for me because I really struggled in my freshman year. Everybody else was doing so well, people were getting on the dean's list, and I didn't know how they were doing it. Everyone else was a scholar.”

Rebecca felt that if she were a scholar she would have been a better student and would have gotten off to a better start:

Because everybody that I knew was like, “Oh, yeah. I’ve been a scholar.” I'm like, “How is that possible?” Nobody scouted me or anything like that. Academically, I struggled. I was very disconnected. When I came for orientation, I chose the worst dorm because I didn't know the differences between dorms. My schedule was terrible. It was like 8am to like 6pm. I didn't have a map of the school, so I didn't know that my classes were all the way in the Comm School and I got lost. I skipped classes a lot just because I didn't want to go to class. My study habits were really bad, so I ended up getting two C's in my freshman year. My parents were astounded. "You've been there for a semester. How is this happening?" I felt like I didn't have the support. I didn't know about college, but my friends were doing so well and getting all A's. So many people were just flourishing, and I didn't know why I wasn't. Then I found out that they were scholars and I was like, "Oh, it might be too late." Also, because I was just like, "Well, maybe I'm just not meant to be a scholar."

Despite her initial challenges Rebecca was able to make some slight adjustments, move forward and ultimately find her success.

Unfortunately, it was not as smooth for Celeste to get back on track after a bad first semester. Celeste was apart of two success programs. The first program she participated in was attached to a scholarship and her participation was mandatory. The program provided academic advising, peer mentorship, tutoring and practically a full scholarship. Which are all of the necessary ingredients for student success. However,

Celeste blamed the program for an unsuccessful first year at the university. She claimed that bad advising was the reason she had a bad first semester, Celeste recounts:

It just started off all wrong because they are the ones that made our schedules, well for the people that didn't know how to do it. I don't remember who it was, but whoever it was helped make my schedule. They put me in these classes that I didn't need for my major. I was in biology, French, psychology and a UGS course. It was a harder biology. They put me in French, and it's like, well I guess common sense will tell everybody else you go with the language that you took in high school, which I took Spanish. She just made it seem like, "Okay, it's going to be cool.

After hearing Celeste it was apparent to me that she was advised to take courses that were apart of the University's core requirements, which is what the advisor should have be doing for first semester students. However, the advisor did not consider Celeste's academic history and ended up placing her in courses where she was unlikely to be successful. After one semester she ended up on academic probation and eventually dismissed from the university at the end of her second semester.

Upon arriving back to the campus the following spring she was referred to another program within the humanities whose main purpose was to serve students on academic probation. Her experience with this program was more positive, because the program did just what it had promised and that was to help Celeste turn everything around. Celeste explained the success she made while in the program, "I got into a program called [removed]. They had requirements that made the difference. I just started to study more and I got into study groups. I met with my professors a lot, like once every week so that I could be on top of everything that we were doing."

Celeste spent the majority of her entire collegiate career on academic probation all because of an unsuccessful first semester. Luckily, Celeste's experience was the exception and not the rule. The majority of the participants had very positive experiences

in their academic success communities and with other campus academic resources like the university's tutoring center and the university writing center. These places were cited as "instrumental" to the students' college success and timely graduation. A couple of participants expressed that had these programs and services not been available to them that they may not have been able to persist.

For some of them, the success programs were safe spaces where they could be open about their academic and social vulnerabilities. Due to the student profiles of these success programs (first-generation, low socioeconomic, academically at-risk) the participants mentioned that for many of them these were the only spaces where they could go to interact with other students that looked like them or were from similar backgrounds as them. These communities afforded them the freedom to form study groups without the fear of being rejected or stereotyped based on their race and gender.

They could also be introduced to the "hidden curriculum" of the university through programming and mentoring. In this case the "hidden curriculum" referred to the unwritten and unofficial lessons, values and perspectives that some students, mostly white middle class, apply in order to be successful in college. For example building rapport with the faculty is not something that many students know to do as first-time college students. It is something that they eventually pick up as they navigate and discover what it takes to be successful at the university. Often times this is after they have already experienced difficulty in that faculty member's course.

Lastly, participants mentioned faculty and staff members (directors, program coordinators, advisors, student development specialists) by name as individuals who made a difference and pushed them to be their best selves. These individuals were critical parts of the students' success by providing comprehensive advising on more than just academics. These individuals provided guidance about career and for the students'

personal lives. The women in this study spoke very passionately about the lengths some of these individuals went to make sure they received the care and support needed to succeed at the institution. The ongoing theme was that these people went “beyond the call of duty” to help them succeed. When the participants described in detail what “beyond the call of duty” meant, the characteristics were congruent with the long-held tradition of education within the Black community called “othermothering” and the “ethic of care” (Guiffrida, 2005; Hill Collins, 2002) mentioned earlier in this study. Othermothering was a positive factor in the retention and success of Black female students at The University of Texas at Austin. Faith and Elle both referred to their success program directors as the “best people in the world” and life-long mentors. It is important to note that not all of the faculty and staff members mentioned by the participants were Black.

### **Financial Aid**

Financial support is a key ingredient to student success in college (Ganem & Manasse, 2011). All of the participants, except one (Ashley) in this study had a financial aid record at The University of Texas at Austin. Financial aid was both an asset and a liability for the students in this study. Financial aid was an asset in the sense that they had it available to them to help cover educational expenses that they would not have otherwise had available to them, and it was a liability in the sense that sometimes it just was not enough to cover all of their educational and living expenses, which created tension between working and being fully invested academically. Having to work in order to earn money to stay in school was a recurring theme throughout our conversations. Only two participants had situations where they did not have to worry about money. Ashley was fortunate to have parents who could afford to pay for her education and other expenses associated with moving to Austin and Elle was a foster child whose tuition was

paid by the state of Texas. She was also a part of a student success program that granted her a four-year \$20,000 scholarship from The University of Texas at Austin. On top of that she won a college essay contest that paid a dividend of \$40,000. All in all she amassed approximately \$76,000 to help pay for college.

As for the other nine participants, they all had to work to close their financial gap. Prior research states that students should work no more than 20 hours per week (Furr & Elling, 2000) and that students should seek jobs on-campus instead of off-campus (Astin, 1993; Furr & Elling, 2000; Pascarella et al., 1994). While some students are lucky enough to find jobs on campus that cover their financial shortfalls there are others where this is not always feasible. In this study some participants had significant financial deficits that they had to make up in order to stay in school. Working 12-15 hours per week for \$400-\$500 a month when rent alone was \$500-\$800 was not sufficient. To make more money and in order to get more hours some participants sought jobs off-campus where they could make more money and work longer hours including the weekends. However, once they secured those job opportunities, many times it came at a cost. Danielle shared her experience working almost 30 hours per week while taking a full course load:

So I know my junior year I started a new job and I was working retail and I went from working at “Charming Charlie” to “Alfred Angelo Bridal Store” and so, that started off pretty easy. I think I started that in October of my junior year, but by the spring I was working almost thirty hours a week, granted I was working the weekends too, but at the same time you know I was working almost thirty hours a week. I was usually somewhere between twenty-seven and thirty and on top of that I was taking sixteen hours my spring semester. So, that got extremely complicated, because I would come home and literally pass out like after work and no studying would get done. I’d wake up at like two o’clock in the morning and be like, “oh, my, gosh, I have work to do,” but I’m literally too tired to do it.



Without question, Danielle's grades suffered. In her words she literally finished that semester by the "skin of her teeth." Fortunately for Danielle she did not have to retake courses which would have impacted her financial aid.

As apart of their initial interviews I asked every single participant about their decision-making as it related to college choice. I also asked if they received scholarship offers from the various institutions they applied to in the past. Several of them were accepted to places that offered them full scholarships. Only Elle reported being on practically a full scholarship at The University of Texas at Austin. The others expressed that they did not get enough money and had to take out student loans or work. As a follow-up to every participant who mentioned that they did not get enough money to attend The University of Texas at Austin I asked them why they chose to attend UT. Many of them cited the prestige of the university or that UT offered what they wanted to study so it was an academic fit for them. Monique shared her story on why she chose The University of Texas at Austin:

My cousin Cory was taking me on a college visit. We drove to the University of Houston, University of Texas at San Antonio and we stopped by here (UT Austin) last. When we stopped here I loved it. I was like, "I have to go here." He was like, "Calm down, we haven't even been to A&M yet." I was like, "Okay, I'm going to go there and I'll choose between these two. The University of Houston is out the question, it's between UT and Texas A&M." I went on a college trip with my school to Texas A&M University. I was like, "I can't go here. It can't happen." I was so surprised that my mom was supportive of my decision. She was like, "Monique, at the end of the day, you have to go where you're happy. You've got to go where you like it." I was like, "Okay." I decided to go to UT and I love it. I'm looking at all the loans I have and sometimes it makes me sad, but I don't regret it because I really believe that I don't know what I would be doing at A&M. I just don't know. I ended up changing my major and A&M doesn't even offer what I would want to study there. What I'm studying now makes perfect sense to me and I love it.

What was interesting about Monique's story was that Texas A&M University had offered her a full scholarship. The University of Texas at Austin had only committed to partially supporting her with a few grants and federal work-study. Monique had to take out approximately \$4,200 in student loans every semester to cover her remaining expenses. Over four years that is over \$33,000, which is a sizable debt for a economically disadvantaged student.

While interviewing other students about their financial aid awards it was very surprising that at least two of the participants felt misled about their financial aid packages. They explained that there were unaware that their packages were only for their freshmen year. At the conclusion of the first semester they were met with the news that they had to search for additional funding, because a portion of their funding from the previous year was considered "one-time funds." This sent them scrambling to secure a substantial amount of funds in a relatively short period of time. The undue hardship that this created for the participants was identified as a barrier to on-time graduation, because students had to consider sitting out a semester or two in order to come up with the money to pay for school semester after semester.

### **Summary**

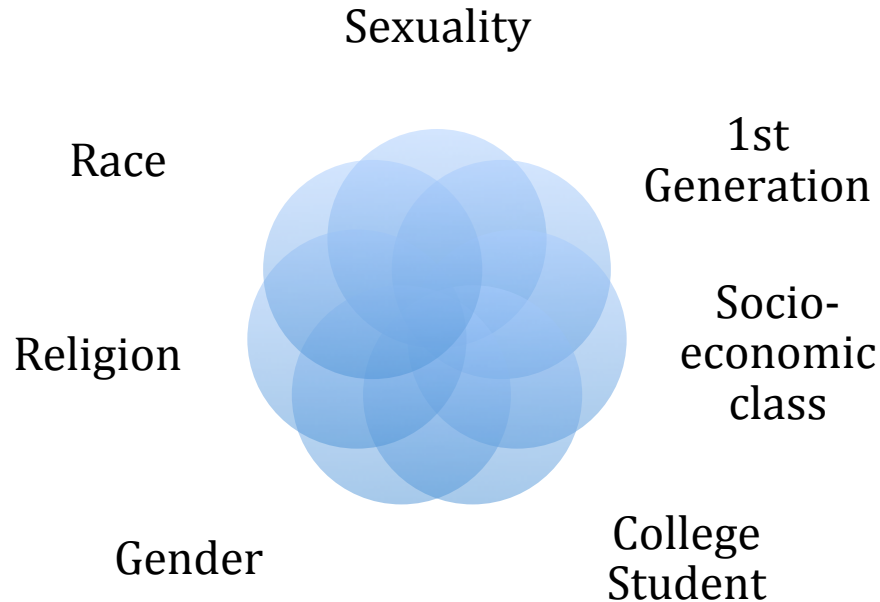
Overall the women in this study felt as though the services and resources available by the University made the quality of the experience better. Although they experienced negative things, there were aspects that were extremely positive that helped to mitigate their desire to leave the campus at times. The participants felt that the many offices and services aligned nicely with their goals and aspirations. Shelia commented that, "There is a service for almost anything a student wants or whatever a student is facing."

The next research question explored the intersection of identities for these women on campus and how those identities made it easier or more difficult for them to traverse campus.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION THREE**

The intersection of race and gender has been the focus of this work. However, the Black women in this study differed in their experiences, nationalities, backgrounds, appearances, socio-economic status, sexuality and beliefs. What connected them all was their struggle to be accepted and respected members of the university community. One goal of this study and the reason for including this particular section was to create a space to address not only the commonalities of the women in this study, but to also highlight their differences. One of the major critiques about research about Black women is that researchers, although well-meaning in their attempt to help improve Black women's position in society, discuss them as a unitary and monolithic entity (Nash, 2008). This section is an attempt to recognize and legitimize those differences between the participants in this study. Again, while this study primarily focused on two categories that intersect (race and gender), the use of a phenomenology helped reveal other intersections (class, sexual orientation, nationality) that were also present, which presented a more comprehensive picture of the subjects' experiences. In this section the intersections of being 1) Black and female, 2) West African, Black and female, 3) Black, female and lesbian, as well as, 4) Black, female and middle class will be explored. Below is a graphic of the most salient identities mentioned in the research.

Figure 2. Intersectionality Model. Visual depiction of the seven most salient identities of the participants of this study.



To answer the third and final research question: *How do Black female college students' intersectional identities shape their experiences at The University of Texas at Austin?* The data was coded using a thematic coding process. The codes were: Double Jeopardy/Multiple Jeopardy, Intersectionality, and Duality. Whenever a participant discussed a negative experience associated with being both Black and a woman, it was coded as “double jeopardy.” If the participants described negative experiences associated with multiple subordinate identities, it was coded as “multiple jeopardy.” If the participants made general references to their multiple identities, both positive and negative, it was coded as “intersectionality.” Lastly, if the participants described what W.E.B. Dubois describes as “double consciousness” it was coded as “duality.” “Double Consciousness” describes the individual sensation of feeling as though your identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have one unified identity.

Dubois spoke within the context of race relations in the United States, but imagine dealing with multiple subordinate identities. Not only being Black, but also being a woman, poor and queer for example.

The concept of “double consciousness” forces these women to not only view themselves from their own point of view, but also view themselves as they might be perceived by the majority culture. As a result sometimes they suffered from low self-esteem and low self-efficacy. By assisting them with exploring the other parts of their identities was designed to give them some amnesty from what society says about who they are. This was an opportunity for them to tell who they were.

