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THE UNDERPREPARED AND UNDERREPRESENTED: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF SELF-EFFICACY ON COLLEGE PERSISTENCE AMONG LOW-INCOME AFRICAN AMERICAN FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty at Governors State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Christine Marie Brown

June 2018

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I want to thank everyone for his or her prayers and encouragement. There were times when this journey seemed impossible to achieve and the tasks to attain a doctoral degree appeared taller and wider than many mountains. There were moments when I doubted my ability to move past those mountains, and it was His grace and mercy that set me above, with wings to soar over those mountains. Glory to God for who He is and how He has blessed me. I thank Him for providing me peace, quiet time, resources, family, friends, mentors, cohort members and professors. A special thank to Shalon McCray, a past doctoral student that encouraged and directed my path towards Governors State University's' Counseling Education and Supervision program. Finally, I acknowledge a great professor and mentor, Dr. Cyrus Ellis. His guidance, wisdom and support influenced my belief that I could follow through on the completion of my

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ABSTRACT

Approximately one-third of college students enrolled in colleges across the United States are first-generation students or those whose parents have not attained a postsecondary degree (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). First-generation students are more likely to be students who are racially/ethnically diverse, low-income, and nearly four times more likely to leave college without a degree (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Radford, Berkener, Wheeler, Shepard, & Hunt-White, 2010). College persistence refers to the students' desire and involved behaviors to maintain enrollment until degree attainment (Gofen, 2007; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). A phenomenological approach was used to conduct face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews to describe the essence of the lived experiences of low-income African American first-generation college students who persisted in four-year undergraduate programs. Results indicated a priority to support African American first-generation college students with sources of self-efficacy.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

College persistence refers to students' desire and involved behaviors to maintain enrollment and participation from first semester until degree attainment (Gofen, 2007; McCaron & Inkelas, 2006). College success, including persistence and degree attainment, serves as the primary means for racially/ethnically diverse and underrepresented populations to improve their socioeconomic status (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that first-generation college students (FGCS), individuals without parents who have attained a college degree, were nearly four times more likely to leave college without a degree compared to continuing-generation college students (CGCS) who are individuals with at least one parent with a college degree. Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics' Beginning Postsecondary Study provided further light on this phenomenon that included low-income, first-generation college students and found some despairing statistics. The study found that low-income FGCS experience less success than continuing-generation peers from the beginning and across all institution types. First, low-income FGCS were four times more likely to leave higher education after the first year than CGCS (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Six years later, nearly half (43%) of low-income FGCS had departed college without earning their degrees. Among those who departed, nearly two-thirds (60%) did so after the first year. After six years, only 11% of FGCS had earned bachelor's degrees compared to 55% of their peers.

According to the Higher Education Research Institute (2007), the number of first-generation college students within the overall U. S. population who entered college as first-time freshmen steadily declined since 1971. Research in higher education supports an increase in persistence and completion rates at four-year colleges and universities; however, there remains a continued disparity for racially/ethnically diverse FGCS demographics (Baber, 2012).

Background and Significance

The United States has the highest rates in the world for college enrollment (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). In 2009, President Obama stated that the United States had the highest proportion of college graduates in the world with an increasing demographic diversity in postsecondary education and a growth of first-generation college students (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). This placed a focus of efforts to improve college persistence and success among populations underrepresented in higher education, including low-income and racially/ethnically diverse students, many of who are first-generation (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Demographics suggest that first-generation college students are underserved populations (e.g., immigrant groups, low-income, students of color) and are defined as students with neither parent having earned a bachelor's degree (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011; Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2011). First-generation college students are more likely than continuing-generation college students to present with additional characteristics that may be barriers towards persistence and degree attainment. For example, first-generation students are more likely to be older as first-year students, come from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds, and have a disability (Bui, 2002). Additionally, FGCS are more likely to be single parents and do not have the financial support from family to support their college education (Bui, 2002). Further, as FGCS tend to be low-income, have a delayed entry into postsecondary education after high school, live off campus, attend college closer to home, attend part time (i.e., not a full course load), and work full time during college enrollment (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Although institutions of higher education have been more successful at promoting college access to FGCS, college success, as measured by persistence and graduation rates (i.e., retention of first-generation

students to graduation), continues to be a problem (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

In order to improve the college persistence rates among African American FGCS, a more deeper understanding is needed of their unique challenges, including what collaborations, strategies, and methods would strengthen persistence as well as the resources (i.e., self-efficacy) required to improve academic achievement. Students with strong self-efficacy are more likely to persist in college and attain their college degrees (Allen, 1999; DeFreitas, 2012). Higher self-efficacy is found to be directly linked to higher grades for college students (Cavazos et al., 2010; Choi, 2005) for high achieving, predominantly FGCS. For the purposes of this study, the researcher used a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of African American first-generation college students who persist in college. The goal was to understand the unique challenges for African American FGCS to inform counselors, educators, and higher education administrators of better ways to serve and increase persistence and degree attainment rates for this population. The researcher engaged African American FGCS in a study that valued their voices and their perceptions of their strengths and challenges in order to give educators, counselors, and higher education administrators a different way to understand their needs more fully. Very few studies included or examined the historical and cultural implications for African Americans related to their participation in the educational system in the United States, including higher education.

First-Generation College Students

The journey toward degree attainment is commonly filled with a combination of challenges and successes; however, the educational pathway to a college degree can be more arduous for some students, specifically first-generation students (Stebleton et al., 2011).

Nationally, first-generation college students are more likely to be a member of a racial or ethnic minority group, are working to break multigenerational patterns, and live between two worlds, cultural and academic (Hutchens, Deffendall, & Peabody, 2011). FGCS are parents and are in the workforce full-time (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation college students are also less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences during college such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities, and using support services (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Higher education researchers studied how these unique challenges, including institutional choice, social integration, lack of a sense of belonging, academic under preparedness, socioeconomic status, and lack of guidance have adverse outcomes on academic success for FGCS (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Higher Education Research Institute, 2007; Ishitani, 2003; Nunez & Guccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Parks-Yancy, 2012; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Snell, 2008; Thayer, 2000).

In addition, the challenge for FGCS, many of whom represent racially/ethnically diverse groups, is that the college environment does not reflect their multiple identities or create opportunities to explore beliefs in context of their lived experiences and new lives at school (Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012). In most cases, students live dual lives and attempt to cope with the gaps between home and school worlds. Higher education scholars suggested that first-generation college students are at a disadvantage when navigating the world of higher education because of their unique characteristics and challenges; however, racially/ethnically diverse students are often skilled at tolerating ambiguity and making sense of a new environment (Pizzolato, 2005). It is therefore important to create learning environments and practices that draw on the strengths of FGCS and have positive influences on their academic success (Jehangir et al., 2012).

First-generation college students continue to arrive at institutions of higher education in greater numbers and to possess various characteristics separating them from their continuing-generation peers. The social, historical, economic, and academic issues, if not addressed, continue to impede access, equity, persistence, and degree attainment. This exploration of the perceptions and experiences for FGCS who are persisting in four-year postsecondary programs helps to fill the gap in the body of knowledge as to what contributes to African American FGCS' academic success.

Lastly, the gap for academic achievement remains disproportionately significant and is complicated further for racially/ethnically diverse students who attend college in more nontraditional ways compared to CGCS. For example, well-prepared racially/ethnically diverse students transition to four-year colleges immediately following high school graduation; however, this may not be common for FGCS who enter college at a later age with varied pre-collegiate experiences and opportunities (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

According to Richardson and Skinner (1992), graduates frequently described their first exposure to the campus as a shock that took some time to overcome. Many racially/ethnically diverse students are underprepared to address the time management of schedules and studying; the economic realities of financial aid and making ends meet; the racial/ethnic isolation; coping with the bureaucratic and academic aspects of a large institution; and understanding how to participate in the complex college environment which was found to be confusing and intimidating. The graduates found that the more they shared their challenges and collegiate experiences with faculty, the more specific and accurate expectations became towards academic success (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

For low-income, racially/ethnically diverse first-generation students, the recent access to higher education has been challenging (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Unfortunately, the segregation of low-income, racially/ethnically diverse students at four-year postsecondary institutions has become more serious. For example, a major barrier to the baccalaureate for low-income, first-generation students is that the vast majority begins and ends their studies in two-year and for-profit institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). In addition, the percentage of Pell Grant recipients enrolled in four-year colleges and universities dropped from 62% in 1973-1974 to 45% in 2001-2002, where it has remained (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010)

Racially/ethnically diverse students can benefit from strategies that increase enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates from four-year colleges and universities. Engle and Tinto (2008) offered a few recommendations to practitioners and policymakers: improve academic preparation for college, provide additional financial aid, ease the transition, encourage engagement on the college campus, and promote re (entry) for young and working adults. It is imperative to provide opportunities toward developing the required academic skills and navigation of the complexities of college, including aspects such as overcoming inadequate preparation, nontraditional modes of college attendance, educational planning, assessment, learning laboratories, summer bridge programs, tailored financial aid, orientation and registration (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Underprepared and Underrepresented

The diversity of racial/ethnic populations in the United States has grown tremendously. For example, between 1980 and 2000, the White population grew by 7.9% and racially/ethnically diverse populations increased by 88% during the same time (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002). The

growth affected multiple sectors in society, including the education system. Compared to 14 million Asians, 3 million American Indians, 600,000 Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, Hispanics and African Americans comprise the largest racially/ethnically diverse groups in the United States with 48 million and 40 million people respectively (U. S. Census Bureau, 2009). The education of African Americans has been historically controversial with government influence and involvement through historical events and programs such as the Emancipation Proclamation (DuBois, 1901), the 1860 and 1890 Morrill Acts (Fleming, 1984; Hikes, 2005), the Freedman's Bureau (Provasnik & Snyder, 2004), prohibitive education (DuBois, 1901; Fultz & Brown, 2008), desegregated schools (Zietlow, 2006), and creation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Funke, 1920; Provasnik & Snyder, 2004).

Academic unpreparedness among African Americans is a historical discussion that captures all aspects of the education system, with African Americans enduring more obstacles. Separate educational facilities, inferior resources, and mandatory industrial education are examples of the kinds of obstacles African Americans experienced within the American education system (Anderson, 1978, 1984). With slavery as structure set aside for economic stability, African Americans were not to be a part of the established educational system in the United States. Between 1860 and 1880, those who controlled the educational system and who opposed the education of African Americans, strategically ensured that schools set aside for the group were underdeveloped with minimal allocation of funds (Anderson, 1984; Provasnik & Snyder, 2004). Separate, underdeveloped, and poorly funded facilities affected the quality of education that African Americans received, placing the population's academic levels significantly behind when compared to those without the opposition.

Another example of academic unpreparedness included Anderson's (1984) description of a school attendance policy that differed based on the race of a student. This description included the differences in school attendance between Whites and African Americans in the South, where African American children were required to attend school 80 days fewer than White students. In addition to disparities in school attendance in the South, very few African Americans attended high school because the privilege was not offered to them (Anderson, 1984). Legal segregation exacerbated the challenge for African Americans' participation in education with the historical accounts in the 1896 Supreme Court ruling for separate but equal facilities in the court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* that established segregation (Hikes, 2005). It was therefore legal for Whites to prohibit African Americans from occupying the same schools and other public places as Whites. Prior to 1896, African Americans were required to attend segregated schools at all education levels. At the primary and secondary levels, schools trained African American students to work as "domestic and agriculture laborers," which contributed to an underprepared population (Anderson, 1984, p. 115).

In addition, at the college level, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were established to provide opportunity for a quality education to African Americans and evolved into an educational hub for racially/ethnically diverse groups today (USDE, 1991). The American government had an integral role in the education of, or lack thereof, of African Americans because of the various laws passed and reviewed in courts. These laws perpetuated discrimination and heavily influenced the education provided to African Americans. For example, the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.* (Carter, 2005) was designed to improve education for African American students dealing with school desegregation, yet implementation was slow. Strong White opposition to desegregation

existed, and Whites held the power to block the implementation of desegregation plans by moving to all White communities or enrolling their children in private schools (Brown, 2004; Carter, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2010-2011). As a result, history would posit that African Americans were underprepared for and underrepresented in colleges and universities across the United States.

After years of struggle and court cases, African Americans were allowed access to public institutions (including schools) that were previously only accessible to Whites (Provasnik & Snyder, 2004). However, after the end of slavery, the new educational freedom was challenging to navigate with no preparation or support about how to survive in the world as free individuals (Anderson, 1978). In addition, bias occurred in the research literature involving African Americans (Anderson, 1984). An early example explained by Anderson (1984) transpired in the 1930s when few high schools existed for African Americans in the South, yet researchers collected data from high school age children not enrolled in school and used the data to paint African American students as inferior to White students. Armor (1995) provided an example found in social science studies reporting that the self-esteem of African American students was higher compared to White students, and African American students in segregated schools had higher levels of self-esteem than African Americans in desegregated schools. Research such as this demonstrated that African Americans are at an extreme disadvantage and are an underprepared population.

Institutional Challenges

While a few studies were conducted focusing on the strengths or successes of African Americans, many articles focused on the deficits of this population and reasons they struggled in higher education (Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2006; Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005).

Next, a significant amount of sociological studies revealed structural and institutional racism to explain academic achievement outcomes based on racial differences including higher education institutions (Harper, 2012). More specifically, higher education researchers minimized racist institutional norms that ultimately may influence the persistence decisions of African Americans (Harper, 2012). This crisis of first-generation African American college attendance, persistence, and completion is further reviewed.

Harper (2012) introduced the term "minoritized" instead of "minority" to highlight the social construction of underrepresentation in U. S. social institutions, including colleges and universities. Harper explained that persons are minoritized in a social context and are labeled minorities in various situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of Whiteness. A few sociological studies acknowledged structural/institutional racism to explain outcomes based on racial/ethnic differences (Harrell, 2000; Jones, 2000). These studies defined racism as individual actions that stimulated marginalization and caused harm on minoritized persons with institutional norms that sustained White privilege and promoted racial inequity. This aligned with studies on student persistence that often relied on traditional theoretical frameworks of student departure to identify assimilation and acculturation of students of color into the dominant culture of the institution (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Gumport, 2007; Rednon, Jalamo, & Nora, 2000). The literature failed to question the contribution institutions of higher education had in reproducing racial hierarchies favoring Whites (Baber, 2012). The way that scholars explain, discuss, and theorize racially/ethnically diverse groups in student achievement, including higher education, was consistently disaggregated (Harper, 2012). Finally, among African American first-generation college students, racially/ethnically subjective environments resulted in various behaviors that may contribute to persistence decisions (Baber, 2012).

The problems with access and equity for education in the past are the result of the problems today, and those problems characterize the education of African Americans (Lincoln, 1969). The government's historical opposition towards freedom and equal rights for African Americans was extensive and presumed to have a relationship with their low college persistence and degree attainment rates. The history of African Americans' participation in the educational system in United States has undoubtedly been challenging and is perhaps a reflection of the postsecondary experiences of many first-generation college students today.

Unique Challenges for African American FGCS

College attendance is considered one of the most stressful times for an individual to experience in his/her life, and African American first-generation college students face unique challenges (Greenberg, Ramsey, & Hale, 1989; Parks-Yancy, 2012). For example, a cohort of students enrolled in a four-year institution in 2003; 21% of African Americans dropped out of postsecondary education three years later compared to just 11% of White students (Aud et al., 2010). An even wider gap was noted in graduation rates. Among a cohort of students who began at a four-year institution in 2001, 42% of the African American students completed a degree within six years compared to 60% of White students (Aud et al., 2010). More specifically, for full-time African American and Hispanic students, 7.5% and 11.1% respectively, completed their associate's degree in three years (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Part-time students completed a degree at even lower rates with just over 2% of African American students and 2.6% of Hispanic students completing an associate's degree in three years. In addition, of first-generation college students who attended college, only 36% of Hispanics and 37% of African Americans completed their undergraduate degree or higher compared to 57% of White students (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Since 1975, African Americans showed the most significant decline

of first-generation students earning a degree compared to other racially/ethnically diverse groups (Conway, 2010). Of students identified as FGCS in the United States, 38.2% are Hispanic, 22.6% are African American, 16.8% are Native American, 19% are Asian, and 13.2% are White (Saenz, Huratado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007).