### **Being Black & Female**

As the youngest student in the study, Faith’s experience at The University of Texas was not as extensive as some of the other participants. Faith’s interview was interesting because at the beginning she expressed that she had never experienced or recognize anything negative, no micro-aggressions or racial classroom moments. However, she went on to discuss how insecure she had become once she enrolled at The University of Texas at Austin.

The one experience that Faith seemed most effected by was her experience with the counseling center during her freshmen year. Faith was referred to the counseling and mental health center on campus after breaking down in a professor’s office. The professor suggested that she talk with someone. Faith heeded the professor’s advice and went to see someone in the center, but was really disappointed and had been apathetic about going to the counseling center ever since her first experience there:

I went to go talk to this lady. I was just telling her like how I felt discouraged, and how I felt like, coming from high school, I was always on top, and then I felt like I fell off the boat. You know what I'm saying? It's just spiraling down. She was

white, and she told me, "Oh, it just sounds like your ego is hurt right now." When she said that, I really didn't hear anything else that came out of her mouth. I'm like, "I'm really going through like some psychological stuff right now. I'm trying to figure out where I am in life, and you telling me that my ego is hurt, that I just basically need to suck it up?" I'm like, they gave this woman a degree to tell me, they are paying her to tell me that my ego is hurt? I think that experience really got me. That experience reinforced that idea that I was not going to make it. She was just like, "Oh, you're not really going through nothing." Basically, that's how she made me feel, like it wasn't really that big of a deal. I don't know if I didn't explain it to her well enough, or something like that. I feel like, had I been white, she would've been trying to find every resource in the book to like just help me come up out of that, like "Oh, you can do it." You know what I'm saying? Something different. I just feel like her response was so off for her to have a degree in counseling. I could've given myself better advice than that. It was hurtful at the same time too.

While Faith said she had not experienced any racism or overt discriminatory actions, she did describe the campus as an oppressive (hegemony) environment that impacted her academic performance and confidence:

Personally, for myself, at a time I became discouraged. I've always thought big, and when I got here, it was actually a point in time where I think I began to put myself back into a box, where I felt like I should follow the system. I became very discouraged my freshman year of college, which is why I don't think I did so well academically. I began to lose faith in myself, especially looking around here and seeing all of these people who I don't identify with ... I don't know. I just went back into the ideology of a hegemony, I was thinking that I was born to fail.

Faith's freshmen year was a challenge. She entered the university as a STEM major and practically failed every science and math course she enrolled in that semester. She felt as though the university had set her up to fail. In her words she said, "The University was set up for me to fail." She kept referring to the university as "the system." It was obvious that while Faith did not associate her feelings and experiences as racial that there was still an undercurrent that she was not yet able to identify and name.

In contrast to Faith the other participants in the study acknowledged that while there were some unfair realities and challenges associated with being both Black and

female that they loved being a Black woman. In every interview the participants were asked to describe their identities and to discuss how they felt about those identities. The pride associated with being a Black woman was evident. To an outsider it may have been puzzling to listen to them describe the daily challenges associated with being Black women and then moments later hear them discuss how proud they were to be a Black woman. Princess put it best:

I love being Black. I love being a woman. I think they are both beautiful things, but to be both it's just the "icing on the cake." I feel like everybody wants to be a Black woman and I feel like even though we go through so much, everybody loves the Black woman they just don't LOVE the Black women, if that makes sense.

She went on to discuss the misappropriation of Black culture on campus. She stated that in her opinion some white female students think that it is trendy to be a "Black woman." In particular she mentioned some of her Caucasian student peers who had an obsession with going to the tanning salon looking to achieve a "bronze glow." She also mentioned how she has seen white, female students "sporting" cornrow braids, long nails and big butts trying to look "urban," which she thought was offensive because she didn't think that any of those women would actually trade places with a her or any Black woman.

Black women are not celebrated when they wear or display those things around campus, Princess said. As a matter of fact when Black women arrive to this campus many of us abandon parts of ourselves in order to blend in on campus." Some of us don't want to be "too Black."

Princess explained that some Black women feel that some of the things that were acceptable back home are not acceptable on campus. For example, the way they dress or how they wear their hair. The idea of having to change or "downplay" your Blackness was also mentioned in an interview with Ashley. She shared how there was a time when she was negotiating whether or not to suppress her Blackness as a strategy for career

mobility. Her dream was to work on Wall Street and she did not want her Blackness and being a female to hinder her success on Wall Street. However, during her time on campus she had come to terms with the fact that there was no escaping being who she was, especially being a Black female:

I was like I really don't care about joining Black groups...my Blackness I'm trying to suppress that as much as I can just so I can make sure I'm on my path in my career but as I have been here around white people, there's really no way to suppress my Blackness so while I'm here for my education there is no way of getting around how my Blackness affects my future. And so for me I have to come to terms with finding out who I am and what that means for my future, what that means for my being in order to be successful even if it does mean my career because at the end of the day I know I'm probably going to have to work with tons of white people but I have to be okay with who I am first and I think that means understanding where I come from, understanding my culture, understanding my race and what I have to do to navigate, like I said before to navigate you know white people.

While some participants were trying to navigate that part of their identity, most had embraced and loved who they were. Many of the participants stated more than once that they felt like being Black and female at The University of Texas at Austin meant something "special." While speaking more with Princess, I asked why she was still enrolled at the university given all the negative experiences? Why not just leave and attend a friendlier, more welcoming campus? She responded:

I guess because of the same reason that I chose to come here, because when I graduate... if I would have gone to a predominantly Black school and graduated, it would be just sort of a like "Okay that's good." But I feel like graduating from here is like.... it puts the sprinkles on the icing, it's just the cherry on top to come here and do something that.... that Black women aren't expected to do. It's just bigger, I guess.

I posed a similar question to Elle. She was asked how people react when she tells them she is a student at The University of Texas at Austin. She responded that they are surprised:



Yes! So yeah I think they just don't imagine, well initially imagine that a Black woman can be at UT. First they think you must be a student athlete...or they assume that you must be in the top 10%. Like you had an unfair advantage to get here. I usually respond 'Yes, I was in the top 3% if they want to know'. But I feel like the top 10% benefits other groups more. For example it benefits white girls way more and no one is surprised when they say they are a student at UT.

When I first began speaking with Elle about her identity on campus the first thing she said was that she was an African American woman and then she went on to list a few other things. When probed about why she listed her identities in that order she laughed and said, "I mean... I love being a Black woman so I'm sure that is why I said that first."

She went on to elaborate about her identity of being a Black woman:

You know, someone asked me 'if you had to choose, if there was some war or something, would you choose to be Black or would you choose being a woman?' And I just couldn't choose. I was like well 'I'm a Black woman and I can't separate them. I think the intersection of being a Black woman is special.

Elle's statement was an example of how she understood that the two identities are inextricably linked. It was surprising that Elle was the only participant who did not separate her identities of being Black and woman. The rest of the participants identified with being Black first and being women second or third. Out of curiosity they were asked why they chose to identify as Black first as opposed to being a woman, or Christian, or another identity. Many of them mentioned that their Blackness was more salient. When anything negative happened to them personally they assumed it was because they were Black as opposed to being female. Grace gave her account:

I'm Black, female, Christian because... It's funny, because we just had a talk with TGF about being Christian first instead of Black, but I'm still working on it. I think that my Black identity transcends a lot of my other identities, specifically my identity as a woman. That's the conversation we had a while back about how I've never been in spaces where my womanhood was something that I thought was challenged and so now this year more so than any other year I've been recommitting to my role as a feminist. It is something that has been on the back burner up until now, but now it's more important to me than the others (identities)."

Another challenge for Black women on campus was that they did not see themselves reflected in many of the disciplines they were studying. They mentioned that they are one of a few in their majors and in the majority of the courses they took on a regular basis. If they wanted to be in classes where they saw others that looked like them they had to seek out courses in African and African Diaspora Studies or Women & Gender Studies. Toni, a humanities major recounted a time when she was at a college function with two other student colleagues who both happened to be Black women. They all had an opportunity to converse with the chair of the their department.

I remember one time like I went to a thing where they had pizza and drinks at the end of the year. Long story short it was me and 2 other Black girls. We talked to the chair of the department and he's like "oh how was your experience?" So we are all looking at each other because we are all on the same page. We are looking at one another like... "hmm should we tell him?" And so one of the girls was like we would really like to have more classes that kind of look at race and at gender you know looking at other things that impact psychological wellbeing and he looked at us kind of confused. He responded, 'Well you know looking at individuals isn't really what we do you know our discipline is the study of the mind. What you are asking about is actually another discipline, which looks at groups of people'. We got the response we expected. My major it's a very like hard science field so we don't even get to talk about applied stuff first of all so if you are a science person my major is for you um if you're not its kind of weird. The fact that I'm deprived of seeing people in the class like me but we are sitting in here learning about attachment relationships every time we talk about studying, I'm like I wonder if the sample had all white babies in it, which I already know it did so like every time I'm in class you know I wear my hair big and I'm asking so do you know about the racial make up of the sample group and like what the SES is and like stuff like that. My major is similar to other disciplines in that it can be very isolating. You don't see yourself in the curriculum or in the faculty.

### **Being West African, Black & Female**

In this study there was only one student who identified as African. The intersection of being native African, Black and female was a story of interest for this section of the study. Rebecca began our discussion stating, " I am as unapologetically

Black as I am unapologetically African. Like I can never separate that. I would say I make about 200 references to African culture a day, but I am just as American.” This set the tone for the rest of our time together. Like the other participants we began the conversation with Rebecca stating her identity and how her identities had shaped her time at The University of Texas at Austin. She began talking about her family’s identity as West African immigrants and now Americans and how it had shaped who she is:

We are very West African, but we're also very American. Like there's a dual nature in our family. I consider myself West African-American because even though I was born in Nigeria and my experience is super West African, there is also a lot of American in me... America has like colored a lot of my experiences and the things I've experienced in America are specific to West African-Americans. Also, I'm a citizen because of my mom so there is that. The Black thing is just because it's an identity that I took on much later in my life. I was one of those people who kind of thought that West Africans or Africans or immigrants were very different from Black people and that there were certain like just fundamental differences between the two groups, but with everything that is going it has proven that we go through a lot of the same things.

Rebecca elaborated that in the United States people who are Black phenotypically are treated the same for the most part, no matter if they are American or from other parts of the world (i.e. African, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latino, etc.) Traditionally, Africans do not identify as Black, but many colleges and universities categorize native African students and Black students together in one group. Rebecca expressed that she lived within a paradox of being Black, but also having to fulfill the expectations of being a model minority because she was African.

At The University of Texas at Austin the two groups intermingle however they both have their distinct communities. In the focus group some of the participants were curious about whether the African students thought that they are “better” or “above” the African American students. Ashley opened up the discussion with the question: “Okay so let me ask you this. From my experience I feel like those who came from Africa feel like

they were better than African Americans here?" The room grew silent waiting for Rebecca to respond. Rebecca graciously took on the role of speaking on behalf of all African students:

I think that there is a general feeling some African people have, like weird negative feelings towards Black people for whatever reason. I think it's also like a family thing, because a lot of times, your African parents don't understand Black culture or don't identify as Black, even though they are, but I've always identified as Black, and so I've been able to bridge that gap with a lot of Africans who haven't been able to do that.

The conversation was just beginning and the other participants wanted to know more about why African people do not want to be associated with being Black or African American. At first, Rebecca tried her best to explain, but it was difficult. After some thought, she decided to simplify her response by just talking about her family. She explained that before her parents immigrated to the United States everything that they knew about Black/African American people in America was negative. So her parents didn't want anything to do with being Black/African American once they arrived in the United States. In addition they pushed their children academically so that they would not be mistaken for being Black/African American. Rebecca acknowledged that this was not how she felt and attempted to explain further the thought process of most Africans about Black people in America:

There are a lot of Africans that think that but that's because a lot of people don't have an understanding of Black history in American history and they're like 'you guys have been here for how long and you haven't done anything?' But until you get in the system and the system recognizes you as a Black person and not an African, you know? Once the exotic thing is gone they're like 'oh you've been here for how long and you're still Black your still this' and at the end of the day it's all about unlearning and un-packaging all that stress and evil of white supremacy that's basically like, colonization is sick you know?

Unfortunately some of those beliefs are passed down to the children of African immigrants. On top of those belief systems are the actual negative experiences that young African students encounter when they enter the American school system.

The teasing and bullying is relentless. I can say this from personal experience when I came to America, from Nigeria to London and then here, the people that were making fun of me and other African people like me was not white people it was Black people. You know what I mean? At that point, almost all of the African people I know initially when we first came here we automatically got together because we didn't want to hang out with people who didn't like us, like white people would ask questions but Black people were the ones that were like 'oh you dark as night! Oh what's your name?' you know making Roots references...

Those experiences follow students to college campuses and do impact Black student-to-student relations on campus. One example at The University of Texas at Austin is that there are three major cultural student associations in the Black community: the African Student Association, Black Student Alliance and the Caribbean Student Association. They are affectionately known as "ABC." It is very rare for the three to intermingle. In an attempt to unify the groups, the leadership of those organizations hosted a joint meeting once a year. Here is what Rebecca had to say about that:

I also think it's interesting to see that within the Black UT, there's so many different segments and a lot of those segments will never intersect. So I remember when I was on the E-Board for ASA, we used to force this and I think it's still forced by the ABCs or whatever. But it was so weird because we would have this one event where ASA, BSA and CSA would get together and we would tell all the members to come together but outside of that we would never talk to each other. The only reason that people would go is because there was going to be food. And when I was on the E-Board, we would be like say, 'hey guys.' And I didn't know any of the people in CSA except for Lola because she was part of ASA, but she was also in CSA. I didn't know anyone from BSA. And it was kind of weird because I knew that there were some ASA members who were also in BSA but there were a lot of BSA members who would never think about coming to ASA. And they would be at Fest Africa, they would come to the Fest Africa After Party but they didn't like ASA, you know what I mean? I don't know what ASA is like now because like I said I'm not on campus much anymore, but I know that during that time there was so much tension between two groups and so when we tried to

come together it just seemed like it didn't make sense like we were better off by ourselves.

The other participants shared one reason that might be with Rebecca. They expressed that they felt as though the African students didn't like them and that the African students thought that they were better than African Americans students. Again Rebecca shared her perspective about why young African students might still be holding a grudge using the African Student Association (ASA) as an example. She likened the actions to sort of a defense mechanism:

I think that there were times that some African students in ASA were hostile to Black students, but I think that it was a protection thing. When I came to America, the people who were making fun of me for being African weren't white people, but they were Black people who didn't really try and get to know us. So Yeah! You can't connect with these people because they're not trying to connect with you so it makes sense for you to group up. So we've created these societies like ASA, because even though we are Black, African issues are very specific to us you know?

Toni, a biracial female who identified as Black revealed that she was a member of both ASA and BSA. Her perspective was that Africans may be resentful because they try so hard to detach or avoid being Black (by America's definition), but to the majority culture, if you have darker skin, it does not matter whether you are African, Caribbean, or Latino they are all considered Black:

And yeah and then I would say that being a Black person who has been adopted into ASA my first two years, it seems that Africans don't know that they're Black when they get here because of like all the negative things about what it means to be Black so it's like 'I'm going to separate myself from that'. And it's so hard for, I think for a lot of them to realize that you, an African or me, I guess technical African American like it don't matter because we all look the same to the majority of America...

### **Being Black, Female & Lesbian**

There were two women in the study who were members of the LGBTQA community. My question to Faith specifically was a follow-up question when she mentioned she had come out in high school. I asked, “Has your identity as a lesbian impacted you while you've been on campus in any way at all? Has it hurt you, helped you connect to different communities, closed off opportunities? Faith discussed in general how her race, gender and sexuality has traditionally been seen as a negative in society. “I just feel like being Black is already a handicap in America, and then, on top of that, being a Black woman who is gay is even worse.” This belief caused her to retreat a bit. While she was out and open about her sexuality in the past, when she arrived at the university she tended not to mention it casually to people. She expressed that only her closest friends knew that she was gay.

In Ashley’s interview she was asked about her identity, she replied, “Black, successful, young woman.” I believed that she was done and then abruptly she stated, “Bisexual.” After a giggle or two I asked her the same follow-up question I had asked Faith, “Has your identity as a bisexual woman impacted you while you've been on campus in any way at all? Has it hurt you, helped you connect to different communities, closed off opportunities? She replied that she wasn’t really “out” on campus. Again, she didn’t want anything about her personal life to damage her prospect of making it to Wall Street and becoming a successful businesswoman.

For the both of them it reminded me of what Princess said in her interview... that Black women come to campus and abandon parts of themselves in order to blend in or fit in on campus. These were two more examples of Black women muting their true identities in order not to compromise their positions at the institution. Neither one of these students felt as though they had a safe space outside of close friends to share that

particular part of their identities. They had not been active in any LGBTQA organizations or the university's Gender and Sexuality Center.

### **Being Black, Female & Middle Class**

Ashley, Rebecca and Shelia all came from middle class backgrounds. All had at least one parent and siblings that earned a four-year baccalaureate degree. All attended predominantly white schooling environments in high school. While Ashley was the only one who did not have a financial aid record the others had records, but were not awarded much need-based financial aid. Instead they had many more student loans than the rest of the cohort.

While interviewing the young women in this study it was apparent to me that this sub-group of women described their experiences slightly different from the others. It was almost as though their socio economic status afforded them some privileges that the other women in the study lacked. For example, when I spoke with Ashley, Rebecca and Sheila about racial matters on campus it did not seem to “rattle” them as much as the other young women in the study. They just let things “roll off their backs.” There was not much that surprised them. At times it seemed that their attitudes were like this is just the way the world is. I could not help but to ascertain that this may have been due to their exposure and experience in predominantly white school environments. So I probed there.

Shelia affirmed my hypothesis. She discussed dealing with race issues dating back to middle and high school, so these issues on campus were not a surprise. When she heard the other participants sharing their experiences in the focus group she was not surprised and wanted to offer an alternative viewpoint and approach to dealing with these negative experiences. She had a “been there, done that” disposition:

I don't think anything was ever bad enough to make me bitter in regards to race. I think part of that was because there were always other races around when I was



growing up. I was always a minority unless we went to church. My parents went to a Black church, so that was really the only time while I was around only Black people. Outside of that, I was always a minority. I was always used to it. A lot that I can identify with is more the micro-aggressions as opposed to blatant racism outside of being called the N word. That's pretty blatant, but outside of that, it's just little series of things along the way. I feel like in a way it does also prepare you for what you're going to experience in the real world too because when I start working and stuff, it's going to be the same thing over again. You'll have those experiences. You just got to know what to do with them. You can't flip out every time something happens or else you'll be the one who's unemployed.

She also shared that both of her parents were alumni and they had already had conversations with her about what she could expect coming to The University of Texas at Austin. This helped so she would not be surprised by any questionable encounters. She said, “all in all I was not looking for it so I have not experienced anything negative.”

Another characteristic of the middle class participants is that they seemed more confident and self-assured. They didn't speak much about feeling like an impostor. While some did experience academic challenges, they did not attribute it to a lack of academic preparedness or being treated unfairly by faculty. Rather they cited things like poor time management or under-estimating the curriculum. Despite some of the experiences that Ashley and Rebecca faced in their respective colleges & majors they never doubted whether or not they belonged in the environment. As a matter of fact when Rebecca spoke about feeling invisible in her communications courses she countered it. She gave an example of a time when she wanted her presence felt. She recounted a time when she made a statement:

I think that since I've been in the comm school I've become more Black and I'm going out of my way to be as Black as I can because I like making people feel uncomfortable. I remember it was like West African Independence Day and it was like at that point nobody could say anything to me. My hair was huge and I was like I'm going to wear make-up today. So I wore Black lipstick. I walked into class with my African attire and I just sat down. The professor walked in after me so she didn't see me at first and then she looked my way and she was just like “ooohhhh” with a surprised reaction and everybody was just looking at me. That

day the lesson was about advertisements or whatever and there were several racist advertisements and I was like, 'oh y'all really trifling today.' So I was speaking up all class like here's the problem with this. A lot of the white people in the class didn't understand and they were just like, "oh my God I didn't think this was going to happen" and the professor was like, "oh oh okay" but she kept showing all these racist advertisements and I was just like I don't know if you did this on purpose but this is totally fine with me. I can do this all day. Yeah so now especially if I'm going to one of my comm classes I'm always trying to be as Black as I can because at the end of the day I can't not be Black and even if I am dressed in Nike shorts and you know a T-Shirt and a fanny pack. Like even if I dress like that they're not going to accept me. So why not be myself and be the Blackest form of my self and be the happiest I can and you know at the end of the day if you make them feel uncomfortable you weren't going to like me anyways so it doesn't matter.

Rebecca made this comment in the focus group and her "matter of fact" attitude resonated with the other women in the room. Two other women started giving their account of times where they displayed bravery and confidence in the classroom.

### **Summary**

The goal of the third research question and this section was to create a space to address not only the commonalities of the women in this study, but to also highlight how they are different. Perpetuating that there is "one experience" of the Black woman is dangerous. While there are some commonalities associated with being both Black and female, each woman's experience is unique given her other identities as multiracial, poor, rich, lesbian, Christian or agnostic. Exploring what it means to be Black, female and lesbian is a different experience from being Black female and Christian. Or take for example being Black, female and poor versus Black, female and rich. One identity provides one of those persons more privileges and agency than the other. So we cannot discuss Black women as being one entity. We have to celebrate the different stories and consider that every Black woman's experience is her own. Every Black female student

does not need to the same service or support. However, seeing her and valuing her contribution to the university experience will go a long way.

## **Chapter Six: Discussion & Implications**

### **OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

This dissertation was a response to the lack of attention and support given to Black female college students. The perspective driving this study is that institutional support for both Black males and Black females on college campuses could have implications for addressing the Black student achievement gap at the nation's top institutions. It should be noted that this perspective is not calling for the elimination of or reduction of services and resources for Black male initiatives but is a call for the addition of services and resources for Black female students. There is much to be learned from both groups that could aid in the success of one another. For example, the strategies that Black female students have utilized to encourage their persistence and completion could inform strategies for Black males and vice versa. Currently, many resources are focused on Black males, however, in order to advance the collective, both groups have to bring their experiences and stories in order to address the achievement gap.

Perhaps it is because Black women are disproportionately represented in higher education, some may assume that programming, academic support, and/or an intervention for this group is not needed. That assumption, however, is problematic. Although Black women have gradually increased their participation, matriculation, retention, and completion rates in higher education, their struggles and successes are still apparent and distinct (Gold, 2011).

In order to understand the experiences of Black female students, successes and experiences two theoretical frameworks were used: Black Feminist Thought and Intersectionality and three research questions were asked: 1) What are the academic and social experiences of Black female college students at The University of Texas Austin? 2) What institutional structures promote or threaten Black female degree completion at

The University of Texas at Austin? And 3) How do Black female college students' intersectional identities shape their experiences at The University of Texas at Austin? The first two questions were analyzed within the Black Feminist Thought framework and the final question and data was analyzed within the Intersectionality framework.

To answer these questions phenomenology was employed as the methodology. Phenomenology was the appropriate choice for this study because it describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or a phenomenon. A phenomenological approach was best suited for this study for three reasons. First, this study did not attempt to examine an individual person or unit; rather, it sought to understand the lived experiences of several individuals matriculating at a selective, predominantly White institution. By studying several individuals, it is possible to include multidimensional identities into the analysis. Second, a phenomenology study would result in helping an outsider better understand what it is like for Black women to succeed in spaces that are not designed to facilitate her success. Thirdly, there is a precedent of prior research using phenomenology to address and explain Black student's experiences on White campuses (see Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson, 2004; Harper, 2009; Patton Davis, 2006; Stewart, 2002).

I collected data from 11 self-identified Black, female students. I recruited the participants in two phases. The first phase was a "pre-selection" and the second phase was a "final-selection." I based the initial selection upon three criteria: a) they must self identify as Black (African, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latina, etc.), b) they must self identify as female, and c) they must be enrolled and classified as a sophomore, junior, or senior. For the recruitment strategy the following networks were solicited: The Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence, an academic support community on campus; the Texas National Panhellenic Council (NPHC) sororities (Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta

Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, and Sigma Gamma Rho); The Fearless Leadership Institute, an academic and professional development initiative on campus for women of color; and the MEC's Afrikan American Affairs Agency, which is an umbrella agency for all Black student organizations at The University of Texas at Austin. In addition, campus administrators and academic advisors were contacted. With the use of these multiple sampling approaches, a diverse group of young women for the sample was recruited.

Each participant was interviewed twice and participated in a focus group. All interviews and the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and then uploaded into Dedoose, a web-based software tool for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research. Dedoose enabled highlighting and coding of excerpts from the transcriptions.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

The first research question generally explored the academic and social experiences of Black women at The University of Texas at Austin. Positive academic and social experiences translated into higher confidence levels, higher levels of integrated activities and confirmation that they made the right decision to attend The University of Texas at Austin. Negative academic and social experiences translated into thoughts of being inadequate, simple, and for some they questioned whether or not they should continue their education at The University of Texas at Austin. They discussed at length transferring to a "lesser" institution or to more welcoming environments like historically Black colleges and universities. The overwhelming majority of the participants reported having negative academic and social experiences. There were four salient themes that emerged: academic challenges, isolation, faculty interaction, and perceived racism.

For the first theme many of the young women revealed that they experienced *academic challenges* while at the university. They grew insecure about their academic

abilities and they questioned whether or not they belonged at The University of Texas at Austin. The students had internalized negative societal messages about their abilities as young Black women. What was most delightful about the young women who experienced challenges late in the collegiate career was the story of persistence and determination they demonstrated. Despite their experiences with academic probation, scholastic dismissal, coming to terms with being ill prepared for the rigors that UT presented; these students found a way to move forward. They wanted to persist and continue because of what it meant to have a degree from The University of Texas at Austin. Today all of these women have either graduated or will within the year.

The second theme from the first research question was *isolation*. In addition to experiencing academic challenges their individual situations were compounded by the fact that they felt alone. Many of the students in the study were ashamed to reach out for help, because that meant that they had to share that they had fallen short. When the Black women in this study were not doing well academically the realities of isolation were exacerbated, because the students were afraid to admit that they were failing or did not understand the material for example. Some of the students discussed the realities of feeling isolated in their courses. One example is that some of them were turned away from study groups. Another example of the students feeling isolated is when they felt that they were being “singled out” to discuss matters related to race in class. It is important to note that many of these women already felt like impostors at some point and were fearful that they would be “outed” as not intelligent enough to be at The University of Texas at Austin if they had spoken up.

The next theme was *faculty interaction*. There were mixed experiences with faculty. It was obvious that all the participants knew that there was value in getting to know their faculty and teaching assistants. As new students the message was emphasized

to get to know your faculty, because it could make a huge difference in the outcome of the course and your future if you plan to pursue graduate school or specific careers. Some of the students reported having positive relationships and experiences with faculty. However, the majority reported having had at least one negative experience with a faculty member. Most of these encounters occurred in office hours. The result of having at least one negative experience with faculty impacted how these women view faculty relationships. After having a negative experience many of them were fearful of approaching faculty in the future.

For the women who had the luxury of having faculty members of color, all of them reported feeling confident and proud when they approached them for assistance. Many of them reported going to office hours more frequently when they had a professor of color, mainly because the environment was safer and they felt that they could relate to them in some way. Many students mentioned that they wished they had more Black women faculty on campus.

The final theme for this research question was *perceived racism*. This study revealed unfortunately that both implicit and explicit racism is still a harsh reality for Black female students at The University of Texas at Austin. Racism was present to the extent that they perceived it as a daily obstacle. The students could recall specific instances where they were subject to microaggressions in classes, the dorms, study groups and just “out and about” in Austin. Students were impacted by the hate-tinged incidents on campus, like the bleach bombing of students on color in West Campus. It made them question their safety and whether or not they should transfer to other campuses. It was also interesting to discover from this study that at least three women experienced what they thought was racism in the same college. The implications of this indicated to the students that this was not a safe space for Black females in particular.