College success, including persistence and degree attainment, serves as the primary means for racially/ethnically diverse and underrepresented populations to improve their socioeconomic status (Suárez- Orozco et al., 2008). Despite the increased college enrollment for African Americans, persistence and degree attainment continues to present unique challenges for these students, and first-year experiences have shown a strong correlation to college persistence and degree attainment (Allen, 1992; Baber, 2012; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005). Among the disproportionate number of racially/ethnically, diverse, first-generation college students enrolling in postsecondary education programs, specifically the persistence and degree attainment rates for African American students is a critical concern (Mehta et al., 2011; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009; Robertson & Mason, 2008).

One unique challenge for African American FGCS is the lack of social capital, which includes the benefit of having the social relationships that support the college student and is considered as “getting the hook-up” (Parks-Yancy, 2012, p. 510). French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coined the term “cultural capital” to emphasize the social and cultural inequalities that existed between two groups of people (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 49). The lack of cultural capital for first-generation students to navigate higher education has significant implications to establish and achieve career goals (Guiffrida, 2005; Housel, 2012; Orbe, 2004). More recently, scholars have expanded on Bourdieu’s work, applying the “cultural mismatch theory” to the experiences of first-generation college students (Stephens, Fryberg, Rose Markus, Johnson, &

Covarrubias, 2012, p. 2). Stephens et al. argued that the policies and the landscape of higher education maintained a position of social class inequality, resulting in a "social class achievement gap" (p. 1178).

Stephens et al. (2012) pointed out that colleges and universities function and share middle-to-upper-class norms, leaving first-generation college students separated. Further, the researchers stated that norms provided the blueprint in which others relate to one another socially. For example, they argued that an individual from a middle-to-upper class background was raised to value independence, including the way he/she related to others in the social world. More specifically, the middle-to-upper class population was taught to "influence the context, be separate and distinct from others, and to act freely based on personal motives, goals, and preferences" (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 3). The middle-to-upper class students came from families where self-importance was influential, and individualism supported. They had experiences and opportunities to choose, control, and influence their lives because they had enough economic and social capital.

Interestingly, first-generation college students, half of whom are low-income, have been raised to value interdependent ways of relating to the social world (Saenz et al., 2007). For example, they are taught to "adjust to the conditions of the context, be connected to others, and to respond to the needs, preferences, and interests of others" (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 3). Individuals raised to embrace interdependent norms historically have limited access to economic capital. They had few opportunities for choice, control, and influence. Family is the primary focus rather than the individual.

African American FGCS are found to have close connections and are interdependent on their families (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Sociological research also explored how

family dynamics provides a general explanation how, for example, caregiver roles affect African American FGCS. For example, the continued impact of slavery on the composition of current African American families remains highly relevant today (Dubois, 1901; Gutman, 1976; Moynihan, 1965). One argument is that slavery destroyed the creation of nuclear families by forcibly separating existing families and further prevents the emergence of new ones. Research suggests that poverty, lack of vocational opportunities, inadequate education as well as structural conditions systematically decrease the ability of African Americans from maintaining strong families (North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014). Consequently, African American families were found to be more prone to matriarchal structures that included a strong presence of extended family ties (Frazier, 1939).

Stephens et al. (2012) surveyed the top 50 administrators from universities and colleges in the United States. Administrators identified the most important skills that their institutions expected for students to develop during college. Eighty-four percent of the administrators reported skills that characterized their college culture as more independent than interdependent. They defined success with characteristics aligned with individual development, personal choice, and self-expression. Stephens et al. (2012) also asked first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students to rank their motives for attending college. First-generation college students were more likely to name interdependent motives compared to their continuing-generation college peers. Forty-nine percent of FGCS chose to pursue college because they wanted to bring honor to their families compared to 27% of their continuing-generation college peers. The study revealed that even after controlling for race and SAT scores, student whose motives for attending college were more independently focused achieved higher grades. A hypothetical comparison of FGCS' college experiences with continuing-generation

college peers are illustrated in Table 1 (Banks-Santill, 2014).

Table 1

Privileges of Cultural Capital

First-Generation College Students	Continuing-Generation College Students
Attends substandard high school with no or few advanced placement courses	Attends high-quality high school with advanced placement options
Participates in few extra-curricular activities	Participates in wide-range of extra-curricular activities to build college resume
Takes college entrance exams without preparation	Takes Princeton Review course to increase college entrance exam scores; attends college "boot camp"
Searches for colleges alone in senior year of high school on the internet	Goes on college tour with family in the junior year of high school or earlier
Selects one of few colleges to apply to and completes applications on his/her own	Selects 3-7 colleges to apply to and prepares application with parents; parents insist that their student apply to schools that they have graduated from
Unprepared for the start of classes, has to wait for financial aid check to be disbursed to buy books and supplies	Decides to over-load by taking one additional course beyond what is required to complete college degree in less time; parents arrange for tour to increase grades in math
Spends summers working in retail store and fast food restaurant	Spends summer completing competitive internship in prospective field; travels internationally with family
Relies exclusively on financial aid, high interest bearing loans that parent must take-out, and minimum wage earnings from summer to pay for college	Relies on college fund to pay for all or some of the cost of college; subsidizes costs with earned merit scholarships
Does not consider participating in semester abroad or international service learning programs due to limited finances	Studies abroad and/or participates in international service learning programs; family plans vacation to semester abroad site to visit student

Graduates but is unsure about how to enter workforce in field of study; does not have interview well and lacks professional dress for interviews; struggles to find work	Graduates a semester early and relies on family's' professional contacts and prior internship experiences to obtain employment in related field

Another implication for first-generation African American college students is the increased probability to remain in the workforce while attending college. Financial constraints tend to be greater largely due to conflicting responsibilities that first-generation students experience between home and school: (a) needing to work while in school to help provide for family, (b) only being able to attend school part-time, (c) continuing to live at home while in school to help provide for family, (d) only being able to attend school part-time, and (e) continuing to live at home while in school (Nunez & Guccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pryor et al., 2006).

Social integration has a significant role in determining how college students cope with their environment (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Further, African American FGCS tended to experience a greater cultural transition involved with educational mobility and moving up social classes (London, 1989; Thayer, 2000; Weis, 1985). They often reported increased pressure to perform as the first in the family to attend college (Orbe, 2004, 2008). Financial constraints tended to be greater largely due to parents with low-income status (Choy, 2001; Pryor et al., 2006). Often related to financial constraints are the conflicting responsibilities between home and school such as needing to work to help provide for family and attending school part-time (Nunez & Guccaro-Alamin, 1998; Orbe, 2004; Pryor et al., 2006).

Additionally, African American first-generation college students experience tension while entering a new environment (Cushman, 2007) and may feel less like they belong on campus compared to their continuing-generation peers (Stebleton et al., 2014). Researchers found a strong relationship between retention and belonging, which includes academic and social

integration into the college setting (Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). Scholars further elaborated on the challenge of coping in two cultures as well (Lippincott & German, 2007; Lubrano, 2004). The greater sense of belonging within academic and social community increased student persistence toward graduation (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002-2003). As a result, African American first-generation college students may lack a sense of belonging compared to continuing-generation college students. Research on sense of belonging indicated that for the student, the stronger the perception of sense of belonging to campus and community, the greater the likelihood of academic success. Lacking a sense of belonging may also be one factor that contributed to cultural conflicts between values of the college atmosphere and community and further contributed to feelings of alienation, guilt, betrayal, and stress (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Logan, 2007).

Additionally, in terms of socioeconomic status, first-generation students are often from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families or racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds (primarily Hispanic and African American). Socioeconomic status can also have an influence on the type of institution that a student selects to attend, and the type of institution attended affects chances for persistence and degree attainment (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Parks-Yancy, 2012). Astin and Oseguera (2005) presented despairing rates of retention and degree attainment for institutions serving a high population of at-risk students, including low-income, first-generation, racially/ethnically diverse students (Astin & Oseguera, 2005).

The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (2014) conducted an analysis of academic appeal letters submitted by students at-risk for departure from the institution, and a great percentage of the letters submitted were from racially/ethnically diverse FGCS. A participant in the study indicated:

> My legal mother is my paternal grandmother; as a child, she and my paternal grandfather, who is now deceased, realized that my younger sister and I were not being properly cared for, so out of the kindness of their hearts, they took us in, adopted us and raised as their own. (University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 2014, p. 31)

The deep sense of family discussed in the literature prevents many students from ceasing their care of family members once they enroll in college. Instead, students reported a sense of responsibility for their family members and even feeling "guilty for leaving" (University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 2014, p. 31). The students' reported active and constant participation in the daily routines for their families back home. Another participant in the UNC-Chapel Hill study reported having to attend court hearings since his stepfather was seeking to gain custody of his stepsiblings. It is not surprising to see how a student occupied with such life changing events would be distracted from coursework. For the purposes of this study, this could be seen as strength for FGCS.

Research suggests that African American single parents seek support for their children regularly through their extended family and congregational networks to address negative outcomes commonly associated with their children (Taylor, Chatters, Woodward, & Brown, 2013). It is a common practice for racially/ethnically diverse parents to seek support that extends beyond the nuclear family and includes extended family members (UNC-Chapel Hill, 2014). The deep connections between extended family members were often times very apparent in some students who participated in the study. For example, a participant described the devastating effect that her cousin's sudden death had on her school performance. She reported never really recovering.

This study also pointed out that faculty is often unaware of the strong sense of family and

connections engrained in their students, particularly for racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college students (UNC-Chapel Hill, 2014). Additionally, professors are unaware that FGCS have children of their own. One parent reported, “There was a lot going on back home with my son and trying to help take care of him while I am at school and paying for daycare” (UNC-Chapel Hill, 2014, p. 28). Racially/ethnically FGCS, out of fear of being deemed irresponsible by professors, feel the need to hide their status as parents. This had an impact on a significant number of racially/ethnically FGCS in the study and should not be overlooked.

Further, UNC-Chapel Hill researchers (2014) reported that one of the critical negative consequences of students serving as caregivers for a family member or being heavily involved in the lives of family members at home is that it forces students to be away from school. School absenteeism produced negative repercussions for the personal as well as the academic development of the students. Students in the study consistently validated the experience. One participant stated, “I began going home every weekend. I was very distracted with the home situation and was unable to focus on my schoolwork” (UNC-Chapel Hill, 2014, p. 28). These students’ absences from the university affected both their social and academic lives.

Social challenges. African American FGCS are unaware of the huge advantage that their peers have in terms of knowledge of informal college norms, behaviors, and expectations (UNC-Chapel Hill, 2014). For example, the dorm room experience often serves as the main source of socialization for university students. Aside from the social opportunities that having a close group of friends can bring to a student, there are other positive externalities. Socialization can help students better incorporate into the university environment as well as provide them with a sense of belonging. Students more integrated into the university system and feel a sense of belonging are more likely to be aware of resources provided by the university, which in turn

enhances their academic performance. However, if a student constantly goes home for the weekend, he/she is less likely to be informed of upcoming events such as professionalization workshops that can potentially enhance intellectual development (UNC-Chapel Hill, 2014). This lack of information or awareness about university resources can negatively influence the performance of the students. This group tends to have higher expectancies and engagements with family commitments and responsibilities that may conflict with college (Tseng, 2004).

Sense of belonging for African American FGCS. One factor linked with the persistence of FGCS African American students is the retention construct of a sense of belonging (Huratado & Carter, 1997). Research indicated that African American students perceived their college environment to be less supportive than White students perceive and were thus less likely to persist to graduation (Carey, 2004; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986). In the same manner that achieving an adequate sense of belonging can produce positive results for African American students, failure to achieve a sense of belonging can have important negative consequences (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2009). The difficulty in African American FGCS achieving a sense of belonging can encourage the emergence of identities opposed to the dominant culture of an institution, thereby increasing the likelihood of feelings of alienation and subsequently oppositional behaviors (Ellis, 2002; Perrakis, 2008).

Students are less likely to connect and engage with their college environment, which may have an adverse effect on their academic success (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As a result, when expectations of coursework from professors are not met, negative behaviors may be observed for African American first-generation students. This response perpetuates perceptions that first-generation students have difficult attitudes, are lazy,

and are underprepared academically. However, professors' assumptions are invalid and suggest that students are experiencing high levels of stress due to lack of engagement on the college campus and rigorous employment schedules outside of the classroom (Snell, 2008).

Undoubtedly, first-generation college students encounter experiences that are different from those of continuing-generation college students, including being underprepared emotionally to cope with both the traditional and unique stressors associated with college (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). This may be evident in their demonstration of a lack of confidence in their skills, low self-esteem, and personal problems (Pobywajlo, 1989). In a study conducted by Stebleton et al., (2011), first-generation college students reported a higher frequency of feeling stressed or depressed compared with continuing-generation college students. Stebleton et al. suggested that the first step is to address the critical role of college counselors to help them understand the uniqueness of FGCS. To support FGCS, counselors need to understand the unique demographics, traits, trends in enrollment, and potential impacts that navigating the college expectations can have on the students' psychological well-being (Stebleton et al., 2011). Given that one in four college students leave the four-year university during or after freshmen year (American College Testing, 2009; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004), it is important for the results of this current study to shed light on these barriers specific to African American FGCS. African American FGCS have unique historical, cultural, emotional, and academic factors that implicate challenges not common for CGCS.

Finally, in the United States the number of African American FGCS who successfully enter and graduate from college lags behind the number of White students who graduate (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2010). In 2008, 20% of students graduated with a four-year degree, and 33% of White students graduated with a four-year degree (NCES,

2010). A detailed look at the college graduation rates of African American students revealed the disparity between African Americans and Whites. Much of the benefit of higher education belongs to individual students and families. Across racially/ethnically diverse groups, average income earnings increased with higher levels of education, and the average college graduate earned two to three times more than high school graduates (College Board, 2004, 2013). College graduates also give their children benefits that increased the prospects that the next generation will prosper (social capital) and contribute to society in various ways. Higher education measurably improves the lives of most participants and significantly increases the probability that adults will move up the socioeconomic hierarchy (College Board, 2013).

The benefits of higher education for society as a whole are both monetary and nonmonetary. Societal benefits include: (a) higher levels of education corresponds to lower levels of unemployment; (b) adults are less likely to depend on social safety-net programs; (c) college graduates have more positive perceptions of personal health; (d) graduates have lower incarceration rates and higher levels of civic participation (College Board, 2004, 2013). Given the extent of higher education's benefits to society and to individuals and families, gaps in degree attainment rates are a great concern in the United States.

Contributions to African American FGCS' Persistence

Very little attention has been given to the successful participation in higher education for first-generation African American college students. However, research efforts introduce strategies and supports that contribute to the college success for first-generation African American college students which include transition programs, learning communities, academic advising, and experiential learning (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012; Darling & Smith, 2007; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Kuh, 2008). Examples of effective college programs and

supports for first-generation African American college students are reviewed. This section includes research efforts that have provided effective strategies to support racially/ethnically diverse populations, including African Americans FGCS. It is imperative factors that contribute to persistence for this population is understood, and the uniqueness of first-generation African American college students is valued as well as their resourcefulness and resiliency towards persistence. Thus, this section highlights the strengths of African American first-generation college students who contribute to a richer understanding of the elements of persistence.