The second research question explored what institutional structures either promoted or threatened degree completion for Black female students on campus. Students identified three key themes that they felt could both supported their goals of graduation and threaten their goals of graduation. Students cited that their student organizations, especially the cultural organizations were key in helping them persist. At many times these organizations were the places where they learned tips for success, the hidden curriculum and were mentored by upperclassmen. They were thankful for the pitfalls they were able to avoid because they were members of said organizations. However at the same time there was the threat of overcommitting to student organizations, which did impact the grades of some of the participants.

The participants also referenced many of the university programs and services on campus. For the most part, with the exception of a couple of participants, they spoke very highly of the learning communities they were apart of and the university resources they utilized. For some the learning communities played a vital role in the academic success. Some voiced out loud that if it were not for their program that they did not think that they would ever see graduation. It was evident from the stories and experiences that these women felt as though the services and resources were a key ingredient to their success on campus and beyond. Two students discussed unfortunate experiences they had with their individual learning communities. These experiences involved being advised to take the wrong set of courses, which caused long-term challenges for the students.

Finally, the last theme for the first research question was financial aid. Students felt as though financial aid was both an asset and a liability. For these women who were already experiencing academic and social challenges, to add the burden of financial challenges seemed unfair to these women. While the awarding of financial aid or lack thereof had nothing to do with their race or gender, it was something that they felt

compounded the racial experiences. More students of color report having to work than any other group. Imagine not being invited for a study group for an important test and on top of that not being able to carve out the additional time needed to study, because you have to work in order to stay in school.

Financial aid was a liability in the sense that sometimes it was just not enough to cover all of their educational and living expenses, which created tension between working and being fully invested academically. Having to work in order to earn money to stay in school was a constant theme throughout our conversations. There are several suggestions that one could make to help mitigate this issue, but that would not fix the core issue and that is if the state of Texas wants all aspects of diversity represented in higher education, then the state has to assist institutions by providing resources for those particular groups of students. The institution is already doing its best to create on-campus employment and other opportunities for students to earn more money while on campus. However, it just is not enough.

The last research question of this study asked how these women's intersectional identities shaped their experiences on campus. The reality is that the participants' stories, while unique and personal to them, became a universal story that all the women could identify with on some level because they shared the identity of being Black women. As I stated before in chapter three the intersection of race and gender is particularly important for Black women because of the complex political and social context in which they live in the United States (Reid & Comaz-Diaz, 1990 & Settles, 2006). Isis Settles (2006) explained that Black women's varied experiences may lead them to perceive both positive and negative qualities associated with their gender and race group memberships. Intersectionality helped "tease apart" what women made of those experiences in their lives. Intersectionality is the idea that individuals can simultaneously have multiple

identities that create a unique experience. In this case we are exploring Black women who have multiple oppressed identities, which produces experiences that only Black women can identify. In this study, in addition to race and gender, other identities emerged like: religious identity, sexuality, and class identity just to name a few.

### **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

When selecting an appropriate framework for understanding the needs of Black women culturally, personally and socially at the university, Black Feminist Thought was the most appropriate framework that considered Black women's position in society as doubly oppressed and took into account the intersection of race and gender. Other frameworks were too general and did not consider multiple identities like being both Black and woman.

Hill Collins, the mother of Black Feminist Thought, states that Black women have occupied marginal positions in academic settings for a long time. She calls this marginal position the "outsider within." Being the "outsider within" is the status of Black women who occupy spaces where the dominant group is in power. Even though Black women are accepted into these spaces, like at the University of Texas at Austin, they are not able to become full participants because they are still invisible and their contributions are not valued.

This study was full of examples of the participants living as the "outsider within." Take for example the instances where Black female students felt isolated because of their challenges associated with getting into study groups. Being able to connect with your peers and study together is a proven strategy for student success and when these Black female students were unable to engage with their study groups they became vulnerable to failure. They were full participants in those courses, but still denied the opportunity to

fully participate in the academic process. In some cases the participants were totally shut out, which prompted many of them to create their own spaces. For those who were able to penetrate study groups there were times when they faced intergroup challenges. For example, as the Black woman in the group she was asked at times to assume the non-intellectual tasks and roles of the group or project. Those sorts of experiences made it difficult for the participants to achieve a sense of belonging at the institution. Many times there was not a personal or cultural fit for these women and many of them considered disengaging or transferring to other institutions.

As previously mentioned in chapter two there are three main tenets of Black Feminist Thought. First the framework is shaped by the lived experiences of Black women even though others have documented Black women's stories. The ways in which others have shaped Black women's identities have been characterized through stereotypes and generalizations (Hill Collins, 2002, p. 469). Unfortunately, many of the participants in this study bought into these messages. For example, at least five participants believed that they were not smart enough, that they had not earned their place at the institution and that they were impostors. Those beliefs were affirmed when they experienced not being picked for study groups and when they had negative interactions with white faculty and staff on campus.

In addition, many of the participants in this study experienced academic challenges. When they failed they automatically associated their failures with being academically underprepared or not ready for the rigors of the University of Texas at Austin. It never occurred to them that perhaps the professor those chose might not have been the best match for their particular learning style or that perhaps they had not yet fully developed the non-cognitive skills and behaviors that are needed to be successful in the university environment (e.g. academic behaviors, academic mindsets, perseverance,

self-regulation, social and emotional skills) which are skills that all students are honing as new college students. They had convinced themselves that there was an intellectual deficit.

Another example of the participants internalizing false messages was that some of the women in this study had internalized oppressive messages about their Blackness and femininity. Princess and Ashley in particular both discussed how they and their peers tried at one point or another to suppress their true identities in order to “fit in” and not be “too Black,” which they felt they had to do in order to become full and accepted participants of the institution. Howard-Hamilton (2003) posits that these negative images and messages are hard to erase when they are being reinforced over and over again. However the solution is that Black women need spaces and opportunities for self-valuation, self-definition, and knowledge validation. Many of the young ladies in this study found some of that through their faith, Black studies courses, student organizations, and academic success communities.

The second tenet states that although the experiences of Black women are unique that there are some intersections and universal experiences between and among Black women. In this study the participants found themselves sharing and reporting similar experiences even though they came from different backgrounds, were in different majors and at different points in their academic journeys. Even Ashley and Shelia, the two participants who seemed to be a lot less “bothered” by their racial encounters on campus admitted that they were targets of microaggressions and other insidious forms of racism and sexism all the time. They were not exempt because they were middle class Black women who had attended predominantly white schools in the affluent suburbs of their hometowns. They just coped with it differently.

The use of this framework was very helpful during the focus group discussion. The participants were able to hear and relate to one another's experiences. The focus group experiment became a counterspace where they were able to discuss different ways that they coped and they were able to share survival strategies. In this space the women were comforted and assured that they were not alone and that some one else was going through or had gone through a similar experience. They discovered a community while sharing their universal experiences.

The third tenet suggests that although commonalities do exist, the diversity of Black women as a group provides multiple contexts from which their experiences can be revealed and understood. Howard-Hamilton's (2003) explanation of this tenet is that the lives of Black women have been shaped by so many outside influences that Black women need to be encouraged to develop, redefine and explain their own stories. It was of the utmost importance for the women in this study to be able to tell their stories how they perceived and felt it. This is why it was so important to also use the intersectionality framework as a companion.

The intersectional framework was a great compliment to Black Feminist Thought, because it too recognized that gender and race/ethnicity could only be experienced simultaneously (Settles, 2006). When negotiating which framework/s to use for this study there were some limitations of Black Feminist Thought. Black Feminist Thought posits that there are intersections of experiences among Black women, but it does not emphasize enough the difference in Black women's experiences. In this study it was a priority to depict the diversity of women in the study as well as the diversity of their experiences. For example it was important to show the unique challenges of a West African student who struggled with the identity of being both Black American and West African. Her struggle with being a West African "model minority" and Black, which was viewed as a

negative to her close family and friends, all at the same time made for a very distinctive experience that no one else in the study could relate to.

Intersectionality provided a pathway to analyze the unique integration of all of their identities. In addition to being Black and female they were able to incorporate other, just as important, constructs of identity like socio-economic status, religion, sexual orientation and national origin to describe themselves. Through this framework participants were able to discuss whether those identities enhanced or compounded the challenges of being Black and female on campus. Future scholarship on Black women should include intersectionality in some way in order to inform and shift society's stereotypical perceptions of what it means to be a Black woman in society.

A bonus of this framework was that the women were able to break away from discussing being Black and female as a deficit construct. It was in research question three where the participants began to express their pride and love being a Black woman. Some of them specifically mentioned that being both Black and a woman was "special."

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH**

There is still a literature gap on Black women in colleges and universities. The higher education landscape has changed quite a bit since the pioneers of this body of research began. This particular study will add to the body of research about Black college women, but will specifically be dedicated to the experiences of Black women in majority White college environments. This study adds to the discussion the ways in which Black female students negotiate their Blackness and gender while attempting to earn their bachelor's degree. This research is timely, particularly due to the fact that the National Center for Education Statistics (2014) reported that African American women, for the first time, have surpassed every other group in college entrance based on race and gender

(2014). As Black women continue to enter PWIs in greater numbers (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004), it was important to look at how their multiple identities impacted their experiences and how those experiences influenced or threatened their retention and persistence outlook at this particular institution type.

In surveying the literature there were not any studies that looked at Black women's experiences at large, tier one, predominantly White institutions like the University of Texas at Austin. Much of the existing research studied women at historically Black college and universities, small liberal arts colleges, smaller state colleges and community colleges. The unique contribution of this study rests in the selection of the site. The University of Texas at Austin was selected for several reasons: 1) The University Texas at Austin is the flagship of the state of Texas and it has more selective admissions criteria than many public and private institutions in the country. Thus, UT Austin provides a unique balance between elite admissions criteria and a responsibility to serve the state's citizens. 2) There is a strong institutional commitment to diversity that is reflective through policy and practice. Examples include the creation of the Division of Diversity of Community Engagement, the variety of support programs available to students and the commitments of the CSUs (colleges, schools, and units) who invest in student success initiatives. In addition the university have a track record of making financial aid decisions that attract a diverse student population (Laude, 2013). 3) It is similar to many predominantly White institutions nationwide that struggle to recruit and graduate Black students. 4) There is a recognized African American male academic initiative on campus that creates an interesting dynamic. 5) The Black female population (including graduate students) is only 2.8 percent. 6) Lastly, the institution's use of the race neutral top 10% percent rule for admissions makes it a unique place to study the



experiences of Black women since all but one participant were admitted under that criteria to the institution.

In the state of Texas the legislature mandates that all Texas high school graduates who graduate within the top 10% of their high school's graduating class are eligible for admission into any public state institution of higher education (Texas House Bill 588). This ensures that students from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds have equal access to institutions of higher learning in the state of Texas. Many of the young women expressed more than once that had it not been for this law that they would not have been admitted into the University of Texas at Austin. The participants in this study demonstrated great resilience despite them feeling like there were not prepared for the University of Texas at Austin. Again, many of them felt that the only reason there were students there was because of this policy.

This study did not do enough of interrogating those resilient behaviors. One of the objectives for this study was to uncover the coping and success strategies of the Black female students at the University of Texas at Austin. For example, one of the study's sub-questions was what coping strategies did they employ? This study was only able to capture two coping strategies: 1) participants using their faith to cope with the everyday struggles that come with living in oppressive environments and 2) the creation of counterspaces (study groups with people of color). Future research should explore the many ways that Black women cope in this environment and also what other success strategies they use to obtain a degree.

Even with the contribution of this study there is much to be desired as it relates to research on Black college women. Considering the systemic barriers for Black women in higher education, future research should be expanded to investigate and identify the best institutional types and best practices that promote Black women's success in higher

education. Some researchers suggest that historically Black colleges (Fleming, 1984; Watt, 1997; Zamani, 2003), and small elite private colleges (Perkins, 1997) are institutional types with proven best practices for Black women's success in college. The findings from that research could have implications for places like the University of Texas that could help increase success rates for Black women at large predominantly White institutions.

Research should also be expanded to investigate the future implications (career and personal) for women who matriculate through PWIs, which could include exploring whether or not the university environment prepared them to handle and/or thrive in environments that resembled their university environments and examining whether the resilient behaviors they acquired in college are transferred over to their career and workplace environments. This particular research interest was peaked by Shelia and Ashley; participants who both seemed preoccupied and focused on career. Both students indicated that they had encountered racism and sexism on campus often, however they did not fret much over it, because they were so used to it. They felt that how they chose to handle it now would prepare them on how to handle it in the future once they graduated and began working in their careers. This research could have implications for Black women's long-term career satisfaction and wellbeing.

Finally, more quantitative analysis of the Black women's experiences at PWIs could provide a more complete picture of what it is like to be a Black woman on these campuses. A delimitation of this study was that the sample size for this study was too small to make generalizations. While I may have strong feelings that the majority of women in these environments have similar experiences this particular study did not allow me to draw those conclusions. Large quantitative studies would allow for researchers to make those assertions. Those studies should explore general campus climate perceptions,

experiences based on academic discipline (e.g. STEM), the influence of educational background on college success for this group and the influence of family on college success for this group just to name a few.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The individual experiences of the women in this study illuminated that there were areas of improvement related to general campus climate, faculty/student affairs and the delivery of services that would make the University of Texas at Austin a more welcoming place for Black female students. In terms of practice, this study helped me to derive several recommendations for the institution. Organizational leaders and the administration should consider recruiting and hiring more faculty & staff who are Black women. This could impact Black female students' sense of belonging. Being able to connect and see individuals who looked like them in positions of power had an impact on these students' academic satisfaction and sense of belonging to the institution.

Secondly, because of the numerous negative faculty interactions mentioned in this study the university should consider requiring all faculty and staff members who have direct student contact to complete diversity and cultural competency training in order to decrease the occurrences of racial and gender bias, as well as, discrimination in classrooms and in office hours. Implementing this practice would not only prepare faculty and staff members in working with Black female student, but it would prepare them to work with other diverse groups of student. To entice faculty to participate the administration should consider making these requirements part of the process for obtaining tenure at the institution. A less political approach would be to introduce the training during new faculty and staff orientation. This way all new faculty and student support staff would be equipped to support students from diverse backgrounds.

Finally, after analyzing the data against the theoretical frameworks it was concluded that in order to address the academic success challenges, as well as, the campus climate issues that the institution should consider investing more in the Black female student experience at the University of Texas at Austin. This along with what they are already doing with Black males on campus could address the persistent achievement gap (four year graduation) of Black students at the University of Texas at Austin. While the university does recognize cultural student organizations, like Black sororities and Black women's student organizations this recommendation is for the institution to consider supporting Black female students through a university funded student success initiative. This could be a controversial step for the institution, because of the focus on one particular group. However, the position could be justified through the data that was provided in the table two of chapter one.

The level of educational attainment for African American women has risen very slowly and still sits significantly lower level than that of white women at the University of Texas at Austin. In addition to the low completion rates for Black women at the University of Texas at Austin, it seems that the attention and resources are evading them and being directed other places. Due to the rise in strategic programming and resources for African American male students, it seems that African American females have become even more invisible on college campuses (Muhammad & Dixson, 2008; Sims, 2008). A retention and support program for African American male students is currently supported by the University of Texas in an effort to remedy the low success rates for African American males at the university. In comparison, there is nothing comparable on campus from Black women. As a matter of fact there are not any programs similar in mission for Black female college students that I have found.

The realities of isolation, a non-supportive campus, and an invisible status have influenced Black female college students to become self-reliant (Fleming, 1983) and inventive when it comes to survival in predominantly white environments, but they should not have to. Many Black women have developed important social support resources often as a result of the need to routinely meet adversity (Bradley & Lipford-Sanders, 2003). The group validation of academic, racial, and cultural experiences empowers these women by allowing them to let go of stereotypes and to internalize more affirming messages about themselves and others (Vasquez & Han, 1995). Survival for Black women is contingent upon their ability to find counterspaces where they can discuss their experiences with people like them (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

In the spring of 2013 while conducting this study a model for success and practice emerged from this research. An unofficial success initiative was established to address the needs of women of color at The University of Texas at Austin. We took a theory to practice approach that includes traditional student affairs theories (Astin, 1987; Cross 1971 & 2001, Pascarella, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1987) along with Black Feminist Thought and Intersectionality in an attempt to help women of color succeed at the University of Texas at Austin. We implemented a comprehensive support community for women of color entitled *The Fearless Leadership Institute*. The program focuses on three main areas of development: academic development, personal development and professional development. Through these main tenets we hoped to promote resilient behaviors, increase retention from year to year and encourage graduation in four years. In addition we were determine to help promote positive self-esteem and self-love within these female college students.

The philosophy undergirding this model is the idea that these young college women will not perform to their fullest potential as scholars or professionals if their

personal lives are not balanced and/or healthy. Therefore a holistic model of support was proposed to aid in developing women of color in these three areas.

Figure 3. Fearless Leadership Institute Model. Visual depiction of the three main areas of development the institute focuses on with Black women who participate with the initiative.



This was done through a series of one on one advising meetings, workshops and events. Once a year, the Fearless Leadership Institute hosts an off-campus leadership retreat. Several students indicated they were interested in obtaining more direction and clarification on life, motivation and tips for success. Some needed guidance on how to balance the ever so difficult juggling act of college life and preparing for the future. Others sought self-acceptance and advice on friendship. At the retreat the students were exposed to teachings and activities that allowed them to grow and fine-tune their perspective on their ability to achieve their short-term and long-term goals. Furthermore,

they received tools to independently problem solve, execute and lead fearlessly. Examples of topics in workshops and retreats include: networking, entrepreneurship, self-esteem, branding, women of color navigating corporate America, issues related to domestic violence, managing mental health and wealth building just to name a few.

The last major component of the Fearless Leadership Institute is the mentoring component. There are two mentor opportunities available to students involved with the institute. The first mentorship opportunity was developed in partnership with the Town Lake Chapter of the Links, Incorporated. The Links, Incorporated is an organization of Black professional women who are accomplished in their respective career fields. These women are also dedicated and active women in their respective community. The young women participants are pair with a Links member based on career interests or other compelling connections for professional and personal advice. The second mentor opportunity affords young women the opportunity to connect with a University of Texas at Austin faculty or staff member, alumnae or graduate student. The FLI mentorship program fills a much-needed gap on campus for culturally sensitive mentoring relationships.

Today the Fearless Leadership Institute has established and cultivated a culture of academic excellence among young women of color at The University of Texas at Austin. Students' benefit from one-on-one advising with a FLI staff member, academic support, tutoring, coaching and a variety of workshops dedicated to developing academic achievement and person and professional growth. In FLI's inaugural year the staff logged over 350 student contact hours and the more than 100 active participants of FLI marked a cumulative grade point average of 3.02 and a retention rate of 97.8%.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to discover what it was like to be a Black female student at the University of Texas at Austin. In order to get a full picture they were asked about their academic and social experiences, what things promoted or threatened their goals of graduation and how their intersectional identities impacted their time on campus. The use of phenomenology as a method revealed that Black female students constantly faced adversity, but still displayed resiliency. These students had experienced some common challenges on campus, however they were able to problem solved in diverse ways because of their diverse backgrounds. The early challenges and failures that they experienced sharpened them and prepared them for success at the institution.

These women were able to fend off the negative messages they received throughout campus by retreating to their counterspaces (student organizations) and coping through their faith. Future research should focus more on how these women cope and what other success strategies they have used in order to persevere. In addition it would be beneficial to learn what other institutional types like HBCUs and small liberal arts colleges are doing to promote success and inclusive environments for Black female students that could be applied to student success at the University of Texas at Austin. Finally, future research should investigate what happens to these women once they leave campus and forge into career environments that resemble their campus environments.

In order to support these students the university should consider the recommendations from this study to increase Black female representation in classrooms and on campus, encourage faculty to seek diversity and cultural competency training that would prepare university faculty and staff to work with diverse groups of students, not just Black female students and finally the institution should consider investing in Black female students by creating and funding a success initiative. This would affirm that the



university is committed to enhancing the chances for career, academic, personal and professional success for all students and not just a select few.

## Appendices

### APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

#### Email to University Partners

Dear <University Partner>,

My name is Tiffany Tillis and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Leadership Program. I am conducting a study on the experiences of Black female students here at The University of Texas at Austin and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved this study. I am seeking juniors and seniors who are currently enrolled and who are within three semesters of graduating with their bachelor's degree. If you know of any students who fit these characteristics and would be willing to talk about the experiences in college, please for their contact information to me (email or phone). Also, please feel free to forward this email to anyone you think might know students willing to participate.

If you have any question or concerns about the study or the recruitment of students, please feel free to contact me. Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Tiffany Tillis

#### Email to Prospective Participants

Dear <Student>,

My name is Tiffany Tillis and I am a graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin in the department of Higher Education Administration in the College of Education. I am conducting a research project on African American female college students at 4-year predominately White institutions. This study will investigate the strategies and/or practices that promote success (degree completion) at these highly selective institutions.

I am contacting you because this listserv will aid me in identifying African American female college students at four-year predominantly white institutions for my study. I am looking for participants who are currently enrolled in a 4-year, predominantly White accredited institution. Participants can be at any stage of their college journey, however I will give preference to juniors and seniors. Participation will include one 60-minute focus group and two individual interviews with the students, all of which will be audio recorded. Appointments will be scheduled with each participant with an agreed time and

location convenient to you. Participation in this study is voluntary and if chosen for this study all information shared will remain confidential.

This research is a passion of mine, because I am an African American female who came from a schooling environment that did not really prepare me for the rigors of a tier one, 4-year, predominantly White, research institution in Texas. There were several strategies I was able to employ and services that I utilized that encouraged my persistence through my bachelor's degree and have sustained me until now, pursuing a doctoral degree in higher education administration.

African American females experience the double jeopardy of being both African American and female, which presents a unique experience that no other group/s of people experience. I'm interested in investigating how African American women continue to beat the odds at these institutions. Even for those who are not doing as well as they would like, I am interested in hearing that voice as well to see where the gap can be closed.

Please complete this survey if you are interested in the study:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/BLMZ6M3>

If you have any questions about participating please contact me at: [tvillis@gmail.com](mailto:tvillis@gmail.com). Also forward this email to any African American female college students you may know.

Looking forward to your participation.

Sincerely,  
Tiffany Tillis

### **Email to Interested Participants**

Dear <Participant>,

My name is Tiffany Tillis and Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my study. I am conducting a research for my dissertation on African American female college students at 4-year predominately White institutions. This study will investigate the strategies and/or practices that promote success (degree completion) at these highly selective institutions.

Also, I wanted to remind you that participation will require one 60-minute focus group and two individual interviews, all of which will be audio recorded. The individual appointments will be scheduled with each participant with an agreed upon time and location convenient to you. Participation in this study is voluntary and if chosen for this study all information shared will remain confidential.

At this time, I would like to ask you to complete use the doodle poll link below to

indicate when it would be a good time to schedule a focus group. Lunch or dinner will be provided depending on the time chosen. Please click the link below and designate times in which you would be available to attend a focus group:

<http://www.doodle.com/uiwdfvmfiaive485>

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me. Again, I want to thank you for your support and voice.

Sincerely,  
Tiffany Tillis

## **APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM**

Study Number: N/A

Approval Date: N/A

Expires: N/A

### **Consent for Participation in Research**

**Title: When and Where I Enter: A Phenomenological Study of Black Women at a Selective Predominantly White Institution**

**Conducted by: Tiffany V. Tillis, [tvillis@gmail.com](mailto:tvillis@gmail.com), 512-796-5117**

**Department/Program: Educational Administration/Higher Education Leadership**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will answer any of your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

### **Purpose of the Study**

You have been asked to participate in a research study about Black female students studying at a selective, predominantly White institution. The purpose of this study is to investigate what the college experience is for Black women who choose to attend a selective, predominantly White institution where they are in the racial minority and what factors contribute to their abilities to secure a degree at this type of institution.

### **If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:**

Complete a brief pre-selection/demographic questionnaire or survey

Participate in two one on one, audio-recorded interviews with the researcher

Participate in one audio-recorded focus group with the other study participants and the researcher

This study will take approximately 4 hours and will include approximately 8-12 study participants.

### **Risks:**

The risks of participating in this study are no greater than everyday life. If you wish to discuss the information above or any other risks you may experience, you may ask questions now.

**Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study. You may enjoy the fellowship and sisterhood associated with participating in the focus group with the other study participants, as well as, you may enjoy the opportunity to share your experiences with the researcher.

**Compensation:**

Each participant will receive a \$10 iTunes gift card at the conclusion of the focus group and interviews.

**Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:**

You may choose your own pseudonym or I can give you one.

The data (notes, audio recording, surveys) will be password protected and kept secured in my laptop at my home.

The data resulting from your participation will be used in a dissertation and may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifiable information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in any study.

Any supporting materials that you may happen to provide to the researcher will be scanned and digitally stored in a password-protected file and on a password-protected computer to ensure additional security.

If it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review the study records, information that can be linked to you will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your research records will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions about the study feel free to ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation call the researcher conducting the study. The contact information is at the top of this page.

For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at [orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu](mailto:orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu).

**Statement of Consent:**

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

**NOTE: Include the following if recording is optional:**

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to be [audio and/or video] recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not want to be [audio and/or video] recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Date \_\_\_\_\_

As the researcher of this study, I have explained the purpose, procedures, benefits, and the risks involved in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name of Person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX C: PRE-SELECTION SURVEY VIA QUALTRICS**

**Pre-Selection Black Female College Student Survey**

1. What is your full name?

2. Please provide a reliable contact email address.

3. Classification (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior or Senior)?

4. College Major?

5. Age?

- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23 or older



6. Graduating High School GPA

- Below 2.0
- 2.0-2.5
- 2.5-2.7
- 2.8-3.0
- 3.0-3.2
- 3.2-3.4
- 3.4-3.6
- 3.6-3.8
- 3.8-4.0
- 4.0-above

7. Please list all high school extracurricular activities you participated in? (i.e. sports, honors societies, student council, choir, etc.) After listing all high school activities, continue with your current college extracurricular activities.

8. SAT Composite Score Range? (Qualitative and Quantitative Combined sections, excluding the writing section) Please answer truthfully. This information is confidential and will only be used to select a diverse group of participants.

- Below 500
- 500-600
- 600-700
- 700-800
- 800-900
- 900-1000
- 1000-1100
- 1100-1200
- above 1200

9. In what percentage did you graduate from high school?

- Top 5%
- Top 10%
- Top 25%
- Top 50%

10. What was the ethnic make-up of your high school?

- Predominately African American
  - Predominately Anglo/White
  - Predominately Latino/Hispanic
  - Balanced mix of all groups
  - None of these
-

## APPENDIX D: PROTOCOL FOR FIRST SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Interview #1 Protocol

### *Script*

Welcome and thank you for your participation today. My name is Tiffany Tillis and I am a graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin conducting my research in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education Administration. Thank you for completing the pre-survey. This is the first of two follow-up interviews that are not to exceed 90 minutes. At the conclusion of the two interviews, you will be invited to participate in a focus group with the other study participants to illuminate any commonalities and to connect and validate one another experiences.

This interview and will include 8 questions regarding your life's history. We will explore background, upbringing, your high school and your college choice decision-making process. I would like your permission to tape record this interview, so I may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself, please feel free to let me know. All of your responses are confidential. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used to develop a better understanding of how you and your peers experience The University of Texas at Austin might. The purpose of this study is to increase the body of knowledge on African American females in higher education and bring awareness to an issue that is often overlooked. The study is unique because it is an attempt to study Black women's experience at a specific institutional type. Much of the research on African American women in higher education focuses on the success of Black women in HBCUs and best practices for working with African American female students in general.