Transition Programs

For the purposes of this study, transition programs are created to support the successful transition of FGCS from high school to college. The population includes African Americans for the purposes of this study. The transition programs work intensely with FGCS to prepare them for the academic and social expectations of college. Summer bridge programs are a type of transition program offered to students during the summer prior to enrollment in the first full-time academic semester (Barefoot et al., 2012). These programs usually target at-risk populations, including racially/ethnically diverse, low-income, and historically underserved students (Barefoot et al., 2012). Summer bridge programs are uniquely designed to allow at-risk students to move onto campus prior to the larger student body's arrival. This supports making more intimate and close connections with faculty and campus resources as well as taking academic courses (Engle et al., 2006). Nationally, these programs demonstrated improved academic readiness for the first year of college and improved retention and graduation rates (Barefoot et al., 2012). The FGCS found summer bridge programs most beneficial when they continued to have access to program support staff and resources throughout the school year (Engle et al., 2006).

First-year orientation programs and seminars developed for first-year students are additional transition services that can positively influence the FGCS' experience. The most effective orientation programs and first-year seminars frequently bring students and faculty together in small group settings (Kuh, 2008). FGCS found that frequent and highly structured seminars with faculty helped them develop the structure and discipline requisite to be successful overall as college students (Darling & Smith, 2007; Engle et al., 2006). Writing-intensive courses also were demonstrated to be helpful in transition programs (Kuh, 2008). These courses provided students with repeated writing practice and were especially beneficial for FGCS who came from under-resourced school systems (Darling & Smith, 2007; Engle et al., 2006).

Learning Communities

A learning community is another resource found to encourage a group of students to seek knowledge in and outside of the classroom (Kuh, 2008). Faculty offering living-learning communities with assignments requiring collaboration for FGCS can help with transition and persistence by purposefully structuring students within a small community of learners. For example, new students involved in a learning community read a book during the summer or attend a lecture and discussion as a group (Kuh, 2008). Living-learning communities often have a residential component in which students engage in academic work together as well as live in the same residence hall (Barefoot et al., 2012). Residential living-learning programs support FGCS adjustment to the college environment (Engle et al., 2006). Collaborative assignments and projects, whether offered through living-learning communities or through other strategies, can support students learning to work and problem-solve within a group as well as exposure to the perspectives of others (Kuh, 2008). Working in a collaborative learning environment can

help FGCS make connections with peers, appreciate academic expectations, and subsequently, enhance their transition to college (Engle et al., 2006).

Academic Advising

Regularly occurring engagement for academic advisement from pre-college enrollment to graduation was found to support racially/ethnically FGCS' navigation of institutional culture, academic expectations, degree requirements, academic choices, and opportunities (Darling & Smith, 2007). Pre-college advising was especially helpful for FGCS as it prepared students academically for college and included parents in the college preparation process (Engle et al., 2006). Early warning systems are a type of academic advising program in which instructors provide early feedback and opportunities for academic advising for students. A primary goal of early warning systems is to identify behaviors early that could potentially lead to academic difficulty (Barefoot et al., 2012). Academic advisors and faculty use early warning systems to guide FGCS to access academic support resources on campus (Darling & Smith, 2007). Faculty office hours are another critical part of academic advising supports and programs. For FGCS in particular, it is important for students to perceive that professors want to meet with them (Engle et al., 2006). Faculty office hours are most effective when FGCS recognize that professors care, want to meet with students, and are accessible with varying availability (Engle et al., 2006).

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is a supportive component found to be especially beneficial to FGCS. For the purposes of this study, service learning, undergraduate research, and diversity and global learning are included in experiential learning (Barefoot et al., 2012). These learning opportunities encourage FGCS to learn through activities and experiences inside and outside of the traditional classroom environment. Service learning involves field-based activities,

community partnerships, and applications by students to real-life settings (Kuh, 2008). It can be especially beneficial to students by encouraging a sense of community and civic awareness as well as peer and faculty interactions including undergraduate research to promote student-faculty interaction (Barefoot et al., 2012). Undergraduate research opportunities are especially beneficial for racially/ethnically diverse FGCS as it acknowledges their value to make contributions to scholarly research and other activities. This reinforces students' sense of belonging at college. Finally, diversity and global learning can support racially/ethnically diverse FGCS from rural/urban communities and encourage interaction with diverse student bodies on college campuses (Engle et al., 2006). Diversity and global learning encourages students to explore perspectives, cultures, and life experiences different from their own (Kuh, 2008).

Simply increasing access to higher education for racially/ethnically diverse FGCS does not translate into persistence or degree attainment. Programs with intentional strategies created to support the unique challenges for this population are required. The aforementioned strategies should occur prior to college enrollment, continue throughout the college experience, be multifaceted, strive to develop students' academic achievement, and encourage campus engagement (Thayer, 2000). In addition to considering the implementation of effective programs to serve racially/ethnically diverse FGCS, higher education researchers and practitioners could benefit from more research on specific subgroups for FGCS (i.e. African Americans).

Statement of the Problem

According to the Higher Education Research Institute (2007), Hispanics remain the most likely group to be first-generation college students (38.2%) at four-year colleges with African Americans (22.%), Native Americans (16.8%), Asian Americans (19%), and Whites (13.2%)

following. Previous studies revealed that the transition to college is challenging for underrepresented and underprepared groups, specifically racially/ethnically diverse groups such as African Americans (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). However, not many studies have focused primarily on African American first-generation college students with a qualitative approach. In qualitative research, the individuals within the research study construct the reality (Creswell, 1994). The qualitative approach is also considered the naturalistic inquiry because no attempts are made to manipulate the environment. Instead, qualitative research focuses on the meanings people correlate with activities and events occurring in their world (Roberts, 2010). As opposed to a quantitative study, a qualitative approach allows greater exploratory research but requires a tolerance of ambiguity. This qualitative study provided the researcher with the opportunity to gain insight into the first-hand viewpoints of African American FGCS at a higher education institution, thereby creating a portrait of their experiences.

FGCS may enter college with various barriers and be underprepared to meet challenges academically, emotionally, financially, and culturally (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Mehta et al., 2011; Parks-Yancy, 2012; Pobywajlo, 1989; Snell, 2008). As a result, scholars' approaches focused more on the rehabilitation of students rather than understanding and nurturing their capacity towards success by exploring the meanings of experiences through qualitative research (Green, 2006). Participants for this qualitative study were all African American FGCS who persisted in college and provided detailed descriptions of their lived experiences. Recommendations for future research and best practices are provided. Further, based on findings, opportunities for future research involving FGCS is suggested with

an emphasis on how colleges and universities might engage their African American FGCS and improve services for all students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to add to higher education research by exploring African American FGCS' perceptions of factors that contributed to their college persistence at a four-year public university. The study sought to understand how the participants perceived their self-efficacy in order to influence their ability to persist in college. Self-efficacy is an empirically validated construct that assisted in the examination of how participants in this study assessed their capabilities to organize and execute the actions required for college persistence. Self-efficacy beliefs influence specific courses of action a person chooses to pursue, the amount of effort utilized, perseverance in the face of challenges and failures, resilience, and the ability to cope more effectively with the associated demands (Bandura, 1997). Next, this study addressed critical gaps in the literature. Previous studies focused on the demographics or characteristics of FGCS but did not explore the strengths, insights, or perspectives of FGCS. This qualitative design was conducive to exploring college persistence for African American FGCS. In addition, careful identification of prominent themes provided core meanings commonly experienced by the population (Patton, 2015).

In order to understand how first-generation African American college students perceived their self-efficacy to influence their ability to persist in college, a phenomenological study was adopted. This allowed for an in-depth description of the essence of the lived experiences of individuals within a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, this study uncovered the perceptions of self-efficacy as an influential factor on the college persistence for African American first-generation students.

Conducting this phenomenological study uncovered the "lived experiences" or events lived by individuals who shared the common experiences (Creswell, 2003, p. 54). Thus, phenomenological research involves the reflection on lived experiences through which one has already passed (Van Manen, 1990). To study a phenomenon, the researcher should anticipate individuals to present their lived experiences of the phenomenon, their perceptions and perspectives, their feelings, what makes sense about it to them, and how it occurred in their lives (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Patton, 2015). The researcher ensured the voices of this historically underserved population were represented through their experiences rather than from bias (preconceptions of researchers and questionnaires) which is often found in the literature. The theoretical framework adopted in this study to investigate the understanding and depth of African American FGCS' lived experiences was self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). The results of the study illuminated practical opportunities for educators, administrators, policymakers, and counselors to promote the success of all students entering college as first-year students, more specifically African American first-generation college students. The results revealed an understanding how to support FGCS prior to and during the postsecondary experiences.

Rationale of Study

First-generation college students (FGCS) are defined as students who come from a family where neither of the parents attained a college degree (Mehta et al., 2011). First-generation college students may enter college with unique barriers related to under preparedness academically, emotionally, culturally, or financially and with uncertain beliefs regarding their ability to be successful in college (Hertel, 2002; Madyun, 2011; Mehta et al., 2011; Pobywajlo, 1989; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Ramsey & Peale, 2010; Stewart, Stewart, & Simons,

2007). Research consistently posited the unique challenges as deficits for African American FGCS (Bui, 2002; Hand & Payne, 2008; Orbe, 2004).

Existing research for African American FGCS has for the most part focused on their unique challenges and characteristics. The majority of the studies were quantitative in nature. The review of the literature revealed three critical gaps in the understanding of African American FGCS in higher education. First, studies of racially/ethnically diverse FGCS compared to their White peers often resulted in viewing FGCS as deficient (Bui, 2002; Hand & Payne, 2008; Orbe, 2004). The research compromised the development of effective engagement strategies for African American FGCS rather than exposing their merits. Secondly, a lack of more detailed, in-depth, lived collegiate experiences of African American first-generation college students exists in the literature. With a steady increase of first-generation college student enrollment in postsecondary institutions (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003), it is important that attention occurs in research to understanding the unique history, culture, and experiences of African American FGCS. Gaining insight and understanding how to better serve African American FGCS in the presence of barriers is relatively unexplored. This study addressed these gaps in the literature that did not sufficiently investigate the lived experiences of African American FGCS who are persisting in college. It was certainly important to explore their voices to understand collegiate experiences in the presence of the unique challenges.

To understand the factors associated with African American FGCS college persistence, this study used self-efficacy as defined by Bandura (1995, 1997) as a cognitive process that evolves over time, involving interaction between the individual and the environment. Studies revealed a relationship between self-efficacy and academic outcomes for racially/ethnically diverse first-generation students (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001;

Devonport & Lane, 2006; Gore, 2006; Majer, 2009; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010; Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008). This study uncovered the experiences and perceptions of college persistence among first-generation African American college students in the presence of barriers and enrollment characteristics documented throughout the literature for FGCS.

Research Questions

The overarching line of inquiry that guided this research was: What are the lived experiences for low-income African American first-generation college students who are enrolled and persist in a public university setting? Additionally, four sub-questions existed:

Research Question 1: What barriers do low-income African American first-generation students identify in college?

Research Question 2: What are the perceived factors that contribute to college persistence for African American first-generation students?

Research Question 3: What experiences do African American first-generation students perceive influence their college persistence?

Research Question 4: What experiences do African American FGCS perceive contribute to their self-efficacy?

Theoretical Framework

The researcher selected identification of rich descriptions commonly shared by third and fourth year students to understand the essence of college persistence through participants' lived experiences. For example, understanding the college experiences and relative cognitive growth of FGCS presents limitations when examining students during or following their first year of college (Pascarella et al., 2004). This study sought to extend the understanding of how FGCS

experience college and its benefit through the third and fourth years of college. A quantitative study conducted by Pascarella et al. searched for the differences in cognitive, psychosocial, and status attainment outcomes. Among end-of-third-year, first-generation college students, higher levels for both internal locus of attribution for academic success and preference for higher-order cognitive tasks occurred compared to their continuing-generation peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). significant differences for first-generation college students (FGCS) and continuing-generation college students (CGCS) for cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes resulted. Another example in Pascarella et al.'s findings indicated that FGCS derived greater outcome benefits from participating in extracurricular activities and peer interaction compared to CGCS, even though engagement in these activities during college was less likely. The findings were significant as self-efficacy was introduced as a resource for college persistence among FGCS.

Bandura (1997), Allen (1999), and Johnson (2006) suggested that individuals with strong self-efficacy were more likely to remain in college, achieve degree attainment, and utilize intrinsic motivation to press forward through tasks. Further, individuals persisted through academic challenges and accessed resources to succeed (Bandura, 1993; Solberg & Villareal, 1997). Self-efficacy is one's belief in his/her abilities to be effective in the completion of tasks (Bandura, 1997; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). The strength in one's belief determines the amount of effort or lack of effort that he/she puts forth in the face of challenges (Bandura, 1986). Individuals avoid or put forth less effort towards tasks when a lower level of self-efficacy is present (Bandura, 1986). Equally, a higher level of self-efficacy increases performance and a person's willingness to persevere (Bandura, 1997).

According to Bandura (1977), the development of self-efficacy involves the selection, assessment, and integration of four major informational sources: (a) mastery experience,

information gained authentically focusing on the individual's successes required for mastery and/or evaluation; (b) vicarious experience, information gained through social comparison and role modeling; (c) social persuasion, information gathered from different types of feedback specifically positive related to abilities; and (d) emotional arousal, the least important source that engages individuals in the judgment of their capability, strength, and vulnerability to dysfunction. Interpreting the perceptions and experiences for self-efficacy may be resources to understand college persistence for African American FGCS.

Definition of Key Terms

This section provides definitions of terms used in this study and ensures the consistent application of definitions throughout the study.

At-Risk Students. Students who are academically, emotionally, financially, and emotionally underprepared for higher education, often including first-generation students (Pobywajlo, 1989; Walters & McKay, 2005).

Continuing-Generation Students (CGCS). Students with at least one parent who had a bachelor's degree.

First-Generation College Students (FGCS). Students at the postsecondary-level student from a family where neither parent/guardian had earned a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001).

Lived Experiences. In a phenomenological approach to research, the lived experiences are the specific experiences described by the participants who have lived them (Leedy, 1997).

Low Income. An individual from a family whose taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150% of the amount equal to the poverty level (Higher Education Act of 1965).

Persistence. A student who returns after a semester of college to continue working towards degree attainment. For the purposes of this study, students who persisted to their third and fourth

year participated in the study.

Phenomenological Research. In phenomenological research, the researcher identifies and describes the "essence" or "central underlying meaning" of human experiences from several participants who experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, pp. 51-52).

Postsecondary Education. College curriculum courses for students beyond the high school level; these courses can be academic, vocational, or professional but not vocational or adult basic education courses (Office of Postsecondary Education [OPE], 2009).

Racially and Ethnically Diverse. Although *race* and *ethnicity* are often utilized interchangeably, a specific distinction and difference exists. Race incorporates the biological and hereditary classification of people based on physical attributes; ethnicity classifies individuals based on their unique social and cultural heritage, which is often times differentiated through regional ancestry (Atkinson, 2004). Specifically, Helms (1990) defined *racial categories* as sociopolitical constructs that society uses to categorize people through perceived biological characteristics. Ethnicity also refers to the cultural practices including customs, languages, and values of a collective group, which might not be part of the same assigned racial group (Helms, 2007). For the purpose of this study, African Americans, American Indians/Native Americans, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, and Latino/Hispanic Americans were referred to collectively as racially and ethnically diverse persons due to being placed in positions of inferior power based on perceived physical attributes and cultural characteristics in the U. S.

Retention. Retention refers to students who have completed college courses for the purposes of attainment of four-year degree (Hagedorn, 2006; Tinto, 2006).

Self-Efficacy. Self-efficacy served as the theoretical framework for this study and was used primarily as an explanatory and analytical lens through which the perceptions of first-generation

college students were interpreted. Self-efficacy is a cognitive resource that involves one's confidence or belief in one's ability to effectively engage in behaviors and learning in order to achieve specific tasks (Bandura, 1977, 1993, 1997). Self-efficacy is a process in which behavior, the individual, and his/her external environment interact to produce some subsequent action or inaction.

Summary

This phenomenological study focused on African American first-generation college students who persisted in college. The study provided a shift in focus for understanding one phenomenon through the perspective of the individuals living the experiences. This approach advocated a genuine concern for the development of practices to support the potential of African American FGCS. Current literature focuses on the barriers for racially/ethnically diverse FGCS; however, this qualitative analysis presented a lens of opportunity for potential development. A detailed literature review provided theoretical connections that established utility and purpose for this study. Lastly, the study identified commonly shared themes relating to perceptions of self-efficacy as an influence on college persistence for the FGCS population. The data should inform educators and counselors on how to assist FGCS with learning to be more successful in college. The development of practices and methods to support, build, and/or increase the rate of college persistence among African American, first-generation college students were ascertained.

In addition, the study addressed important gaps in the literature. First, the research literature indicated a significant amount of quantitative self-efficacy studies presented with a narrow lens (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Secondly, racially/ethnically diverse FGCS are consistently compared to their continuing-generation peers with results viewing African

American FGCS as deficient (Bui, 2002; Hand & Payne, 2008; Orbe, 2004). Lastly, gaining insights and understanding of how to serve African American FGCS in the presence of their challenges was explored.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to understand the essence of college persistence for African American first-generation college students (FGCS). More specifically, their perceptions and experiences that contributed to college persistence were researched to understand the population's unique challenges. This chapter presents literature regarding the population's participation in postsecondary education. In addition, the researcher was interested in understanding the perceptions and experiences of self-efficacy for African American FGCS. Several studies examined self-efficacy on college persistence for racially/ethnically, diverse students, and this section discusses these studies further regarding FGCS (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011; Chemers et al., 2001; Devonport & Lane, 2006; Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Gore, 2006; Majer, 2009; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Vuong et al., 2010; Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008). Little existed in the literature regarding self-efficacy for college persistence by African American FGCS. The results of this current research uncovered factors that affected African American FGCS and provided a better understanding of college persistence for this population. This qualitative study intended to address these gaps by focusing on the perceptions and experiences of self-efficacy for African American FGCS who persisted in college, an indicator toward degree attainment.

Self-efficacy is an empirically validated construct that assisted in the examination of how this study's participants assessed their capabilities to organize and execute actions required to persist in college. Self-efficacy beliefs influence specific courses of action a person chooses to pursue, the amount of effort utilized, perseverance in the face of challenges and failures, resilience, and the ability to cope more effectively with the associated demands (Bandura, 1997). This study revealed the perceptions and experiences of self-efficacy for African American FGCS

who were persisting in college. First, I reviewed FGCS, including African American students, and identified gaps in the literature. Second, I examined the literature on self-efficacy for racially/ethnically diverse FGCS.

Self-efficacy influences almost every aspect of academic development including choice of activities for engagement, persistence, and goal attainment (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Elias & Loomis, 2000; Schunk 1991; Zimmerman, 1995). For example, higher levels of self-efficacy had been found to be directly linked to academic achievement, including better grades for college students, even when controlling for socioeconomic status and past school performance (Chemers et al., 2001; Choy, 2001; Elias & Loomis, 2000; Elias & McDonald, 2007; Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis & Langley, 2004). Further, higher academic self-efficacy was related to stronger academic achievement for African Americans (DeFreitas, 2012; DeFreitas & Bravo, 2012; Majer, 2009). Due to the powerful influence and the resource of self-efficacy on academic achievement, consideration as a factor for college persistence among African American FGCS was important. The research literature failed to provide a thorough investigation of factors that contributed to the persistence of African American FGCS in the presence of their unique characteristics and barriers, which received thorough attention. The phenomenon was worthy of further investigation for this study. The literature review concludes with an analysis of how self-efficacy, the literature on FGCS, African Americans and persistence perspectives all interconnect to provide the rationale for the study.

First-Generation College Students

A first-generation college student refers to a postsecondary-level student from a family where neither parent/guardian earned a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001). First-generation college students are a well-known phenomenon in research; however, the literature has failed to point

out the sociopolitical history for African American FGCS. This population did not always have access to a college education. Prior to the Civil War, few African Americans were granted access to postsecondary institutions and were forbidden by discriminating laws and attitudes to pursue college education, especially in the South (Institute of Higher Education Policy, 2010). Due to the Morrill Acts in the 1800s, many African Americans gained access to a college education, further expanding access to higher education (Avery, 2009). In 1944, the G.I. Bill allowed veterans to seek a postsecondary education, further expanding access to higher education (Higher Education Act (HEA), 1965). In 1965, the Higher Education Act addressed racial and ethnic minority students on college campuses and noted their limited representation (NCES, 2012). The impact of the HEA of 1965 documented the increase of college enrollment for minority students from 5.9 million in 1965 to 18 million in 2010 (NCES, 2012). These statistics included racially and ethnically diverse FGCS in the United States.

In response to the United States' War on Poverty, the Higher Education Amendments authorized TRIO federal programs to provide educational opportunity programs in 1965 (HEA, 1965). Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services were TRIO programs specifically targeting first-generation college students and included services to support preparation, enrollment, and degree attainment for postsecondary success. HEA underwent several reauthorizations, and the most recent one appointed an Advisory Committee by Congress. One of the concerns the committee addressed was the low bachelor's degree completion rates of low-income African American and Hispanic 2012 high school graduates. The findings reported graduation rates at 26% and 21% respectively (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2013). As a result of the HEA efforts, an increased presence of ethnic minorities who are FGCS enrolled in postsecondary education.

According to Choy (2001), first-generation students account for an increasing proportion of the overall college population in the United States today, with some estimates approaching 50%. In 1995-1996, FGCS accounted for 34% of the student enrollment at four-year institutions and included 53% of the population at two-year institutions. The recent transformation of postsecondary education posits for open access, which has created opportunities for FGCS. However, gaps persist in knowledge about FGCS and how the knowledge is transformed into practice (Green, 2006; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). This current research investigated the research gaps for African American first-generation college students.

College Persistence for FGCS

A substantial amount of research literature exists concerning persistence and rates of degree attainment. In the literature, race, ethnicity, and gender differences are reflected to capture the prevalence of occurrences among racially/ethnically diverse populations of college students. According to Brock (2010), race, ethnicity, and gender are variables that showed significant statistical differences towards college persistence and degree attainment. Among 2–4 year universities and colleges, Asians and Pacific Islanders comprised the greater rates in persistence and college completion, followed by Whites, Hispanics, and African Americans. When race and ethnicity were included as variables in the literature, FGCS were less likely to persist or attain a college degree compared to White students in the United States (D'Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2005) reported that only one-third of African Americans and one-fourth of Hispanic American students enrolled in college in 2004. This is disturbing compared to 50% of Whites and 67% of Asian Americans who enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the same year. Racially/ethnically diverse students

reflected 22% of the undergraduate degrees earned in 2002-2003 compared to Whites who earned 70% of undergraduate degrees for the same year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005).

For racially/ethnically diverse FGCS, researchers found barriers towards persistence and adjustment. FGCS were more likely to need remedial courses, attend college part-time due to work, and present feelings of inadequate preparedness for college (Reid & Moore, 2008; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). These factors led to lower performance and lower grades and contributed to lower college persistence rates (Pascarella et al., 2004). Coursework and relationships with faculty were both factors to seriously consider in the examination of low college persistence rates for FGCS. Understanding the expectations of professors and coursework contributed to stress among FGCS (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009). FGCS were less likely to seek support to reduce stress and to receive guidance, which resulted in higher stress levels. It is therefore imperative to understand the underprepared FGCS prior to their arrival on campuses and the potential for psychological stressors.

Finally, FGCS were four times more likely to leave college after their first year compared to continuing-generation college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Comparing the 6-year college completion rate, 43% of low-income, first-generation college students left college before completing their degrees. For students who left, 60% left after the first year. Clearly low-income, racially/ethnically FGCS were identified in the literature as a population with huge gaps related to college persistence. This current study provided insight on how to better serve African American FGCS based on the perceptions and experiences of the students persisting and focused on their strengths in the presence of challenges.

Barriers for FGCS

Research indicated that first-year supportive services addresses the transition to college for FGCS and increases retention and degree attainment levels by providing personalized connections and supports within the university (Davis, 2010). A literature review follows for some of the identified challenges for FGCS. Lower-income FGCS are at a disadvantage due to their parents' lack of experiences with and information about college (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Further, family members experience difficulty guiding their FGCS in terms of the college application process and experience challenges when helping their students to understand expectations academically and socially in college (Mehta et al., 2011; Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Continuing-generation college students (CGCS) have an advantage with experienced parents who have knowledge of the college process and serve as personal guides to their students supporting transition and adjustment. FGCS often have additional pressures that are not common for CGCS (i.e., family obligations, employment, contributions to the family household). Other pressures included limited financial resources, as FGCS tend to come from low-income families (Engle et al., 2006). First-generation status increased the risks for leaving college prior to earning a degree, especially persistence to the second year of college (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009). Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that FGCS were nearly four times more likely to leave college without a degree compared to continuing-generation college students. Considering the disproportionate number of African American first-generation college students enrolling in postsecondary education programs (Mehta et al., 2011; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009; Robertson & Mason, 2008) the persistence and degree attainment rates continue to lag behind continuing-generation college students.

Other factors to consider as barriers for FGCS were that they tend to work more hours off campus, complete fewer credit hours in the first year of college, and receive less support from family and friends compared to their CGCS peers (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). When students worked off campus more than 20 hours per week, they had less opportunity to build connections such as meeting peers, being involved in student organizations, attending tutoring session, and meeting with professors during office hours. As a result, they may often struggle to complete a full-time course load per semester.

African American FGCS

African American FGCS faced additional challenges once they began college that were intensified due to their academic preparation (or lack thereof) and other characteristics such as low socioeconomic status (Baber, 2012; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Table 2 illustrates a snapshot of the barriers for African American FGCS.

Table 2

Barriers and Challenges for African American FGCS

Challenges/Barriers	Indicators	Citations
Underprepared emotionally and culturally	Higher levels of reported stress and depression; lack of confidence in skills, low self-esteem, and personal problems	Pobywajlo, 1989; Stebleton et al., 2014
Historical complexities for African Americans students	Underrepresented for rates of college enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment; underprepared academically	Anderson, 1978, 1984; DuBois, 1901; Fultz Brown, 2008; Provasnik & Snyder, 2004; Zietlow, 2006)

Lack of social capital	Lack network, internship, and employment connections, and other relationships; parents without postsecondary experiences	(Guiffrida, 2005; Parks & Yancy, 2005; Westphal & Stern, 2006
Socioeconomic status	If low-income, employment needed to support college and family expenses and responsibilities; perceived negatively by faculty and staff	Baber, 2012; HERI, 2007; Garcia, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2004
Social integration	Struggles between home and college community; feelings of isolation and lack sense of belonging on college campus; racism and discrimination	Astin, & Oseguera, 2005; Cushman, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Stebleton et al., 2011)

While college access for African Americans steadily increased over the years, students remain plagued by weak college preparatory curriculums, low Advanced Placement exam pass rates, ineffective and insufficient guidance by counselor services, unqualified teachers, minimal school materials, and inadequate school facilities (Kozol, 2005). These significant issues exist in many school systems across the country, especially for underfunded and poorly structured urban school districts that serve large populations of African American students (Condron & Roscigno, 2003). Additionally, research for high achieving African American students attending predominantly White institutions stressed the need for the creation of "sanctuaries for success" to support students of color in the process of developing a sense of belonging and acceptance to counteract the alienation they may experience (Brooks, 2011, p. 135).

Another problem that affects educational progress for African American students is racial discrimination (Jackson, 2007). Evidence indicated that institutional and systemic racism is embedded in many public policies, which negatively affects the educational outcomes of African American students (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Many of the institutional structures

within schools that impede college access for African American students were nationally consistent. For example, African American students underperformed on standardized tests compared to their White counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Steele (1997) concluded the discrepancy in standardized test scores between African Americans and White students might be caused by "stereotype threat," which is an anxiety response that occurs when individuals are placed at risk of upholding a negative stereotype associated with their identity group. Despite the differences in test performance between African American and White students, colleges and universities continually utilize and rely on test measures to determine college admission even when research suggested that standardized tests are week measures of academic success for students of color (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005).

Achievement Gap

Much research on this "achievement gap" indicated significant differences between the academic achievement of African Americans and Whites from pre-kindergarten to college and beyond (Taylor, 1995; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Yeung & Pfeiffer, 2009). In addition, a number of imperial studies demonstrated that African Americans and Latinos have lower academic achievement in college than their White peers in the absence of generational status (Culpepper & Davenport, 2009; Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2011). First generation college students received lower grades, earned fewer academic credits, and were less likely to obtain a college degree (Chen, 2005; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009). However, a clear reason for why FGCS had poorer academic performance compared to CGCS has not been found. Many researchers observed lower academic achievement for FGCS compared to CGCS (Engle, 2007; Majer, 2009; Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2003). To explain further, first-generation college students had lower grade

point averages (GPA) than continuing-generation college students did (Chen, 2005). Lower grade point averages likely caused FGCS to drop out of college more than for CGCS (Martinez et al., 2009). In other words, CGCS were more likely to persist in face of poor academic performance. Other researchers found that one's belief in his/her academic abilities affected academic performance, which in turn affected persistence and degree attainment (Vuong et al., 2010).

Lower academic achievement and lower rates of persistence among FGCS stems from a variety sources, including poor educational environments and culturally irrelevant public policies in relation to racially/ethnically diverse students (Jones & Menzies, 2000). In addition, FGCS were underprepared to enter college, often took fewer higher college-level courses during high school, performed poorly on academic placement exams, reduced time for studying and interacting with faculty, and had higher rates of employment while in college (Chen, 2005; DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013; Engle, 2007). One interesting hypothesis for the lower levels of achievement among FGCS was that they have lower academic self-concepts than other students do (DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013) do.

Self-concept can be defined as an individual's assessment of self s based on his/her experiences and interpretations of those experiences such as "I am good at math' (Schunk & Pajares, 2005). The primary goal of this current study was to determine whether perceptions and experiences of self-efficacy influenced college persistence for African American FGCS. For the purposes of this study, self-efficacy is one's belief in his/her abilities to be successful academically. Perhaps focusing on improving one's beliefs about these abilities also leads to improved academic outcomes (DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013).

Ethnic Identity

Another significant factor is ethnic identity, which refers to how an individual perceives the knowledge, traditions, and history of their particular ethnic group. Ethnic identity received more attention in the U. S. with the prevalence of an increasingly culturally diverse society (Baber, 2012; Peterson & Spencer, 1990). A strong identification with one's ethnic background has been consistently linked to several positive outcomes, including higher academic achievement (Fife, Bond, & Byars-Winston, 2011). Fife et al. examined the role of ethnic identity in the academic self-efficacy of African American students majoring in STEM (science, mathematics, technology, and engineering fields). One-hundred sixty-five African American undergraduates (125 female, 45 male) enrolled at one U. S. historically Black university's college of science, engineering, and technology program in the mid-Atlantic region participated in the study. Being a first-generation student was not a background variable considered in this study; however, the findings informed the basis of this current study that examined African American students.