At this time I would like to remind you of your written consent to participate in this study. I am the responsible investigator, specifying your participation in the research project: *A Phenomenological Study of Black Women at a Selective Predominantly White Institution*. You and I have both signed and dated each copy, certifying that we agree to continue this interview. You will receive one copy and I will keep the other under lock and key, separate from your reported responses. Also, for your participation you will receive a gift card at the conclusion of the two interviews and focus group. Thank you.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop, take a break, or return a page, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission we will begin the interview.

Questions:

1. Please introduce yourself. Include your name, classification, major, and an interesting fact?
2. Tell me about your family background (Hometown, Parents, Siblings, Religious Affiliation, Any pivotal life moments). Try to be as detailed as possible.
3. Think back over all the years in high school and tell me who you were then. How would your high school classmates and administrators tell me you were?
4. Do you feel that your high school prepared you for college/UT-Austin?
5. Why did you choose The University of Texas at Austin?
6. What other colleges were you accepted into?
7. Are you a first generation college student?
8. Are you pleased with your decision to attend The University of Texas at Austin?
9. If no, ask student to elaborate on why the student is displeased with their decision.
10. If yes, ask student to elaborate on why they are pleased that they chose The University of Texas .
11. How do you feel about the campus environment? Is it welcoming, hostile, friendly, resourceful, etc.?
12. How do others perceive The University of Texas (i.e. family members, friends-here and away, former teachers and counselors)
13. Do you live on/off campus?
14. Do you work a job? If so, how many hours per week?

\*\*\* If participant wishes to discontinue study, ask if they would be willing to share why:

Thank the participant for her participation. And schedule the second interview.

## APPENDIX E: PROTOCOL FOR SECOND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Interview #2 Protocol

### *Script*

Welcome and thank you again for your participation today. My name is Tiffany Tillis and I am a graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin conducting my research in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education Administration. Thank you for completing the pre-survey. This is the second of two follow-up interviews that are not to exceed 90 minutes. At the conclusion of this interview, you will be invited to participate in a focus group with the other study participants to illuminate any commonalities and to connect and validate one another experiences.

This interview and will include 8 questions regarding your college experiences and how you make meaning of those experiences. I would like your permission to tape record this interview, so I may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself, please feel free to let me know. All of your responses are confidential. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used to develop a better understanding of how you and your peers experience The University of Texas at Austin might. The purpose of this study is to increase the body of knowledge on African American females in higher education and bring awareness to an issue that is often overlooked. The study is unique because it is an attempt to study Black women's experience at a specific institutional type. Much of the research on African American women in higher education focuses on the success of Black women in HBCUs and best practices for working with African American female students in general.

At this time I would like to remind you of your written consent to participate in this study. I am the responsible investigator, specifying your participation in the research project: *A Phenomenological Study of Black Women at a Selective Predominantly White Institution*. You and I have both signed and dated each copy, certifying that we agree to continue this interview. You will receive one copy and I will keep the other under lock and key, separate from your reported responses. Also, for your participation you will receive a gift card at the conclusion of the two interviews and focus group. Thank you.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop, take a break, or return a page, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission we will begin the interview.

Questions:

1. Please describe yourself?
2. Now that you are at UT What have your classroom experiences been like?
3. Give me a two-sentence description of your Freshman year, Sophomore year, Third year, Fourth, Fifth.
4. What are your professional goals once you graduate?
5. Have any of you experienced any challenges or adversity since you have been on campus (academic, personal, work-related)?
6. If you have experienced challenge academically, how did you overcome or deal with the challenge? What resources did you utilize (spirituality, campus services, family, friends, organizations, etc.)?
7. When things get hard or when you experience challenge, what urges you to keep trying/going?
8. Have you identified any mentors of campus?
9. If so, describe them, who are they?
10. If no, describe why you do not have a mentor?
11. Are you involved in any student clubs, organization, or university sponsored organizations?
12. Are you in any “360 connection” communities/academic support programs?
13. Are you involved or have you been involved in any romantic relationships since you have been a UT student?
14. Have those relationships impacted your school performance in anyway? (helpful or detrimental?)

\*\*\* If participant wishes to discontinue study, ask if they would be willing to share why:

Thank the participant for her participation. Get availability for focus group or announce the use of doodle polling

## **APPENDIX F: PROTOCOL FOR FOCUS GROUP**

Black Female College Students Focus Group  
Tiffany T. Lewis Dissertation  
3/11/15  
Welcome/Introductions

Good Evening and welcome to our focus group/session. Thanks for taking the time to join us to talk about Black Female College students at a Predominantly White Institutions (UT Austin). I am Tiffany T. Lewis and I have two Assistant Moderators: Telissa Spencer and Bianca Rosales who are both IE students who I mentor. They will assist with a few logistical things today.

What I have done was identify a few preliminary and prevalent themes that include, but are not limited to:

- Academic Challenges
- High School Profiles
- Role Modeling
- Racism/Perceived Racism
- Faith
- Relationships

There are no wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. Keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful.

We're tape recording the session because we do not want to miss any of your comments. People often say very helpful things in these discussions and we cannot write fast enough to get them all down. We will be on a first name basis tonight, and we won't use any names in our reports. You may be assured of complete confidentiality. The reports will go back to the county extension staff to help them plan future programs.

Well, let's begin with introduction of the participants here tonight. Also, please take the time to write your real name and pseudonym on this card. When you are done, please pass them this way.

### **Guidelines**

- No right or wrong answers, only differing points of view
- We're tape recording, one person speaking at a time
- We're on a first name basis

- You do not need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views
- Rules for cellular phones and pagers if applicable. For example: We ask that you turn off your phones or pagers. If you cannot and if you must respond to a call, please do so as quietly as possible and rejoin us as quickly as you can.
- My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion
- Talk to each other

### **Recorder (Assistant Moderator) Skills**

- Help with equipment & refreshments
- Arrange the room
- Welcome participants as they arrive
- Sit in designated location
- Take notes throughout the discussion
- Operate recording equipment
- Do not participate in the discussion
- Ask questions when invited
- Give an oral summary at the end
- Debrief with moderator
- Give feedback on analysis and reports

### **Questions**

1. Does everyone here identify as Black and Female?
2. Is everyone here currently enrolled at The University of Texas at Austin
3. What does being Black and female mean to you?
4. Would you consider yourself successful in high school?
5. Did your high school prepare you for college/UT Austin?
6. For those who say “no.” How do you believe your high school could have done better to prepare you?
7. What is like to be a Black Female at The University of Texas at Austin
8. Have you witnessed or experienced any racism or discrimination (blatant, micro-aggressions, etc.) on campus, in the classroom, in office hours, working on campus?
9. How many of you will admit that you have had academic challenges at one time or another as a student at UT Austin.
10. If you did, how did it impact your academic self-efficacy and esteem?
11. How many of you have taken the “Triple Threat” of Calculus, Biology and Chemistry all together in the same semester.
12. If so, would you do it again? Why?
13. Think back over the past few year and tell me about your fondest memory
14. Think back over the past few years and tell me about you lease favorite memory or disappointments at UT-Austin.



15. What do you think your experience be like if you were not involved in student organization?
16. Let's talk about outsiders and their impression when you tell them you are a UT-Austin student. How does it make you feel when people react that way to you with surprise?
17. Many of you cited you faith as one of the reasons you were able to stay motivated and persisted. Let's talk about faith. How has it carried you?
18. In the same vein... Many of you cited that you were encouraged to keep moving because you want to role model or be an inspiration to younger sibling or your nieces and nephews. Let's delve in deeper with that. Why is that so important?
19. Many of you shared previously that you are currently involved with or were at one time in student organizations? How have your organizations played a role in your retention and persistence at UT-Austin?
20. If you were recruiting another young Black woman to attend UT Austin what would you say to her?
21. How many of you are in relationships?
22. How have your relationships been helpful to your academic success here on campus?
23. How have they been hindrances?
24. If you could sum it up in a couple of sentences what things/people/practices have promoted your success at UT Austin?
25. If you could sum it up in a couple of sentences what things/people/practices have at times hindered your success at UT Austin?
26. What can UT-Austin do to improve the experiences of Black women on this campus?

**APPENDIX G: FEARLESS LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE ANNUAL REPORT**



FEARLESS  
LEADERSHIP  
INSTITUTE

**ANNUAL REPORT**



**F L I**  
FEARLESS LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

## WHY WE FLI

The Fearless Leadership Institute (FLI) is an academic, professional and personal development initiative for women of color at The University of Texas at Austin. The program is housed within the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (DDCE) and managed by staff members Tiffany Tillis Lewis and Thais Moore. Throughout the year FLI empowers students through bi-weekly workshops, special events and an annual leadership retreat.

The core values upheld by FLI and its members are leadership, confidence, authenticity, ambition, honesty, accountability, academic excellence, balanced life, preparedness, and personal and social responsibility.

The objectives that guide the direction of the organization are as follows:

### EMPOWERMENT

Provide a supportive and collaborative environment through empowering women and inspirational programming.

### HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Holistically develop women to maximize quality of life.

### SUCCESS

Provide opportunities and experiences to cultivate academic achievement, cultural exposure, professional training and ultimate success.

### PROGRESSIVE PLATFORM

Provide a progressive platform, advocate and establish a voice for women of color.

### TRAILBLAZER

Serve as a model for cultural support organizations at educational institutions across the country.

## ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

**FLI PARTICIPANTS  
CUMULATIVE  
GPA OF  
3.02**

The Fearless Leadership Institute has established and cultivated a culture of academic excellence among young women of color at The University of Texas at Austin. Students benefit from one-on-one advising with a FLI staff member, academic support, tutoring, coaching and a variety of workshops dedicated to developing academic achievement and intellectual growth. In FLI's inaugural year the staff logged over 350 student contact hours. The more than 100 active participants of FLI marked a cumulative GPA of 3.02 and a retention rate of 97.8%.

*"Luck found me when I first transferred to UT and met Tiffany. I honestly had no clue how to start my journey at such a prestigious and gigantic school. As a member of this organization, I believe FLI is an outlet of serenity. At every event there's laughter and warm energy circulating the room. I enjoy being a part of FLI and I'd recommend any woman to do the same. I love FLI."*

—Eunice Afenkhen

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Students are exposed to professional and real life experiences through workshops, internships and networking opportunities. FLI offers students best practices to become complete and competitive members of the workforce after graduation. From professional etiquette and style to resume and job applications, FLI leaders strive to provide comprehensive support for students to conquer the workplace.

In 2015 FLI students joined internship programs at Razilla, Turner Broadcasting, Whole Foods and Midnight Basketball in Sydney, Australia.

*"Being a part of FLI this semester has definitely been a truly wonderful experience. Being surrounded by amazing women of color who are doing big things is motivating and has inspired me to do the same."* —Telissa Spencer

## FLI MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

The FLI Mentorship Program engages mentors who can provide one-on-one support for young women who may need extra guidance, a listening ear, or advice during their college career. FLI mentors are available for young women both during and outside of FLI regularly scheduled events.



## PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT

FLI is committed to assisting young ladies of color develop confidence and core values for life. The institute encourages self-discovery and intellectual, spiritual and personal growth. Through mentorship, community fellowship and workshops focused on life skills, FLI participants are inspired to challenge themselves and fulfill their purpose, whether on campus, in the community or around the world. As an example, eight FLI students crossed the globe in the summer of 2015 to travel abroad to Australia, China, Cuba, England, India and South Africa.

*"FLI is a necessary presence for the continuing retention of women of color on UT's campus. The Fearless Leadership Institute empowers, lifts up, motivates, and inspires women of color to take their place as leaders on this campus and be leaders not only in their respective UT communities, but all over campus as well. Participating in FLI was beneficial and integral in solidifying my own confidence, voice, and presence while a student at UT."* —Jasmine Graham

## ANNUAL WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP RETREAT



The second annual Women's Leadership Retreat was held March 4-6, 2016 with 58 students attending (more than twice the number last year). Over the course of the three-day retreat, students were challenged and lives were changed. Retreat curriculum was structured specifically to address the developmental needs of college women of color as it relates to leadership. Cell phones were checked in at the start of the activities for each day to encourage full participation, and partic-

ipants were asked to dress in business casual attire to help develop a sense of professionalism.

Throughout the weekend students were given the opportunity to reflect on their aspirations. They learned about brand management, maximizing social media platforms and authentic leadership. The weekend came to a close with a celebratory ceremony, which featured the "confidence walk" – a strut down

the runway as they received their certificate of completion. Superlatives were given to students who exuded the characteristics aligned with the organization's core values— Miss Ambitious, Miss Congeniality, Miss Authentic, Miss Prepared, Miss Confident and the overall standout received the Miss Fearless award. Each superlative recipient received a statement necklace as a reminder to make a statement and leave a mark on all life's pursuits.

### THE LINKS BECOME INSPIRING FLI MENTORS

The Fearless Leadership Institute students had their first opportunity to socialize and network with members of the Town Lake Chapter of The Links, Inc. on Wednesday, Sept. 23, 2015, at a special event designed to cultivate relationships between engaged students and inspiring women. This event kicked-off a long-term relationship between FLI and the Links which includes mentoring, workshops and community service.

The Links, Inc. is a public service, non-partisan volunteer organization with more than 14,000 members in 281 chapters.

### TANECIA L. GARDNER: FLI OFFERED SUCCESS

Tanecia L. Gardner is a recent graduate from Houston, Texas. She joined the Fearless Leadership Institute (FLI) in the Fall of 2013. After joining the FLI, she was surrounded by individuals who have offered her love and guidance, enabling Tanecia to make a remarkable turnaround. FLI was there to assist her in some very personal life events. The directors of FLI "other-mothered" her by inviting her into their lives' and homes' as if she were one of their own. In addition they had countless one-on-one sessions in the office giving advice and providing practical tools to assist Tanecia with being successful. Tanecia's progress was remarkable; she made a 360 degree turn from struggling academically and personally to being a student leader. In the spring of 2015, for the first time since enrolling at the University of Texas at Austin, Tanecia made A's and B's in all five classes and graduated in December 2015 with



a degree in psychology, but more importantly with her head held high, looking forward to the next chapter of her life.