Fife et al. (2011) found that students who were able to make connections with other ethnic groups tended to have higher expectations of achievement once they completed their degrees. This supported Anglin and Wade's (2007) research that indicated individuals who embraced his/her own ethnic identity, but also made connections with other ethnic groups, were confident in beliefs to perform tasks related to the career fields and produced higher levels of success. This significant finding reinforces the assumption that teachers should consider issues around culture and identity as a valuable tool to enhance the education of African American students. Academic success for African American students is complex, and learning does not occur simply because information was presented, but the possibility of learning increases when

more significant variables impacting students were carefully considered (Phinney, 2003).

Another study examined the racial identity and adjustment to college in African American students at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Anglin and Wade (2007) found that the belief when an individual embraces his/her own Black racial identity, yet is able to make connections with other racial and cultural groups, resulted in a positive relationship with adjustment to college. Given that a disproportionate number of FGCS are racially/ethnically diverse, degree attainment rates for these groups provides evidence of challenges for FGCS (Terenzini et al., 1996). Compared to White students (40% of whom completed college in four years, 67% in six years), 21% of Black, non-Hispanic students, and 25% of Hispanic students finished in four years, and 46% and 47%, respectively, completed in six years (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). Further, being a racially/ethnically diverse student is an additional risk factor for FGCS for earning a postsecondary degree. These statistics highlighted postsecondary institutions with environments cultivating success among traditional college students may be less likely to do so with racially/ethnically diverse students.

Cultural Dynamics

African American first-generation college students reported feeling the burden of maintaining and managing two cultures. Challenge existed when balancing the responsibilities at home and maintaining peer and community relationships in their college environments (Schmidt, 2003). Guiffrida (2005) conducted a study of 99 African American students at a midsize, private Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Purposeful sampling obtained participants with varying academic achievement levels, including FGCS. African American students felt family pressure, which hindered their academic success. Students felt obligated to go home on a regular basis to provide support to their families. Students also explained that they

traveled home often to connect with peers since they had not established a social network on campus. Not only do African American FGCS to deal with home culture and responsibilities, they also deal with their new college culture being unfamiliar and unlike the culture and environment to which they are accustomed. Choy (2001) described this dynamic as being socially knowledgeable and competent in two cultures, also known as biculturalism.

In the presence of the challenges for African American FGCS, a significant gap in the literature existed to examine the factors influencing the persistence for this population. Specifically, an absence of qualitative research exists that lends to the voices of African Americans, describing their perceptions and experiences, as first-generation college students. The purpose of this study was to support both the population and the existing body of research on first-generation college students.

Implications for Counseling Profession

When serving African American FGCS, counselors, and counselor educators can be more effective if they understand and are prepared to address this population's unique enrollment characteristics and barriers. Historical complexities, socioeconomic status, social integration, under-preparedness, racial discrimination, cultural dynamics, and ethnic identity influenced enrollment, academic progress, and persistence outcomes for racially/ethnically diverse FGCS (Anderson, 1978, 1984; Anglin & Wade, 2007; Baber, 2012; Cushman, 2007; DuBois, 1901; Fife et al., 2011; Guiffrida, 2005; Jackson, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pobywajlo, 1989; Stebleton et al., 2011). For example, counselors can support African American FGCS when they anticipate the disappointments of students and process maladaptive thoughts and feelings with students before a devastating impact on academic achievement occurs (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Further, though there are college counselors providing academic advisement, student

support, and retention services to assist African American students, minimal attention was given in the counseling literature to understand the experiences of African American students, including FGCS (Gullffrida & Douthit, 2010).

Although counselors have become leaders and change agents in promoting social justice in education, providing research on effective multicultural counseling processes, and identifying links between racial/ethnic identity development and mental well-being, an important gap in the counseling literature still exists. The American Counseling Association's mandate to promote social justice by understanding and serving the needs of historically marginalized populations is required (Arredondo et al., 1996; Lee, 2007).

Counselor educators in particular have a critical role in preparing counselors to serve racially-ethnically diverse FGCS in many ways. The counseling professionals who understand the challenges faced by African American FGCS may provide invaluable means of support and advocacy for students to facilitate their academic success.

Finally, this research study served as an examination, with substantial data, to inform the counseling profession of ways to serve African American first-generation college students from a servant leadership perspective whereby the counseling professional responds to potentially viable resources to improve postsecondary outcomes for this population.

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura's (1977, 1993, 1997) seminal work included the development of his social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework that helps to explain the power cognition has on behavioral changes over time. Further, Bandura explained in the theory the relationship between self-efficacy and coping behaviors to be initiated by an individual. The coping behavior relates to how much effort an individual exerts towards tasks and resilience in the face of

challenges, adversity, and failures. Self-efficacy is a primary element of social cognitive theory and was described by Bandura (1977) as one's belief of how well he/she will successfully complete tasks. He further proposed that self-efficacy is a cognitive resource personal for an individual and displayed through his/her belief in one's capabilities and abilities. It is not solely dependent upon actual abilities. It is, therefore, an individual's belief that he/she can be successful. Therefore, an individual's beliefs about his/her abilities and capabilities to perform tasks and influence events affects the individually emotionally and behaviorally. In fact, the level of self-efficacy relates to whether or not a person engages in a particular behavior or activity (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Individuals may avoid or put forth less effort towards tasks with a lower level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Equally, a higher level of self-efficacy increases performance and a person's willingness to persevere (Bandura, 1997). Perseverance in the presence of obstacles may also be the case for African American FGCS. Bandura's (1977) seminal work on self-efficacy validates the assumption that people often create and foster perceptions of their capabilities.

Self-efficacy influences the cognitive process with a direct influence on preventive situations that individuals construct and rehearse (Bandura, 1994). For example, individuals with high self-efficacy beliefs participate in the anticipation of success regularly, and those with low self-efficacy beliefs tend to center on pitfalls and anticipate failures (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy also impacts motivation by influencing goal attainment, perseverance, and resilience to failure (Bandura, 1994). Individuals with a high sense of self-efficacy set higher goal levels than those with lower self-efficacy and exert more effort to achieve the goals. Additionally, those with low self-efficacy attribute failures to a lack of ability, while those with higher self-efficacy

attribute failure as a lack of effort on their part. As a result, individuals may give up in the face of challenges or exert more effort (Bandura, 1977).

Self-Efficacy as a Paradigm

Self-efficacy was chosen as the basis of this qualitative study as it included the exploration of the perceptions and experiences of self-efficacy as an influential factor on college persistence for African American first-generation college students. For the past 30 years, an extensive number of studies validated the effects of self-efficacy beliefs on a broad variety of human goals including academic achievement (Coutinho, 2008; Pajares, 1996; Schunk & Mullen, 2012; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992), career development (Betz, 2006; Betz, Klein, & Taylor, 1996; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), dropout prevention (Schunk & Mullen, 2012), health (Bandura, 1991, 1997; Bandura, Reese, & Adams, 1982), and athletics (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy could be used as a predictor towards academic achievement for racially/ethnically diverse FGCS (Majer, 2009), and the unique lived experiences could provide a framework in which to understand the perceptions and experiences of self-efficacy on college persistence.

This section includes self-efficacy as the model for understanding college persistence as well as research conducted involving postsecondary settings and college persistence. To understand the perceptions and experiences of African American FGCS, the researcher used self-efficacy as a construct for understanding college persistence for this population, in the presence of unique challenges.

Self-efficacy is a primary element of social cognitive theory and is described by Bandura (1977) as one's belief of how well one will successfully complete tasks. Pajares (1996) highlighted that a greater sense of self-efficacy strengthens one's resilience in the face of

challenge, failure, or threat. It is relevant to seriously consider Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977, 1986, 1997) based on the assumptions that an individual's initiation and persistence towards coping is based on their expectations for success. The strength of one's beliefs in his/her abilities to be effective likely affects one's decision to make efforts and remain confident in the face of challenges. Self-efficacy beliefs therefore influence specific behaviors that an individual selects, the amount of effort that one applies, and the perseverance through and during challenges (Bandura, 1977). Extensive research indicated the significance of self-efficacy on academic outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996), and supportive evidence established a significant correlation between self-efficacy and achievement (Fast et al., 2010; Pajares & Miller, 1994).

One's beliefs about his/her self-efficacy can be encouraged and strengthened through four potential sources of information to assist an individual with determining confidence: (a) mastery experiences (enactive), (b) vicarious experiences (modeling), (c) verbal persuasion (social), and (d) judgments of physiological states (emotional arousal) (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997; Wood & Bandura, 1989). When an individual has strong positive experiences, one's self-efficacy is strengthened while adverse efficacy experiences weaken one's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997; Chowdhury, Endres, & Lanis, 2002; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Interaction between cognitive, affective, and biological environments and behaviors constantly informs and influences how people feel, think, motivate, and behave (Bandura, 1993). Most importantly, behavior is a product of cognitive functioning with the potential to influence future cognition. This cycle is a critical aspect of Bandura's overall theory, specifically as it relates to self-efficacy.

Thus, according to Bandura (1977), the development of self-efficacy involves the selection, assessment, and integration of four major informational sources: (a) mastery experience, which includes information gained authentically with focus on the individual's successes that require mastery and/or evaluation; (b) vicarious experience, information gained through social comparison and role modeling; (c) social persuasion, information gathered from different types of feedback, specifically positive and related to abilities; and (d) emotional arousal, a least important source, that engages individuals in the judgment of capability, strength, and vulnerability to dysfunction.

Mastery Experience

As human beings develop successful experiences within a specific domain of functioning (i.e., parenting, career, marriage, college persistence), expectations for success also increase (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). When a person experiences failure, a negative impact often occurs. Over time, although a single experience is not likely to have a significant positive or negative influence, the individual may avoid engaging in specific tasks at various levels (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). Mastery experiences are most influential in developing self-efficacy, as those experiences are based on direct and personal experiences (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Two reasons exist for how mastery experiences have such an impact on self-efficacy. First, acts of mastery are based on direct and personal experiences. Second, one's mastery is directly related to an individual's effort and skill (Smith, 2002). An increase in self-efficacy beliefs may be correlated with one's approach towards goal orientation (Lau, Liem, & Nie, 2008; Sins, van Joolingen, Savelsbergh, & van Hout-Wolters, 2008) and a more profound approach to learning (Phan, 2010; Sins et al., 2008). A lower self-efficacy, in contrast, negatively impacts learning and leads to maladaptive behavior (e.g., avoidance of task). The literature supported the

correlation of mastery experiences and self-efficacy.

The importance of attending college has been thoroughly highlighted throughout the literature; however, Lindholm's (2006) study revealed that students who decided not to attend college explained that negative experiences at home and in school were major factors contributing to their decisions. This was consistent with Bandura's (1977) original description in which he indicated that experiences may significantly influence the development of resilient or self-defeating behaviors for individuals over time.

Vicarious Experience

Vicarious experience, known also as modeling, affects self-efficacy through social comparison where individuals judge abilities based on the capabilities of others (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Vicarious experience also includes observational learning (modeling) from a skilled perspective that continuously builds upon an individual's knowledge and understanding. Seeing others perform successfully is considered vicarious experience, which can also increase self-efficacy in individuals when the individual determines that he/she too possessed the capabilities to perform and master similar tasks. Observing others who are skilled in a particular area and practicing the modeled behaviors fosters initial learning (Erlich & Russ-Eft, 2011). Models assist individuals to build self-efficacy beliefs through conveying effective strategies for managing challenging situations (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Under close supervision, receiving encouragement, and reducing anxiety during practice, the individual acquires learning (Erlich & Russ-Eft, 2011).

According to research, vicarious experiences have the least impact on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). However, vicarious experiences are more impactful when an individual perceived models similar to him/her (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Gladwell

(2013) provided an example of this relationship, "We form our impressions not globally, by placing ourselves in the broadest possible context, but locally-by comparing ourselves to people in the same boat as ourselves" (p. 78). Individuals may observe similar persons successfully performing a task with persistent effort and as result increase one's self-efficacy beliefs. Vicarious experience is information gained through social comparison and role modeling. On the end of the spectrum, observing similar individuals fail, despite consistent efforts, it negatively decreases one's efficacy beliefs and undermines future efforts (Chowdhury et al., 2002; Wood & Bandura, 1989).

Social/Verbal Persuasion

Verbal persuasion, also known as social persuasion, is another way to increase one's self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Verbal persuasion is most effective subsequent to a performance accomplishment (i.e., a mastery experience). "If people receive realistic encouragement, they will be more successful than if they are troubled by self-doubts," (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 365). Positive verbal persuasive feedback has the ability to increase individual self-efficacy (Dortch, 2016). During the course of an individual's life, one receives messages that may have a positive or negative impact on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Verbal communication and evaluative feedback is most successful when information is well informed, reliable, and pragmatic (van Dinther, Dochy, & Segers, 2011). Similar to vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion reportedly has a weak effect on self-efficacy and is likely dominated by previous performances (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Pajares, 1997; Schunk & Mullen, 2012; Schunk & Pajares, 2009).

Emotional Arousal

An individual's judgments involving physiological states, i.e., emotional arousal, is the fourth factor of self-efficacy, yet it is considered the weakest source to engage individuals to judge capability, strength, and vulnerability (Bandura, 1986; Phan & Ngu, 2016; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Physiological responses such as anxiety and stress can affect one's self-efficacy as can the absence of these responses. Phobias are helpful in explaining this phenomenon's source of self-efficacy information. For example, if an individual experiences an increased heart rate during an elevator ride, his/her sense of self-efficacy in successfully managing that situation is likely to be negatively impacted. As a predictor towards educational outcomes and/or achievement, promoting healthy emotional states might contribute toward higher levels of self-efficacy (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). However, others have found that stress-related factors such as test anxiety were less predictive of student achievement than self-efficacy (Chemers et al., 2001; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005). With vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion, the impact of emotional arousal on the self-efficacy of individuals is limited.

Self-efficacy is extensively present in research literature, including studies on the impact of vicarious learning and verbal persuasion on the development of self-efficacy (Schunk, 1982, 1983; Schunk & Hanson, 1985; Schunk, Hanson, & Cox, 1987). In the 1990s and 2000s, with the development of Likert-scale measures, researchers focused the exploration of how the four informational sources of self-efficacy differed (Britner & Pajares, 2006; Phan, 2012; Usher & Pajares, 2006, 2009). With similarities consistent with Bandura's (1997) theoretical principles, the results indicated the power of mastery learning experiences compared to other informational sources (Britner & Pajares, 2006; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007; Usher & Pajares, 2006). Self-efficacy is a result of a complex series of consistent interactions, interpretations, and

behaviors. In this context, self-efficacy develops in interaction with the quality and quantity of experiences in one's environments. Understanding an individual's approach to difficult tasks, the observations and learning from others, and persuasive verbal feedback as resources contributing to college persistence for African American FGCS was analyzed using a phenomenological approach. Mastery/lived experiences, vicarious/modeled experiences, and social/verbal persuasion have the potential to positively or negatively interact and influence an individual's belief in his/her capacity to be successful (Bandura, 1977; Schunk & Mullen, 2012; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Therefore, self-efficacy is a critical factor to consider and was found to contribute to a student's college adjustment, academic performance, social integration, and ability manage stress (Bandura, 1997; Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011; Chemers et al., 2001; DeFretias, 2012; Gaylon, Blondin, Yaw, Nalls, & Williams, 2012; Majer, 2009; Mehta et al., 2011; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tovar et al., 2009; Vuong et al., 2010). To date, very few studies gave attention to the influence of self-efficacy on African Americans; however, a few studies addressed African American males and females through qualitative approaches most relevant for this study.

African Americans Male Students and Self-Efficacy

Some evidence suggested that self-efficacy serves as a resilience factor in the college persistence process. For example, Wilkins (2005) conducted in-depth interviews with African American male college students to acquire an understanding of the coping strategies that supported their ability to overcome racially hostile college settings. Students reported feeling strongly confident in their academic abilities (self-efficacy) and maintained focus on their goals (academic achievement, persistence, and degree attainment) with mastery experiences as the

driving force. Wilkins concluded that the development of self-efficacy should be considered as a powerful intervention for professionals who desire to support African American males.

Another study on self-efficacy on African American males in community college settings sought to explain the relationship of self-efficacy to math anxiety and perceptions of academic preparedness (Bates, 2007). Four-hundred African American males in a developmental math course participated in the study. A significant relationship existed between self-efficacy, students' perceptions of their academic preparedness, and math anxiety. Self-efficacy had an inverse relationship on math anxiety, so as efficacy increased, anxiety decreased. Self-assessments were also a component of the study with academic preparation for the course found to have a positive and significant relationship with self-efficacy.

Bates' findings provided insight for this current study given its focus on African American college students' experiences, which remains a gap within the postsecondary education research literature.

African American Female Students and Self-Efficacy

Dortch (2016) provided an in-depth example for both vicarious experiences (modeling) and verbal persuasion (social) as powerful resources for African American students in higher education. In a phenomenological exploration of self-efficacy for African American female doctoral students, the study found both verbal persuasion and vicarious experiences to be the strongest predictors of self-efficacy (Dortch, 2016). The study challenged scholars like Bertand Jones, Osbourne-Lampkin, Patterson, and Davis (2015), Lewis, Ginsberg, and Davies (2004), Nettles and Millett (2006) who argued that African American graduate students simply require funding, accessible faculty, and a supportive environment in order to persist; however, the inequities that threaten the educational outcomes of African American students were minimized.

A broader perspective was examined in the study and took into account that African American students go through the process of resisting inequities by cultivating self-efficacy. The study provided rich descriptions from two female African American doctoral students who described the role of self-efficacy in contributing to their academic success.

Bandura (1997) cited mastery of tasks as the most influential source of self-efficacy. However, his findings indicated that vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion had an impact on the academic outcomes for African American students. Mastery of tasks, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion components were incorporated to describe ways in which African American first-generation undergraduate students respond to failures and challenges.

Self-Efficacy and Academic Performance

Self-efficacy is noted as a major contributor towards persistence, resilience, and achievement in academic settings (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1983; Zimmerman, 2000). In the past two decades, researchers also made considerable attempts to establish the validity of self-efficacy as a predictor of students' motivation and learning (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011; Chemers et al., 2001; Choi, 2005; Majer, 2009; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Pajares, 1996; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Vuong et al., 2010). In addition, the level of self-efficacy directly impacted an individual's decision to engage or not in specific behaviors, tasks, and/or activities (Bandura, 1986). An individual may avoid or put forth the effort toward situations where low self-efficacy is present (Bandura, 1986). Chemers et al. (2001) defined self-efficacy as "students' confidence in mastering academic subjects" (p. 56). If a student is confident in doing well in college, he/she is more likely to succeed (Chemers et al., 2001).

Lent, Brown, and Larkin (1986) found a relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance for first-year college students, the time where students experience the most

difficulties in transition. Self-efficacy reportedly had an influence on academic achievement for college students enrolled in technical and scientific programs of study. Zimmerman et al. (1992) examined how perceived self-efficacy influenced academic achievement and personal goals. A quantitative approach sought to examine 102 high school students from lower-middle class communities. The sample included African American, Asian, Hispanic, and White students who completed a questionnaire with items from the *Children's Multidimensional Self-Efficacy Scales*. The academic achievement scale measured students' perceived ability to perform in academic areas proficiently. Zimmerman et al. found that students' perceived self-efficacy for academic achievement and student goals consisted of 31% of the variance in the students' academic course attainment. Though the research concluded a significant portion of the variance as unexplained, social cognitive theory includes other factors, which affect and explain academic achievement (Zimmerman et al., 1992).

Zimmerman et al. (1992) explained the ways in which self-efficacy was a significant and major resource for an individual, which allowed one to have control over his/her functioning by impacting and influencing feelings, thoughts, motivation, and behavior. A strong level of self-efficacy resulted in students setting high goals to challenge themselves and in dedicating more time towards those goals to achieve successful academic outcomes. Thus, self-efficacy was required for individuals to effectively use skills needed to achieve successful outcomes (Bandura, 1993). Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy can overcome barriers, remain engaged in tasks, be motivated to put forth the required effort to accomplish goals, and remain resilient in the midst of failures. It is, therefore, a student's belief in his/her capabilities to be academically successful that predicts future academic attainment (Bandura, 1993). Based on social cognitive theory, self-efficacy has a significant impact on academic development,

including persistence and improved grades in college (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Chemers et al., 2001; Choi, 2005; Zimmerman, 1995).

A meta-analysis of research in educational settings found that self-efficacy beliefs have an impact on academic performance and persistence outcomes. In the meta-analysis, self-efficacy beliefs accounted for 14% of the variance found in students' academic performance and 12% in academic persistence (Multon et al., 1991). These results aligned with Bandura's (1994) suggestion that self-efficacy influences individuals through four major psychological processes: cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection and is related to one's academic achievement.

Bandura (1997) found that regardless of task difficulty, self-efficacy predicted performance. Additionally, individuals with strong self-efficacy more likely remained in college, achieved degree attainment, and utilized intrinsic motivation to press forward through tasks (Allen, 1999; Johnson, 2006). Further, individuals persisted through academic challenges and accessed resources to succeed, which also influenced the way stressful situations were experienced (Bandura, 199S; Solberg & Villareal, 1997). Individuals with strong self-efficacy exerted greater effort and persisted longer than those who demonstrated lower self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Self-Efficacy and College Adjustment

Researchers also conducted studies exploring the relationship of self-efficacy and college adjustment for racially/ethnically diverse populations (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). The first year of college is critical for the college student's academic success and is most evident with college freshmen and transfer students (Cuseo, 2003). Richardson and Skinner (1992) were the first to specifically consider the college adjustment for racially/ethnically diverse FGCS as part of 107 in-depth interviews of graduates of 10 public

universities across the country. Faculty behavior and self-efficacy positively impacted college adjustment. Brady-Amoon and Fuertes' (2011) study of 275 undergraduate students supported research findings that self-efficacy contributed to a student's ability to adjust to the college environment. Likewise, Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) compared groups of FGCS and CGCS at a private liberal arts West coast university and revealed that a student's level of self-efficacy at the beginning of the year significantly predicted college adjustment at the end of the academic year regardless of generational status.

Self-Efficacy and Social Integration

Social supports are strategies that nurture and strengthen social networks, campus-connectedness, sense of belonging, self-confidence, and academic motivation (Huratado & Carter, 1997). Such supports include positive relationships with faculty and peers, both of whom help provide students with executing the actions needed for academic success (IHEP, 2010). Therefore, college persistence relies heavily on the student's perception that he/she academically and socially integrates into campus life (Huratado & Carter, 1997). Particularly for racially/ethnically diverse students, a sense of belonging depends on their ability to identify with others in an environment where genuine efforts to engage and support inclusion occur. This includes identifying with fellow students, finding acceptance among student groups or organizations, identifying with an institution's mission statement, or the way in which faculty provides instruction and support in and outside the classroom (Hoffman et al., 2002-2003; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Tovar et al., 2009).

First-generation students were more likely to feel left out compared to continuing-generation students, had trouble finding their place, and often presented lower levels of self-efficacy (Housel & Harvey, 2009; Hunter, McCalla-Wriggins, & White, 2007; Ostrove & Long,

2007). Challenges in how to select a major, find internship opportunities, and choose goals that undermine their academic abilities were examples of obstacles specific for first-generation students' success (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009). Students who experienced discouragement with academic abilities and few successful academic experiences may perceive college completion as unattainable.

DeFreitas (2012) reported results to support the importance of positive self-efficacy during college enrollment. DeFreitas surveyed 249 African American and Hispanic college students who attended an institution predominantly serving Hispanic students by examining the relationship for involvement with faculty and mentoring on self-efficacy with academic achievement. The findings suggested involvement with faculty and self-efficacy significantly related to academic achievement for the groups. As suggested by previous research, involvement with faculty related to better academic achievement (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). When students felt able to discuss academics and other subjects with faculty outside of the classroom, they performed better in the classroom. Interactions with faculty were particularly important for this study conducted with African American and Hispanic students. Establishing relationships with faculty suggested that even when racially/ethnically diverse students are not minorities at a university, they still benefit from faculty involvement. This may be particularly important for racially/ethnically diverse students who are more likely than White students to perceive that faculty has negative views of them and their academic potential (Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008). When racially/ethnically diverse students had positive interactions with faculty and felt a sense of belonging in the academic setting, this reinforced their beliefs that they can be academically successful (Furr & Elling, 2002; Quarterman, 2008).

Self-Efficacy and Stress

Anxiety and negative emotions can be draining, and self-efficacy has a direct influence on emotions through its effects on one's ability to manage and cope with stressful events, including college persistence (Chemers et al., 2001). Stress is "the negative emotional or physical state that results from being exposed to a threat" (Earnest & Dwyer, 2010, p. 2). When an individual has a sense of control over a stressful situation, he/she is more likely to respond to the situation with confidence (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992). Stress levels and coping skills are essential to determining how a person responds and succeeds to a task (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). First-generation students confronted the same anxieties, frustrations, and the novelty of college as well as continuing-generation students but additionally experience stressors from social and cultural transitions (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Johnson, Wasserman, Yildrim, and Yonai (2014) examined the effects of stress and campus perceptions on persistence decisions for racially/ethnically diverse and White students (). The study utilized a modified version of Bean and Easton's (2001-2002) psychological model of college student retention and investigated persistence decisions of racially/ethnically diverse and White students at a predominantly White university. Environmental experiences, including campus perceptions, impacted the level of stress for a student, resulting in negative effects on college persistence (Johnson et al., 2014). Johnson et al. found consistencies with other research on the role of stress in academic performance and persistence decisions for students of color (Neville, Heppner, Ji, & Thye, 2004; Wei, Ku, & Liao, 2011). Stress related to the academic environment had a negative influence on persistence for racially/ethnically students. For the racially/ethnically students, direct negative effects were found for commitment to the institution and indirect effects on their intentions to return and academic performance. For the White

students who participated in the study, stress related to an indirect effect on persistence decisions, negative direct effects on commitment to the institution, and indirect effects on intention to return and make academic progress. Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, and Cribbie (2007) conducted a study with 128 students and found that as students' stress levels decreased, improved academic adjustment occurred, including academic performance. Students experienced the most stress during the beginning of their first year of college, and as the year progressed, stress levels decreased because adjustment increased (Friedlander et al., 2007).

College Attendance

One of the most stressful times for people experience in their lives is during attendance at college (Ramsey, Greenberg, & Hale, 1989). First-generation college students face unique challenges. Scholars gave attention to the unique challenges for racially/ethnically diverse FGCS who often have insufficient academic preparation for college and less knowledge to navigate the complexities of college (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Nunez & Guccaro-Alamin, 1998; Padron, 1992; Schmidt, 2003; Thayer, 2000; Vargas, 2004). Unfortunately, first-generation college students remain at a disadvantage with less generational and cultural capital provided to them, and most significantly, the absence of college specific information (Barry et al., 2009; Hsiao, 1992; Thayer, 2000).

Cultural Transition

Further, first-generation college students tend to experience greater challenge in the cultural transition, including interaction with both home and college environments (Constantine & Baron, 1997; Cuellar, 2000). Stress increases with managing the expectations involved in educational mobility and moving up the social ranks (London, 1989; Thayer, 2000; Weis, 1985). First-generation college students reported increased pressure to excel as the first in the family to

attend college, and limited income to support education increases stress (Choy, 2001; Orbe, 2004, 2008; Pryor et al., 2006). Lastly, first-generation college students often come from low-income families or from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds (primarily Hispanic and African American) with increased risk for stressors associated with poverty, violence, and racial and ethnic discrimination (Lott, 2003; Pieterse, Carter, Evans, & Walter, 2010). Regarding the relationship of self-efficacy and low socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity predicted lower self-efficacy for both African and Hispanic Americans college students and higher levels of stress (Majer, 2009; Mehta et al., 2011). The unique challenges potentially increase stress among first-generation college students, which suggests discouraging outcomes.

Academic Performance

Among the unique stressors and discouraging outcomes for first-generation college students, the students question their ability to perform academically, persist, and work successfully towards degree attainment (Chen & Carroll, 2005). The struggle with self-efficacy arises more frequently for this group when consideration of college related tasks, increased intimidation of the college setting, living between two cultures but really not belonging to either, and lacking a sense of belonging on campus (London, 1989; Lubrano, 2004; Orbe, 2004; Padron, 1992; Podsada, 2010; Tovar et al., 2009). Due to some of the unique stressors and feeling ill equipped to have successful academic outcomes, first-generation college students are at increased risk to drop out (51% less likely to earn a degree over 4 years than their peers are). When failures occur, students are less likely to put forth the effort and commitment to persist (Ishitani, 2006; Podsada, 2010).

Underprepared

In addition, FGCS reported feelings of being unprepared for the rigor of college, and these feelings of inadequacy lead to higher levels of stress and anxiety, which adversely influences students' decisions to pursue postsecondary goals (Mehta et. al., 2011; Rodriquez, 2003). A prevalent challenge for FGCS is feeling academically underprepared for college (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). FGCS reported feeling less confident and academically inferior to their peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Cushman, 2007; Ishitani, 2006). All of these factors contribute to decreased academic motivation, low self-efficacy levels, and ultimately may result in departure.

This unique family, cultural, social, and academic transitions among first-generation college students are critical factors to consider, as high chronic stress contributes to a range of medical and mental health problems (Brewer & Petrie, 1996; Dixon, Rumford, Heppner, & Lips, 1992; Hsiao, 1992). Physiological conditions associated with stress, including fatigue, headaches, and sleep difficulties may lower one's self-efficacy as well as psychological responses to stress, including fear, anxiety, and depression (Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

Psychological Risks

A study comparing first-generation and continuing-generation undergraduate students assessed sources of social support, post-traumatic stress, depression, and life satisfaction (Jenkins, Belanger, Melissa, Boals, & Duron, 2013. The sample included 1,647 participants: 63% White, 14% African American, 6% Asian, 13% Hispanic, and 4% other. Jenkins et al. found that first-generation college students struggled with higher levels of post-traumatic stress and symptoms of depression, and had less life satisfaction compared to continuing-generation college students. This study suggests a need for increased mental health services for FGCS who

are at risk of these symptoms. The unique challenges impacted overall psychological wellness, academic performance, and persistence in college (Jenkins et al., 2013). The phenomenon of college persistence for racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college students remains complex and requires further examination.

Finally, Devonport and Lane (2006) found a significant relationship for self-efficacy, coping, and retention. In other words, students who used active coping strategies experienced an increase in coping efficacy, contributing to an increase in self-efficacy. The self-efficacy scores reported 81.3% of the students characterized as at-risk of dropout. College can be a very stressful period in the lives of most students, and racially/ethnically diverse students reported higher levels of stress than students who persisted in college (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Neville et al., 2004).

Self-Efficacy for Diverse Populations

The relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievement is well established; however, the influence of race and ethnicity on the relationship remains unclear. For example, social cognitive theory posits that racially/ethnically diverse persons have low levels of self-efficacy, lack of experience to sources of self-efficacy, less successful past performance, fewer role models, and less encouragement (Lent et al., 1994; Lent et al., 1996). After reviewing literature comparing racially/ethnically diverse college students with their White peers, higher levels of self-efficacy were found among White students (Mayo & Christenfeld, 1999; Pajares & Kranzler, 1995). However, Graham (1994) suggested that the relationship between racially/ethnically diverse populations and self-efficacy involved more complexity. Graham reviewed 18 studies and found higher levels of self-efficacy for African Americans than Whites. Four of the studies found no significant differences, five presented mixed results, and two

showed Whites with higher self-efficacy. These results suggest some inconsistencies for the relationship between self-efficacy and ethnicity for varied reasons (DeFreitas, 2012).