## HOW TO FLI WITH US

### Support

FLI welcomes your help! Whether its through your time or treasure, we look forward to the opportunity to connect, engage and collaborate to continue to serve women of color at The University of Texas at Austin. Your time will be well spent with students who will benefit tremendously from your generosity. Your financial contributions will directly support the programming activities throughout the year to educate and guide students to be their best self. Programming will include bi-monthly workshops, special events and the annual leadership retreat focused on upholding our core values and key objectives. To volunteer, contact Tiffany Tillis. To give, visit <http://ddce.utexas.edu/fli> for online gifts or return the form below.

We have received tremendous support from local and national corporations and organizations that share in the missions and work of the Fearless Leadership Institute as well as committed individual donors. Our partners, corporate and institutional supporters for the 2014-2015 fiscal year:

AAMRI	Leader Think
Austin AISD	Nothing Bundt Cakes
Aveda	Orange Brûlé
Body Shop	Sephora
Brand Group Idea	Students for Equity and Diversity
Coca Cola	Student Government
CPK	Tiff's Treats
Division of Diversity and Community Engagement	Town Lake Links of Austin
HEB	Wal Mart
	Whole Foods

## I would like to support the Fearless Leadership Institute.



Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to make a donation of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to support FLI's workshops, special events and annual leadership retreat.

Check made payable to The Fearless Leadership Institute/University of Texas at Austin  
 Credit Card     Visa     AmEx     Mastercard     Discover

Credit Card No. \_\_\_\_\_

CVV Code \_\_\_\_\_ Expiration Date \_\_\_\_\_ Name on Card \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

I would like more information on FLI and how I can support The Fearless Leadership Institute.

You may also donate by visiting <http://ddce.utexas.edu/fli/>. Click on the **Give Now** button to give online. All donations are tax deductible.

Please mail to: DDCE Development Office, 2304 Whitis Avenue—Stop G4600, Austin Texas 78712



The University of Texas at Austin  
**Division of Diversity and  
 Community Engagement**

The Fearless Leadership Institute is a program within the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin.

## CONTACT

**Tiffany Tillis**  
 tiffany.tillis@austin.utexas.edu  
 512-471-1205

**Thaïs Moore**  
 thais@austin.utexas.edu  
 512-232-7599

For more information about the Fearless Leadership Institute, visit [DDCE.UTEXAS.EDU/FLI](http://DDCE.UTEXAS.EDU/FLI) or email: [fli@utexas.edu](mailto:fli@utexas.edu)



## References

- Adan, A. & Felner, R. D. (1995). Ecological congruence and adaptation of minority youth during the transition to college. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(3), 256-269.
- Allen, W. R. (1992). The Color of Success: African-American College Student Outcomes at Predominantly White and Historically Black Public Colleges and Universities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(1), 26-45.
- Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The education of the Blacks in the south: 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Astin, A. W. (1987). Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education. *Journal for College Student Personnel*, 25, 301
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W. (1999). Involvement in learning revisited: Lessons we have learned. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40, 587-598.
- Aud, S., Fox, M. A., & KewalRamani, A. (2010). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic minorities: Post secondary participation* (NCES 2010-015). Retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010015.pdf>
- Aud, S., Hussar, W., Johnson, F., Kena, G., Roth, E. Manning, E., ... Yohn, C. (2012). *The Condition of Education 2012* (NCES 2012-045). Retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012045.pdf>
- Auerbach, S. (2001). *Under co-construction: parent roles in promoting college access for students of color*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Baker, C. N., & Robnett, B. (2014). Race, social support and college student retention: A case study. *Research in Brief*, 53(2), 325-335.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychology Review*, 84(2), 191-215.
- Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American Psychologist*, 37(2), 122-147.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.

- Banks, R. R. (2011). *Is marriage for white People?: How the African American marriage decline affects everyone*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Beato, A. (2011, October 8). *Black women: the most unmarried of people in the U.S.* Retrieved from Intentional Online News website: <http://intentional.com/2011/10/08/Blackwomen-the-most-unmarried-group-of-people-in-the-us/>
- Block, C. J., Koch, S. M., Liberman, B. E., Merriweather, T. J., & Roberson, L. (2011). Contending With Stereotype Threat at Work: A Model of Long-Term Responses 17. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 39(4), 570–600. doi: 10.1177/0011000010382459
- Bonous-Hammarth, M. (2000). Value congruence and organizational climates for undergraduate persistence. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: A handbook of theory and research* (Vol. 15, pp. 339-370). New York, NY: Agathon Press.
- Bourke, B. (2010). Experiences of Black students in multiple cultural spaces at a predominantly white institution. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 3(2), 126–135. doi:10.1037/a0019025
- Bowen, W. G., & Bok, D. (1998). *The shape of the river*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bowie, L. (2011). The economic status of Black women in America. Retrieved from NAACP: <https://donate.naacp.org/blog/entry/the-economic-status-of-black-women-in-america>
- Braddock, J. (1981). Desegregation and Black student attrition. *Urban Education*, 15, 403-418.
- Bush, V. B., Chambers, C. R., Walpole, M. (2009). *From diplomas to doctorates: The success of Black women in higher education and its implications for equal educational opportunities for all*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Bradley, C., Ann, J., & Sanders, L. (2003). Contextual counseling with clients of color : A “sista” intervention for African American female college students. *Journal of College Counseling*, 6, 87–91.
- Brooks, R. L., & Van Noy, M. (2001). A Study of Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy as Psychosocial Educational Outcomes: The Role of High School Experiences and Influences.
- Chavous, T. (2002). African American college students in predominately White institutions of higher education: Considerations of race and gender. *Perspectives*, 8(1), 142-150.
- Chavous, T. M., Harris, A., Rivas, D., Helaire, L., & Green, L. (2004). Racial stereotypes and gender in context: African Americans at predominantly Black and predominantly White colleges. *Sex Roles*, 51, 1–16.

- Cohen, A. M. (1998). *The shaping of American higher education: Emergence and growth of the contemporary system*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Coker, A. (2003). African American female adult learners: Motivations, challenges, and coping strategies. *Journal of Black Studies*, 33, 654-674.
- Cokley, K. (2000). An investigation of academic self-concept and its relationship to academic achievement in African American college students. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 26(2), 148–164. doi:10.1177/0095798400026002002
- Collins, P. H. (1986). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black feminist thought. *Social Problems*, 33, S14-S32.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- Collins, P. H. (1996). The social construction of Black feminist thought. In C. S. Turner, A. L. Antonio, M. Garcia, B. V. Laden, A. Nora, and C. Presley (Eds.), *Racial and ethnic diversity in higher education* (pp. 765-768). Boston, MA: Pearson Custom Publishing.
- Collins, P. H. (1998). *Fighting words: Black women and search for justice*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Conrad, C. (2008). *Black Women: The Unfinished Agenda*. Retrieved from <http://prospect.org/article/black-women-unfinished-agenda>
- Constantine, M. G., & Greer, T. M. (2003). Personal, academic, and career counseling of African American women in college settings. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2003(104), 41–51. doi:10.1002/ss.106
- Constantine, M. G., & Watt, S. K. (2002) Cultural congruity, womanist identity attitudes, and life satisfaction among African American college women attending historically Black and predominantly White institutions. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43, 184–194.
- Cook, S. G. (2010). Helping Black women to navigate troubled waters. *Women in Higher Education*, 19(5), 18-19.
- Crenshaw, K. (2010). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139–168.
- Cross, T., & Slater, R. B. (2004). The persisting racial gap in college student graduation rates. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 45, 77-85.



- Cross, W. E., Parham, T. A., Helms, J. E., & Jones, R. L. (1991) The stages of Black identity development: Nigressence models. *Black Psychology*, 3, 319-338.
- Cuyjet, M. (2006). *African American men in college*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Davis, L. P. (2006). The voice of reason: A qualitative examination of Black student perceptions of their Black culture. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(6), 628–646.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (2001) *The power of community: mobilizing for family and schooling*. Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield.
- De Mar, J. J. (2009). *Retention and access issues affecting Black women attending predominantly White institutions*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Marian University, Fond du Lac, WI.
- Drewry, H. N. & Doermann, H. (2001). *Stand and prosper: Private Black colleges and their students*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (2002). Does the Negro Need Separate Schools? In E. Provenzo (Ed.), *Du Bois on Education* (pp. 328–335). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Evans, S. Y. (2007). Women of color in American higher education. *The NEA Higher Education Thought & Action Journal*, Fall 2007, 131–138.
- Evans, A. L., Evans, V., & Evans, A. M. (2002). Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUS). *Education*, 123(1), 3-17.
- Fleming, J. (1983). Black women in Black and White college environments: The making of a matriarch. *Journal of Social Issues*, 39, 41-54.
- Fleming, J. (1983). Sex differences in the educational and occupational goals of Black college students: Continued inquiry into the Black matriarchy theory. In M. S. Homer, M. Notman, & C. Nadelson (Eds.), *The challenge of change*. New York, NY: Plenum.
- Fleming, J. (1984). *Blacks in college: A comparative study of student success in Black and in White institutions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fleming, J. (1996). Black women in Black and White college environments: The making of a matriarch. In C. Turner, M. Garcia, A. Nora, & L. I. Rendon (Eds.), *Racial and ethnic diversity in higher education* (pp. 223-232). Boston, MA: Pearson Custom.
- Foley, D. E. (1997) Deficit thinking models based on culture: the anthropological protest. In R. Valencia (Ed.) *The evolution of deficit thinking: educational thought and practice*. London, UK: The Falmer Press.

- Fries-Britt, S. & Turner, B. (2002). Uneven stories: Successful Black collegians at a Black and White campuses. *The Review of Higher Education*, 25, 315-330.
- Furr, S. R., & Elling, T. W. (2000). The Influence of work on college student development. *NASPA Journal*, 37(2), 454-470.
- Gándara, P. (1982). Passing through the eye of the needle: High-achieving Chicanas. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 4, 167–179.
- Ganem, N. M., & Manasse, M. The relationship between scholarships and student success: An art and design case study. *Educational Research International*, 2011, 1-8.
- Gasman, M. (2012). The changing face of historically Black colleges and universities. Retrieved from University of Pennsylvania: [http://www.gse.upenn.edu/pdf/cmsi/Changing\\_Face\\_HBCUs.pdf](http://www.gse.upenn.edu/pdf/cmsi/Changing_Face_HBCUs.pdf)
- Giddings, P. (1984). *When and where I enter: The impact of Black women on race and sex in America*. New York, NY: Morrow.
- Gilliard, M. D. (1996). Racial climate and institutional support factors affecting success in predominantly white institutions: An examination of African-American and White student experiences. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.
- Gold, S. P. (2011). Buried treasure: Community cultural wealth among Black American female students. In C. R. Chambers (Eds.), *Support systems and services for diverse populations: Considering the intersect* (pp. 59-71). Bradford, UK: Emerald Group Publishing. doi: 10.1108/S1479-3644(2011)0000008007
- Grant, L. (1984). Black females “place” in desegregated classrooms. *Sociology of Education*, 57, 98-111.
- Griffin, K. A., & Reddick, R. J. (2011). Surveillance and sacrifice: Gender differences in the mentoring patterns of Black professors at predominantly White research universities. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(5), 1032–1057. doi:10.3102/0002831211405025
- Guerra, B. M. (2013). *Fact sheet : The state of African American women in the United States*. Retrieved from Center for American Progress: <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/SOW-factsheet-AA.pdf>
- Guiffrida, D. (2005). Othermothering as a framework for understanding African American students’ definitions of student-centered faculty. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(6), 701–723. doi:10.1353/jhe.2005.0041
- Guiffrida, D. A. (2003). African American student organizations as agents of social integration. *Journal of College Student Development*, 44(3), 304–319. doi:10.1353/csd.2003.0024

- Guiffrida, D. A. & Douthit, K. Z. (2010). The Black student experience at predominantly White colleges: Implication for school and college counselors. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 88, 311-318.
- Guy-Sheftall, B. (1982). Black women and higher education: Spelman and Bennett colleges revisited. *Journal of Negro Education*, 51(3), 278-287.
- Hackett, G., & Byars, A. M. (1996). Social cognitive theory and the career development of African American women. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 44, 322-340.
- Harper, S. R., Carini, R. M., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2004). Gender differences in student engagement among African American undergraduates at historically Black colleges and universities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(3), 271-284.
- Harper, S. R. (2006). Black male students at public flagship universities in the U.S.: Status, trends and implications for policy and practice. Retrieved from University of Pennsylvania: <https://works.bepress.com/sharper/7/download/>
- Harper, S. R. (2009). Nigger no more: A critical race counternarrative on Black male student achievement at predominantly white colleges and universities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(6), 697-712.
- Hirt, J. B., Amelink, C. T., McFeeters, B. B., & Strayhorn, T. L. (2008). A system of othermothering: Student affairs administrators' perceptions of relationships with students at historically Black colleges. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 45(2), 210-237. doi:10.2202/1949-6605.1948
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking Black*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1990). *Yearnings: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as a practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- hooks, b., & West, C. (1991). *Breaking bread: Insurgent Black intellectual life*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Howard-Hamilton, M. F. (2003). Theoretical frameworks for African American Women [Special Issue: Meeting the Needs of African American Women]. *New Directions For Student Services*, 104, 19-27.
- Hurtado, S., Eagan, M. K., Tran, M. C., Newman, C. B., Chang, M. J., & Velasco, P. (2011). "We do science here": Underrepresented minority student interactions with faculty in different college context. *Journal of Social Issues*, 67(3), 553-579.