Aronson and Inzlicht (2004) suggested that an undeveloped or unstable self-efficacy connects to feelings of racial stereotype. Aronson and Inzlicht further described vulnerability and feelings of being stereotyped can make an individual feel less likely to believe that he/she has control over goals and outcomes in these situations. Self-efficacy was most influential for Whites in academic achievement than for African Americans because Whites were less likely to impacted by racism or stereotyping (Aronson & Inzlicht, 2004).

Social cognitive theory may be a pathway in understanding differences across racial/ethnic groups and in examining the relationship between academic achievement and outcome expectations, an individual's expectancies for future results based on behavior (Lent et al., 1994, 1996). Social cognitive theory suggests that outcome expectations are influential factors towards academic achievement, and an individual is less likely to put forth the effort needed to achieve goals if the individual believes that the efforts will not produce desired outcomes, such as good grades and college persistence. Due to racial and socioeconomic discrimination, which is significant among racially/ethnically diverse persons, negative outcome expectations may be higher with unexpected negative experiences and outcomes (Lent et al., 1994, 1996). This is evident when a prejudiced individual evaluated the performance of a racially/ethnically diverse person and regardless of performing well on a task, the performance receives negative feedback. As a result, the feedback serves a negative outcome (Lent et al., 1996).

The relationship between negative outcome expectations and experiences to perceptions of racism and discrimination is understood (Irving & Hudley, 2005, 2008); however, this does

not explain ways in which racially/ethnically diverse persons experience racism and discrimination. The relationship between self-efficacy and outcome expectations for racially/ethnically diverse persons and the influence of their perceptions and experiences involving discrimination and racism requires further research examination for college persistence.

However, the studies added value to the body of research in postsecondary education, they failed to provide examination of the underlying processes and environments that African American first-generation college students must travel in order to achieve success. Self-efficacy as a theoretical framework provides a unique opportunity to add breadth to previous research. With a qualitative approach, the essence of college persistence for African American first-generation college students was uniquely investigated.

Self-Efficacy and First-Generation College Students

While research on self-efficacy and generational status is scarce, one research study explored the role of first-generation status and academic self-efficacy and found that FGCS reported lower levels of self-efficacy compared to continuing-generation peers (Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008). In this study, the researchers utilized various inventories and scales to survey 367 college students enrolled at a large, public university on the west coast. Among the participants, 34.9% were first-generation, and 65.1% were continuing-generation students. The College Self-Efficacy Inventory (CSEI) developed by Solberg, O'Brien, Villareal, Kennel, and Davis (1993) measured the confidence levels in students relative to college tasks. Originally, the inventory evaluated Hispanic college students and later examined African American students enrolled in a predominantly White institution. Wang and Castaneda-Sound (2008) examined the

hypothesis that FGCS would reveal lower levels of academic self-efficacy compared to their peers.

The CSEI contains three subscales (course efficacy, social efficacy, and roommate efficacy); however, Wang and Castaneda-Sound (2008) utilized only the first two subscales in their study. The course and social efficacy scales included seven items each measuring self-confidence in completing college tasks and common interactions that college students encounter in a university setting (Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008). The results indicated that first-generation students scored significantly lower on measures of self-efficacy compared to their continuing-generation peers.

Another study with racially/ethnically diverse FGCS enrolled in a community college found that self-efficacy predicted increases in GPA using a longitudinal study one year later (Majer, 2009). Majer examined self-efficacy and academic success of ethnically diverse FGCS in a community college located in the Midwest region of the U. S. Majer hypothesized that levels of self-efficacy and socioeconomic characteristics would predict academic outcomes, and socioeconomic characteristics among FGCS would indicate a relationship between self-efficacy for education and academic outcomes. The quantitative study selected a convenience sample of FGCS, and participants completed the Beliefs in Educational Success Test (BEST) in order to measure levels of self-efficacy. A positive relationship existed between levels of self-efficacy for education and GPA at the end of the academic year. Three academic outcomes were predicated: students' GPA, attendance, and attrition. This suggested that higher levels of self-efficacy for education played a significant role in promoting educational gains among diverse FGCS. This was one of the few studies that directly examined self-efficacy for racially/ethnically diverse FGCS with a focus to advocate strategies for self-efficacy.

Vuong et al. (2010) studied college sophomores at five of 23 California State University campuses. The purpose of the study was to examine whether academic success, defined by GPA and persistence rates, was a function of self-efficacy. The study sought to determine if differences were present for first-generation and continuing-generation college students and to examine differences based on gender, ethnicity, and size of campus. The College Self-Efficacy Inventory was administered, and it found that the perceptions of college sophomore about their abilities (self-efficacy) influenced their academic performance and persistence to maintain a GPA that allowed them to continue towards degree attainment (Solberg et al., 1993). Although studies suggested that racially/ethnically diverse students, many of whom are first-generation, had lower self-efficacy compared to continuing-generation and Whites, the Solberg et al. study did not support that conclusion.

Through qualitative inquiry, this current study gained a deeper understanding of ways in which perceptions and experiences for self-efficacy influenced college persistence for African American FGCS. Understanding the voices of African American FGCS is empowering and provided perspectives never explored. This current research challenged the overwhelmingly deficit lens presented in the research for African American FGCS. The examination of the intersection of self-efficacy, first-generation college students, and college persistence occurred. The next section highlights what is known and critically examines what is absent in the literature concerning African American FGCS.

The Intersection of Self-Efficacy, FGCS, and College Persistence

Bandura's (1977, 1986, 1997) four sources of self-efficacy can be used to develop efficacy-building supports for first-generation college students from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds. The four sources named by Bandura were: (a) vicarious experiences, (b)

emotional arousal, (c) verbal persuasion, and (d) mastery accomplishments. The self-efficacy theory provided a pathway to link theoretically the existing literature on racially/ethnically diverse, first-generation college students, and persistence. This section focuses on the self-efficacy, college persistence, and first-generation research. First, the influence of self-efficacy on one's capabilities to perform specific actions and behaviors to produce desired outcomes is highlighted. Second, first-generation college students have lower persistence rates than continuing-generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004). This section culminates by linking self-efficacy and FGCS research with broader ideas of college persistence adopted for this study.

In this current study, the definition of self-efficacy is: "One's perceived capabilities for learning or performing actions at designated levels" (Schunk & Pajares, 2009, p. 220). Further, self-efficacy is the degree of strength of one's belief in ability to successfully manage tasks and reach goals, and in this case a profound indicator towards academic success (Chemers et al., 2001). For example, self-efficacy is evident when the ability to persist academically is present through the students' ability to be successful with academic tasks, performance, achievement, and degree attainment. Therefore, self-efficacy directly relates to how long a FGCS responds to the rigor of college (persistence) and the many transitions (barriers) he/she encounters towards academic success. Levels of self-efficacy may determine if a student chooses to persist in college. Self-efficacy, therefore, is based on an individual's belief in his/her power to be effective in managing challenging tasks.

For the African American, first-generation college student, the belief that he/she can effectively manage the tasks associated with college persistence was relevant for this research study. Participants in this study shared their narratives relating to their beliefs in managing

academic tasks successfully and unsuccessfully. This phenomenological study allowed for the rich descriptions of the personal struggles and successes from African American, first-generation college students with emphasis on the decisions made and actions performed in the process. The researcher sought to understand the influence of self-efficacy as a powerful source for first-generation college students.

Change and transition to college can be challenging. The transition from high school to college can place significant demands on young adults (Tinto, 1982, 1999). College life can be overwhelming, demanding, and stressful for a new student and requires well-developed abilities to exercise independence, initiative, and self-regulation (Bryde & Milburn, 1990; Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). Confidence is directly related to one's abilities (e.g. self-efficacy) and is a major factor that contributes to an individual's successful navigation through challenging life experiences (Chemers et at., 2001). Transition to college requires actions and effective responses to challenging tasks to result in successful outcomes (Chemers et al., 2001). Students with high self-efficacy view themselves as more confident in their abilities and respond accordingly to demanding situations. A common thread for self-efficacy and first-generation research is the direct and personal experiences for students. Bandura (1977) referred to these as mastery experiences, which Schunk and Pajares (2009) determined to influence the development of self-efficacy. As college students experience academic success, their expectations for success also increase; the same is just as impactful as students experience failure. For self-efficacy, one's mastery experiences for academic success and college persistence was relevant for this study.

In one study, Schunk and Mullen (2012 applied self-efficacy to create an understanding of the departure decisions and motivation levels among high school students. Though the study

included high school students, the demographics of the participants were relevant for this research. Schunk and Mullen explained, "By interacting with others, people learn knowledge, skills, strategies, beliefs, norms, and attitudes. Students act in accordance with their beliefs about their capabilities and the expected outcomes of their actions" (2012, p. 220). The study included participants from low-income and ethnically diverse backgrounds, at risk for dropping out and underperforming in high school and college. Pajares (1996) suggested that a lower self-efficacy may be a result of failed experiences and discouragement or negativity results aversively impact students' motivation and engagement academically.

Further, Schunk and Mullen (2012) interviewed racially/ethnically diverse college graduates who had attained their college degrees in midst of obstacles and reported their determination as the contributing factor to their success. Several of the participants believed the goal towards degree attainment was consistent with securing better lives, access to money, security, and power (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). Securing a better job, acquiring social status, and improving lifestyles were also motivators for the participants. Compared to continuing-generation college students (CGCS), FGCS learned the connection between a college degree and the potential for better employment. For CGCS, the belief in college as a pathway towards employment was modeled and established early on as parental expectations, and FGCS learned through their history of employment/military experiences that college was a pathway towards better employment, independence, and a better standard of living (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Understanding contributing factors towards degree attainment for African American FGCS who were currently persisting influenced this researcher and study.

Mastery expectations described by Bandura (1977) were most influential towards degree attainment. Findings by other researchers were consistent with Bandura's (1997) theoretical

framework, where mastery learning is a powerful resource of self-efficacy (Britner & Pajares, 2006; Pajares et al., 2007; Usher & Pajares, 2006). For example, Richardson and Skinner (1992) indicated that though graduates reported skepticism about opportunities associated with college, career discrimination following college and family/peers discouraged their determination to master the skills needed to support academic achievement, persistence, and degree attainment. This resulted in the development of mastery expectations. Understanding the perceptions and experiences for mastery learning and expectations for African American FGCS remains a gap in the literature and this research explored this topic in more depth.

When preparation was introduced Richardson and Skinner's study (1992), graduates reported lack of adequate academic preparation, which involved complex cognitive, physical, and social aspects of the college-going experiences, and was consistent with social-cognitive theory for the development of self-efficacy beliefs (Attinasi, 1989). For example, Richardson and Skinner's (1992) further study revealed that mastery expectations were clearly important for students' development of expectations for course content and the needed academic skills required for academic success and degree attainment. Additionally, the researchers reviewed that there are many racially/ethnically diverse students who were well prepared for postsecondary education, and yet there were many others who had overcome the obstacles of inadequate academic preparation and as first-generation college students met the challenges of postsecondary education. This current study extended Richardson and Skinner's (1992) findings and explored in more depth the perceptions and experiences of African American FGCS who were persisting in college in the face of their unique barriers.

Thus, a limit exists to the impact a greater sense of self-efficacy can have on any human being and academic success. There is not a doubt that mastery expectations, mastery learning,

determination, and academic preparation are examples of powerful influences on an individual's self-efficacy. Clearly, self-efficacy cannot stand in for ability; however, it can certainly extend existing ability (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). It is relevant to highlight that this can be an important distinction for African American first-generation college students.

Individuals with a strong sense of self and confidence in the ability to succeed, compared to those with less confidence, are more likely to be successful (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Understanding the essence of college persistence for African American FGCS, with self-efficacy as a framework, should assist in understanding students who hold fast to their beliefs or confidence in their capacity to successfully complete life tasks (Bandura, 1997). Bandura further explained in his self-efficacy theory that one's behavior is an indicator that reinforces beliefs that he/she can successfully approach tasks. Self-efficacy has received overwhelming attention from the field of education with emphasis on understanding the relationship of self-efficacy and academic achievement and performance (Pajares & Johnson, 1996; Pajares & Valiante, 1997). The researcher unveiled the perceptions and experiences for self-efficacy on college persistence for African American first-generation college students. By understanding the reviewed literature and the acknowledgment of the limitations, this study should launch a movement among scholars, delineating the importance of exploring a broader range of contributing factors that affect college persistence, instead of relying so heavily on the demographic and enrollment characteristics of first-generation college students. Growing concern exists to create practices and strategies to prepare and support racially/ethnically diverse FGCS from enrollment to degree attainment.

Conclusions

Although scholars have explored why students leave college before attaining their college degree, self-efficacy provides an explanation of students' persistence process from a social-cognitive perspective, suggesting an opportunity to influence the development of self-efficacy for first-generation college students with the potential for powerful academic outcomes towards postsecondary success (Astin, 1975, 1999; Astin, Astin, Green, McNamara, & Williams, 1982; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora., 2000; Tierney, 2000; Tinto, 2000). Consideration of individual student characteristics such as first-generation, low-income, race, ethnicity, inadequate preparation, nontraditional modes and institutional characteristics (racial/ethnic isolation), students' opportunities for mastery experiences, perceptions of belonging, financial aid, and involvement in student activities are taken into account in the decision to leave before attaining a college degree (Astin, 1975; Zajacova et al., 2005). While each of the previous studies contributed to college persistence, none of the literature examined the perceptions and experiences of African American FGCS and how self-efficacy may or may not be a contributing factor for college persistence based on these lived experiences. The insights gained from this study can help create responsive educational environments for all students, including racially/ethnically diverse FGCS.

Further, this study created a context for how collaboration with African American FGCS help develop strategies and practices that support access, persistence, academic achievement, and degree attainment. It is imperative to note that self-efficacy has predicted performance (Bong, 2001; Choi, 2005; Coutinho, 2008; Multon et al., 1991; Pajares, 1996). However, self-efficacy received little attention, specifically for African American FGCS. The next chapter focuses on the methods applied to this research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of low-income African American first-generation college students (FGCS) enrolled in a public university setting. The overarching research question guided the study: What are the lived experiences for African American first-generation college students who are persisting in a public university setting? More specifically this study will focus on the four sub-questions: (1) What barriers do low-income African American first-generation students identify in college? (2) What are the perceived factors that contribute to college persistence for African American first-generation students? (3) What experiences do African American first-generation students perceive to influence their college persistence? (4) What experiences do African American FGCS perceive to contribute to their self-efficacy?

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of African American first-generation college students and their college persistence. This chapter provides the detailed methods of phenomenology, which intends to more specifically recognize ways in which self-efficacy was perceived and experienced among African American first-generation college students. The chapter begins with describing phenomenology as the research design adopted for the study. A discussion of the goals of research and data collection procedures follows. This section also describes the data analysis procedures for the study, including the ways in which the results are presented. Finally, the researcher discusses her role in the study, including potential biases.

Research Design

This study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research to understand the unique lived experiences of African American first-generation college students

(FGCS). Pascarella et al. (2004) stated, “Although we appear to know much about first-generation college students with respect to their academic preparation, transition to postsecondary education, and progress toward degree attainment, surprisingly little is known about their college experiences” (p. 250). According to Moustakas (1994), the primary source of knowledge in phenomenological research is perception, which cannot be questioned. The advantages of phenomenology allow the researcher to study the phenomenon in ways not achievable through quantitative research methods. The phenomenological approach to research allows the researcher to explore the essence of an experience rather than seeking measurements and explanations. Phenomenology embarks to uncover the “lived experiences” or events lived by individuals who share the common experiences (Creswell, 2003, p. 54).