- Hurtado, S., Milem, J. F., & Clayton-Pedersen, A. (1999). Enacting diverse learning environments: Improving the climate for racial/ethnic diversity in higher education. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, 26(8).
- Institutional Reporting, Research, and Information Systems. (2012). IMA\_S\_GradRetention\_2006\_Fall. Retrieved from <https://reports.utexas.edu>
- Jacobson, J., Olsen, C., Rice, J. K., Sweetland, S., & Ralph, J. (2001). *Educational achievement and Black and white inequality* (NCES 2001-061). Retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001061.PDF>
- Jean-Marie, G. (2011). “Unfinished agendas”: Trends in women of color’s status higher education. In G. Jean-Marie & B. Lloyd-Jones (Eds.), *Women of color in higher education: Turbulent past, promising future: Diversity in higher education* (Vol. 9; pp. 3-20). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group.
- Johnson-Bailey, J., & Cervero, R. (1996). An analysis of the educational narratives of reentry Black women. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 46(3), 142-157.
- Johnson-Newman, D., & Exum, H. A. (1998). Facilitating healthy ego development in African American female college students attending predominantly White universities. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 36(1), 70–80. doi:10.2202/1949-6605.1068
- Jones-DeWeever, A. (2009). *Black girls in New York City: Untold strength & resilience*. Retrieved from Institute for Women’s Policy Research: <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/BWBGreport.pdf>
- Jordan-Zachery, J. S. (2007). Am I a Black woman or a woman who is Black? A few thoughts on the meaning of intersectionality. *Politics & Gender*, 3(02), 254–263. doi:10.1017/S1743923X07000074
- Journal of Blacks in Higher Education. (2009). News & views. Retrieved from [http://www.jbhe.com/news\\_views/64\\_degrees.html](http://www.jbhe.com/news_views/64_degrees.html)
- Kao, G., & Thompson, J. S. (2003). Racial and Ethnic Stratification in Educational achievement and attainment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29(1), 417–442. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100019
- King, D. K. (1988). Multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness: The context of a Black feminist ideology. *Signs*, 14(1), 42–72.
- Kusimo, P., Carter, C., & Keyes, M. (1999). I’d like to go to Harvard but I don’t know where it is: Bridging the gap between reality and dreams for adolescent African American girls (ERIC ED439205). Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Research Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Retrieved from ERIC: [https://archive.org/stream/ERIC\\_ED439205#page/n7/mode/2up](https://archive.org/stream/ERIC_ED439205#page/n7/mode/2up)

- LeCompte, M. D., & Goetz, J. P. (1982). Problems of reliability and validity in ethnographic research. *Review of Educational Research*, 52(1), 31–60. doi:10.3102/00346543052001031
- Lee, J. (2001). Racial and ethnic achievement gap trends: Reversing the progress toward equity? *Education Researcher*, 31(1), 3–12.
- Lee, Jr., J. M., & Keys, S. W. (2013). *Repositioning HBCUs for the future*. Retrieved from Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities website: <http://www.aplu.org/library/repositioning-hbcus-for-the-future-access-success-research-and-innovation/file>
- Lerner, G. (1992). *Black women in White America: A documentary history*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.
- Mattis, J. S. (2002). Religion and spirituality in the meaning-making and coping experiences of African American women: A qualitative analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26, 309-321.
- Mawhinney, L. (2012). Othermothering: A personal narrative exploring relationships between Black female faculty and students. *Negro Educational Review*, 62-63(1-4), 213-232.
- Mcgraw, M. J. (2006). *Understanding the racial disparity in graduation rates at a large Ivy League university* (CHERI Working Paper #90). Retrieved from Cornell University: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/student/15>
- Metz, G. (2002). Challenges and changes to Tinto's persistence theory (ERIC ED471529). Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association, Columbus, OH. Retrieved from ERIC: [https://archive.org/stream/ERIC\\_ED471529/ERIC\\_ED471529\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/ERIC_ED471529/ERIC_ED471529_djvu.txt)
- Morris, J. (1999). A pillar of strength: an African-American school's communal bonds with families and community since *Brown*. *Urban Education*, 33(5), 584–605.
- Morris, M. (2007). *Sisters in the struggle: Individual and institutional factors affecting the persistence of Black, female, doctoral students at U.S. predominantly white institutions*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, MA
- Mortenson, T. (2000). Do Black students on a White campus value the university's efforts to retain them? *Academe*, Nov/Dec, 1-6.
- Moses, Y. T. (1989). *Black women in academe: Issues and strategies*. Retrieved from Association of American Colleges: <http://www.aacu.org/publications-research/publications/black-women-academe-issues-and-strategies>

- Muhammad, C. G., & Dixon, A. D. (2008). Black females in high school: A statistical educational profile. *The Negro Education Review*, 59, 163-180.
- Mumford, R. (1996). The role of mentoring in the college experiences of mature African American women: A qualitative investigation (ERIC ED404910). Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Ontario. Retrieved from ERIC: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED404910.pdf>
- Museus, S D., Palmer, R., Davis, R. J., & Maramba, D. C. (2011). *Racial and ethnic minority students' success in STEM education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Fast facts: Degrees conferred by race and sex*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72>
- National Coalition on Black Civic Participation. (2014). Black women's in the United States, 2014, progress and challenges: 50 years after the war on poverty; 50 years after the 1964 Civil Rights Act, 50 years after Brown v. Board of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbcp.org>
- Nettles, M. T. (Ed.). (1988). *Toward Black undergraduate student equality in American higher education*. New York, NY: Greenwood Press
- Nettles, M. T. (1991). Racial similarities and differences in the predictors of college student achievement. In W. R. Allen, E. Epps & N. Z. Haniff (Eds.), *College in black and white* (pp. 75-91). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Nguyen, M., Ward-Bibo, E., & Engle, J. (2012). Advancing to completion: Increasing degree attainment by improving graduation rates and closing gaps for African-American students. Retrieved from The Education Trust: [http://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Advancing\\_AfAm.pdf](http://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Advancing_AfAm.pdf)
- Nitsche, N., & Brueckner, H. (2009). Opting out of the family? Social Change Inequality in family formation patterns and marriage outcomes among highly educated women. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco, CA, August 2009.
- Office for Civil Rights (1991). *Historically Black colleges and universities and higher education desegregation*. Retrieved from U.S. Department of Education: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/hq9511.html>
- U.S. Department of Labor. (2012). *The African American labor force in recovery*. Retrieved from <https://www.dol.gov/sec/media/reports/BlackLaborForce/BlackLaborForce.pdf>
- Oliver, M. & Shapiro, T. (1995). *Black wealth/White wealth: A new perspective on racial inequality*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Oyserman, D., Gant, L., & Ager, J. (1995). A socially contextualized model of African American identity: Possible selves and school persistence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(6), 1216–1232. doi:10.1037//0022-3514.69.6.1216



- Padilla, R. V., Trevino, J., Gonzalez, K., & Trevino, J. (1997). Developing local models of minority student success in college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 38, 125-135.
- Pascarella, E., & Terenzini, P. (1979). Student-faculty informal contact and college persistence: A further investigation. *Journal of Educational Research*, 72(4), 214-218.
- Pascarella, E., Bohr, L., Nora, A., Desler, M., & Zusman, B. (1994). Impacts of on-campus and off-campus work on first year cognitive outcomes. *Journal of College Student Development*, 35, 364-370.
- Patitu, C. L., & Hinton, K. G. (2003). The experiences of African American women faculty and administrators in higher education: Has anything changed? *New Directions for Student Services*, 2003(104), 79-93. doi:10.1002/ss.109
- Patton, L. D. & Harper, S. R. (2003). Mentoring relationships among African American women in graduate and professional schools [Special Issue: Meeting the needs of African American women]. *New Directions for Student Services*, 104, 67-78.
- Perkins, L. (1983). The impact of the “cult of true womanhood” on the education of Black women. *Journal of Social Issues*, 39(3), 17-28
- Perkins, L. M. (1993). The role of education in the development of Black feminist thought, 1860-1920. *History of Education*, 22(3), 265-275.
- Perkins, L. M. (1997). The African American female elite: The early history of African American women in the Seven Sister Colleges, 1880-1960. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(4), 718-756.
- Phillips J. M. & Gully S. M. (1997). Role of goal orientation, ability, need for achievement, and locus of control in the self-efficacy and goal setting process. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82(5): 792-802.
- Po Yin, D. & Watkins, D. (1998). Affective variables, learning approaches and academic achievement: a causal modeling investigation with Hong Kong tertiary students. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 68(2), 173-188.
- Price, G. N., Spriggs, W., & Swinton, O. H. (2011). The relative returns to graduating from a historically Black college/university: Propensity score matching Estimates from the National Survey of Black Americans. *The Review of Black Political Economy*, 38(2), 103-130. doi:10.1007/s12114-011-9088-0
- Rankin, D. L. (2001). Women in higher education-persistence pays off. Retrieved from Women in Higher Education: <http://wihe.com/printArticle.jsp?id=18180>
- Reddick, R. J. (2009). Fostering cross-racial mentoring: White faculty and African American students at Harvard college. In S. Sánchez-Casal and A. Macdonald (Eds.), *Identity in education* (pp. 65-102). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Reddick, R. J. (2011). Intersecting identities: Mentoring contributions and challenges for Black faculty mentoring Black undergraduates. *Mentoring & Tutoring, 19*(3), 319-346.
- Reddick, R. J., & Heilig, J. V. (2012). The current and dire state of African American male crime and education in the Central Southwest: Are mentoring constellations a promising strategy? *Journal of African American Males in Education, 3*(1), 29-46.
- Reddick, R. J. & Saenz, V. B. (2012). Coming home: *Hermanos academicos* reflect on paths and present realities at their home institution. *Harvard Educational Review, 82*(3), 353-380.
- Robinson, M. L. (1985). *Princeton-educated Blacks and the Black community*. Unpublished master's thesis, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.
- Robinson, T. L. & Ward, J. V. (1991). A belief in self far greater than anyone's disbelief: cultivating resistance among African American female adolescents. *Women and Therapy, 11*(3/4), 87-104.
- Sealey-Ruiz, Y. (2012). A way of making it: Black reentry females' success and challenges to undergraduate education. *National Journal of Urban Education and Practice, 5*(3), 363-375.
- Sedlacek, W. E. (1987). Black students on White campuses: 20 years of research. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 28*, 485-495
- Sims, G. A. (2008). Irrelation as a social construct for African American college women on a predominately White campus. *College Student Journal, 42*(2), 691-702.
- Solarzano, D. & Yosso, T. (2001). Critical race and LatCrit theory and method counterstorytelling. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 14*(4), 471-495.
- Solarzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education, 69*(1/2), 60-73.
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69*(5), 797-811.
- Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist, 52*(6), 613-629
- Stephens, D. P. & Phillips, L. Integrating Black Feminist Thought into conceptual frameworks of African American adolescent women's sexual scripting processes. *Sexualities, Evolution & Gender (7)*1, 37-55.



- Steptoe, A. & Wardle, J. (2001). Locus of control and health behavior revisited: a multivariate analysis of young adults from 18 countries. *British Journal of Psychology*, 92(4): 659-673.
- Stewart, K. D. (2011). Understanding Black student perceptions of targeted student support services on a predominantly white college campus. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina.
- Taylor, U. (1998). The historical evolution of Black feminist theory and praxis. *Journal of Black Studies*, 29(2), 234–253.
- Thompson, B. (2002). Multicultural feminism: Recasting chronology of second wave feminism. *Feminist Studies*, 28(2), 337–360.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropouts from higher education. *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 89-125.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Turner, C. & Thompson, J. (1993). Socializing women doctoral students: Minority and majority experiences. *Review of Higher Education*, 16(3), 355-370.
- U. S. Government Accountability Office. (2012). Retirement security: Women still face challenges (GAO-12-699). Retrieved from <http://www.gao.gov/assets/600/592726.pdf>
- Vandiver, B. J., Fhagen-smith, P. E., Cokley, K. O., & Jr, W. E. C. (2001). Cross's nigrescence model: From theory to scale to theory. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 29(3), 174–200.
- van Laar, C. (2000). The paradox of low academic achievement but high self-esteem in African American students: An attributional account. *Educational Psychology Review*, 12(1), 33–61.
- Watt, S. K. (1997) Identity and the making of meaning: Psychological identity, racial identity, womanist identity, self esteem, and the faith development of African American college women. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC.
- Watt, S. K. (2003). Come to the river: Using spirituality to cope, resist and develop identity [Special Issue: Meeting the Needs of African American Women]. *New Directions For Student Services*, 104, 29-40.
- Watt, S. K. (2006). Racial identity attitudes, womanist identity attitudes, and self-esteem in African American college women attending historically Black single-sex and coeducational institutions. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(3), 319–334. doi:10.1353/csd.2006.0038

- Ward, J. (1996) Raising resisters: the role of truth telling in the psychological development of African-American girls. In B. Leadbetter & N. Way (Eds.), *Urban girls: resisting stereotypes creating identities* (pp. 85–99). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Williams, M. R., Brewley, D. N., Reed, R. J., White, D. Y., & Davis-Haley, R. T. (2005). Learning to read each other: Black female graduate students share their experiences at a White research one institution. *The Urban Review*, 37(3), 181-199.
- Winkle-Wagner, R. (2009). *The unchosen me: Race, gender, and identity among Black women*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wolf-Wendel, L. (1998). Models of excellence: The baccalaureate origins of successful European women, African American women and Latinas. *Journal of Higher Education*, 2(69), 141-186. doi: 10.2307/2649204
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose cultural has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.
- Zajacova, A., Lynch, S. M., & Espenshade, T. J. (2005). Self-efficacy, stress, and academic success in college. *Research in Higher Education*, 46(6), 677–706. doi:10.1007/s11162-004-4139-z
- Zamani, E. M. (2003) African American women in higher education [Special Issue: Meeting the needs of African American women]. *New Directions for Student Services*, 104, 5-18.

## **Vita**

Tiffany Vanese Tillis was born in Taylor, Texas. She was educated in the Taylor Independent School District until she was 12 years old. Her family relocated to Fort Worth, Texas, where she graduated from O.D. Wyatt Senior High School in 1999. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Texas at Austin in 2003 and her M.Ed. from the same institution in 2008. She has been employed with the University of Texas at Austin since August of 2003. For three years she was an admissions counselor. In 2006 she joined the Academic Enrichment Services office and led the ACE and Faculty/Staff Mentoring Program. In 2009 she became the Program Coordinator of the Gateway Scholars Program until 2014. Since 2014 she has served as the director of the Longhorn Link Program, a TRiO Student Support Services Program and co-director of the Fearless Leadership Institute.

Contact: [tvillis@gmail.com](mailto:tvillis@gmail.com)

This dissertation was typed by the author.