Thus, phenomenological research involves the reflection on lived experiences through which a person already passed (Van Manen, 1990). Husserl (2014) explained that for the researcher the course of action is to engage people in describing things as experienced through their senses. Further, Husserl suggested that individuals know their experiences by attending to the perceptions and meanings that awaken conscious awareness. To study a phenomenon, the researcher should anticipate individuals to present the lived experiences of the phenomenon, perceptions and perspectives, feelings, what makes sense about it, and how it occurred in each person’s life (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Patton, 2015).

Phenomenology emphasizes the meaning individuals give to an experience and allows exploration of commonalities of shared experiences (Creswell, 2007; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Mertens, 2005). Van Manen (1990) described this shared essence as the “grasp of the very nature of the thing” (p. 177). Phenomenology was the appropriate methodology for this study because the literature did not provide an adequate understanding of college persistence

for African American FGCS. This approach allowed for the exploration of lived experiences commonly shared and provided an explanation of what participants experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Since it is the lived experiences of the participants who were the focus of the data, their description is always viewed as credible (Ferch, 2000).

Phenomenological studies focus on cultures, emotions, experiences, perceptions, feelings, knowledge, opinions, relationships, programs, organizations, or any events that individuals consciously experience (Patton, 2015). Creswell (2007) describes two types of phenomenology: (a) hermeneutical phenomenology that allows the researcher to interpret the phenomenon under study, and (b) transcendental phenomenology that allows the researcher to create detailed descriptions of participants' lived experiences and allows the essence of those experiences to emerge.

Transcendental Phenomenology

For the purpose of this study, transcendental phenomenology was best suited because this allowed the narratives from African American first-generation college students' lived experiences to be reflected from their voices, which are meaningful. Transcendental phenomenology, as described by Moustakas (1994) is "perceived freshly, as if for the first time" and "is described totally, in a fresh and open way… a complete description is given of its essential constituents, variations of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes" (p. 34). Transcendental phenomenology is useful for describing a phenomenon using the participants' experiences, perceptions, and voices (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). According to Creswell (2013), the textural descriptions examine the participants' experiences, and the structural descriptions develop by how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Furthermore, Moustakas' (1994) data analysis method of transcendental-phenomenological

reduction was best suited for this study and was used to achieve a textural-structural synthesis and essence of the experiences. The focus of the study was to illuminate the participants' lived experiences and not my interpretation of the experiences.

Perna and Thomas (2006) indicated that qualitative studies are needed to understand how the factors that predict student success in college are pathways toward persistence. In order for the researcher to thoroughly engage in this study, phenomenological interviews were utilized to describe the lived experiences which involved an interactive process focusing on gathering a comprehensive account of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; (Van Manen, 1990). In-depth interviews were required to allow participants to describe their lived experiences of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). To accomplish this task, the researcher worked consciously to remove all biases and suspend any preconceived opinions as a first-generation college student (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The researcher yielded to a holistic perspective to understand that persistence for first-generation college students is complex and cannot be reduced to cause-effect relationship (Patton, 2015).

Qualitative Research as a Paradigm

Research paradigms are belief systems based fundamental philosophies (i.e., ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetoric, and methodology), and research traditions are methodological approaches and design strategies grounded by paradigms (Hays & Singh, 2011). Combined, the paradigms and traditions served as a map to highlight the counseling researcher's assumptions, values, and activities related to research interest. Based on the researcher's paradigm (e.g., feminism, social constructivism, critical theory), the researcher placed differential value on the nature of truth or realty of a phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2011). Qualitative researchers generally operate from a different epistemological framework than quantitative researchers

(Atieno, 2014). For example, many qualitative researchers believe that understanding any phenomenon is to view it in its contexts (Atieno, 2014). It is therefore best to understand the whole phenomenon instead of seeking understanding of smaller pieces through quantitative approaches. Qualitative research allows the researcher to study culture or organization and experience what it is like to be a part of those with flexibility in the inquiry of people kept in context. Rather than using a measurement that constructs as in a fixed set of questions, the qualitative researcher allows the questions to emerge, flow, and change as the researcher becomes more familiar with the phenomenon (Atieno, 2014).

Hays and Singh (2011) indicated that research models are grounded in belief systems based on a core philosophy of science (i.e., ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetoric and methodology), and research is based on methodological approaches influenced by paradigms. Together, they serve as a path that highlights the counseling researcher's assumptions, values, and activities in which to pursue the investigation of a topic. Qualitative researchers operate under different ontological assumptions about the world (Atieno, 2014), which is the value to the nature of reality or truth of a phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2011). Ontology is one belief system based on the core philosophy of science influenced by a paradigm. One single reality separate from perceptions is not assumed. Individuals experience the world from his/her point of view, therefore, a different reality. Conducting research that does not value unique experiences of individuals violates the fundamental view of individuals. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that research has the potential to present bias, particularly because the researcher has his/her perceptions as well.

From a counseling perspective, which is consistent with the researcher's professional identity, counseling researchers use qualitative research to guide professional practice in the

same manner in which counselors use theoretical orientations to guide practice with their clients (Hays & Wood, 2011). According to Hays and Wood (2011), counseling researchers traditionally use the following six qualitative research traditions consistently: grounded theory, phenomenology, consensual qualitative research, ethnography, narratology, and participatory action research. For the purposes of this research, phenomenological research is explained further.

Additionally, the goal of phenomenology is to give voice to participants' lived experiences with depth and meaning (Hays & Singh, 2011). The researcher sought to align intentions for this study and to understand the individual and common experiences of participants, based on the participants' perceptions and thoughts of their experiences and by valuing the different individual experiences of the world (Hays & Singh, 2011; Wertz, 2005). Counseling researchers therefore approach a phenomenon as a blank slate, refraining from judgment and bracketing their assumptions. The researcher experienced the phenomenon through the lens of those who have experienced it. Phenomenology uses interviewing to first understand the world of the participant and then move toward searching for commonalties across participants (Wertz, 2005). In the process of moving back and forth through the data, researchers seek the essence, commonalities, and differences of the phenomenon under investigation. The four steps involved in this process are discussed further in the data analysis section (Moustakas, 1994).

Goal of Research Study

Qualitative research focuses on understanding and explaining the meaning individuals construct from lived experiences and how individuals make sense of the world (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, (2001). The goal of this study was to learn and deeply understand college

persistence for third and fourth year African American FGCS, taking into account the students' rich descriptions, perceptions, experiences of the world, as they viewed it. It was therefore imperative to collect information to understand the participants' lived experiences with focus on describing the essence of what it means to be an African American first-generation college student.

Transcendental phenomenology was best suited for this study because it addressed a gap in the literature that did not give attention to the perceptions, experiences, and voices of African American FGCS who were persisting in college. It was important study to explore and document the lived experiences of African American FGCS in the presence of their unique challenges. It also included first-person accounts and detailed descriptions. As Merriam (1998) indicated, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, more specifically, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 6).

Phenomenology and Education

Scholars determined qualitative research as a valuable method for exploring the phenomenon of first-generation college students. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) indicated that a qualitative approach is essential to extend the research beyond that which simply compares first-generation students to their continuing-generation counterparts yet fails to explore other factors that impact their college experiences. An example of the phenomenological approach applied to college persistence is relevant. Baber (2012) chose phenomenology to understand the essence of lived experiences for first-year African American college students. While recent research suggested that persistence and completion rates at four-year institutions are on the rise, a more in-depth exploration of data revealed a continuous rate of disparity among

racially/ethnically diverse populations (Baber, 2012). The phenomenological study used an interpretive framework that allowed for the investigation of the subjective influence on the educational experiences of African American students enrolled in predominantly White institution.

Baber (2012) study examined how racial identity development shapes first-year college experiences among African American students with the hope to shed light on the consistent issue of persistence and attainment among the underrepresented and marginalized population. Though first-generation status was not an identified variable for the study, the participants' voices presented the challenges for African Americans in pursuit of higher education. The phenomenological approach provided a greater understanding of first-year experiences for African American college students and the need for researchers in higher education to continue investigation of the complexities of factors contributing to college persistence for this population, including students with first-generation status.

Several studies examined self-efficacy for racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college students with quantitative approaches (Chemers et al., 2001; DeFreitas, 2012; Devonport & Lane, 2006; Majer, 2009; Vuong et al., 2010; Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008). However, Richardson and Skinner (1992) first conducted a qualitative study with this population using in-depth interviews cited with 107 racially/ethnically diverse FGCS (African American, Hispanic, and Native Americans) after their attainment of undergraduate degrees. Richardson and Skinner sought to identify the variables that contributed to the participants' decisions to persist and graduate. The current researcher extended on the scholars' work and gave attention to the voices of African American FGCS as they persisted toward degree

attainment. The researcher provided insight through the perceptions and experiences of self-efficacy as African American FGCS with unique historical journeys in higher education.

Research Questions

In chapter one, the research questions for the study, including sub-questions, were presented. These questions are: What are the lived experiences of low-income African American first-generation college students who are persisting in a public university setting?

Research Question 1: What barriers do low-income African American first-generation students identify in college?

Research Question 2: What are the perceived factors that contribute to college persistence for African American first-generation students?

Research Question 3: What experiences do African American first-generation students perceive influence their college persistence?

Research Question 4: What experiences do African American FGCS perceive contribute to their self-efficacy?

Participant Selection

According to Creswell (2009, 2013), researchers utilizing a qualitative research design purposefully select participants and the research site to be most beneficial in providing the researcher with a greater understanding of the research problem. For this reason, the researcher targeted African American first-generation college students at a public university who were willing to share their perceptions and experiences of persistence. The study utilized purposeful sampling, so the interviews would be rich in information and obtain more depth of experiences related to the phenomenon from a smaller number of participants (Patton, 2015). For example, the researcher selected participants who were third and fourth year students to provide rich

descriptions and experiences for college persistence. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research for identifying and selecting information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). Criterion purposeful sampling strategy involves identifying and selecting participants that meet a predetermined criterion (i.e., African American, third and fourth year first-generation college students, persisting in a public university setting). For this study, the participants were selected because they possessed knowledge, experiences, and information about the depth of the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants were chosen from one site (one public university in Midwest U. S.) because the researcher sought detail (depth) of the phenomenon and not breadth to understand the phenomenon.

Qualitative research designs provide more depth of understanding of a particular research interest while quantitative research provides more breadth of understanding a particular research interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants for this qualitative study were selected based on the assumption that they possessed knowledge and experiences with the phenomenon of interest (i.e., first-generation college students persisting) and therefore were able to provide detailed or depth of the information. From the perspective of qualitative research, participants who met or exceeded the selection criterion possessed personal (or, at the very least, greater) knowledge of the phenomenon based on their experiences, to make them information-rich cases (Palinkas et al., 2015). The researcher placed greater attention to depth to provoke understanding and to develop a hypothesis to serve in future research.

According to Creswell (2013), a phenomenological study traditionally includes a group of individuals who had all experienced the same phenomenon and the sample ranges from three to 10 (Creswell, 2013). Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) proposed that saturation often occurred with 12 participants in homogeneous groups. Saturation is a purposeful strategy for

addressing the potential problem of a small sample size and involves terminating the collection of data when new and emerging insights are no longer present (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2015). Though a study of one individual for an extended length of time would be rich information, it would not provide the depth that the research questions and study's purpose required to completely understand the phenomenon. In order to draw inferences about first-generation college students who had the same demographics and persisted to their third and fourth years, studying more than one individual would provide needed information (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Twelve to15, low-income, African American first-generation college students who were persisting in a four-year undergraduate program in a public university in the Midwestern area of United States were selected. Participants for this study were purposely chosen to illuminate the research questions and to strategically align with the research purpose and data. Persistence was defined as a student's return after a semester of college to continue working towards degree attainment. For the purposes of this study, participants were in their third or fourth year of postsecondary education.

Sampling. The sampling process included collaboration with the Director of the Center for the Junior Year (CTJY) at Governors State University (GSU) who served as my primary contact for student recruitment and site selection. Additionally, a staff member from the site's Office of Institutional Research assisted the researcher in identifying students who met the selection criteria using the college's student records' database. Using the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) and the college's email system, an email was sent to prospective participants to introduce the researcher and explain the purpose of the study (see Appendix B). Upon receipt of an email response indicating interest to participate in the study, the researcher contacted each student directly by email to thoroughly explain the study, the selection criterion, the purpose, and

the safeguards to protect the participants. In this reply email, the participants were provided with notification of informed consent (see Appendix C), the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D), and the audio consent (see Appendix E). The demographic questionnaire served as the tool to screen potential participants for the study. Twenty-two students expressed interest in participating in the study and returned the demographic questionnaires and consents via email. Of those 22 students who returned documents and expressed interest in participating in the study, 18 met the selection criterion. The first 15 students who made themselves available for an interview on their campus were scheduled and completed interviews from November 9, 2017, through December 21, 2017.

The final pool of students interviewed for this study included 3 juniors and 12 seniors. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 25 years old. All students were African American, nine were females, and six were males. All 15 students met the criterion definition for first-generation college students.

Research Site

The researcher selected Governors State University (GSU) as the research site for this study. Founded in 1960 as an upper-division graduate public university, the university is located 40 miles south of Chicago and is best known for offering affordable tuition rates compared to other public institutions in Illinois. In 2014, GSU transitioned into a four-year traditional institution with acceptance of the first freshmen class of 242 students. This transition resulted in serving traditional-aged students (18-24) on its campus. The average age of undergraduate students at GSU is 30; and the average age of graduate students is 35 (GSU Office of Institution Research, 2014).

GSU had the potential for the phenomenon to study to be highly likely. The goal was to select 12 to 15 students who met the selection criterion for the study. After the sampling process was complete, 15 students participated in the study. Each participant for this study was low-income, African American, first-generation, and persisting in an undergraduate program at GSU. For the purpose of this study, a first-generation college student was defined as a postsecondary-level student who came from a family where neither parent/guardian earned a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001). A few other criteria applied to select participants for this study:

- Participants were enrolled as full-time undergraduate students.
- Participants were enrolled in the third or fourth year of postsecondary education.

Interpretation of Findings

This study focused on a transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research. The researcher engaged in the qualitative analysis process of peeling back the layers of data to be gathered and then re-assembled. While conducting the interviews, for example, the researcher engaged in analysis of interviews collected earlier, writing memos included in the final narrative report, then analysis of information, and finally the final report (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher used the process of iterative analysis (DPhil & DPhil, 2009) which is a reflective process that involved the researcher continuously making-meaning of the data. Further the researcher employed iterative analysis to understand what was happening in the constant search for concepts and themes from the data. Engaging with the iterative framework allowed the researcher to better analyze lived experiences of African American first-generation college students that were persisting as a group, rather than as independent.

To assist in data analysis to support the final report of findings, the researcher used a hand-coded process using Moustakas' (1994) method of analysis of phenomenological data to

locate all text associated with the phenomenon. This included cutting, sorting, and underlining key phrases to identify segments of meaningful data from participants' expressions, known as horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher used the structural coding process (Guest , MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) where conceptual phrases were identified and applied to represent a segment of data related to specific research questions (MacQueen, McLellan-Lemal, Bartholow, & Milstein, 2008). Structural coding assisted the researcher in labeling to quickly access data relevant to the analysis. This process allowed the researcher to examine and compare segments for commonalities, differences, and relationships. The researcher went through each line of text of data several times and assigned preliminary codes. Definitions were also created for each code using participants' quotes.

Next, the researcher engaged in clustering the information into themes and subthemes and used the process of reduction and elimination (Moustakas, 1994). According to Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997), the researcher identifies the frequency in which participants expressed a concept (general, typical, variant). In order to characterize the frequency of occurrence of themes, the researcher identified general themes as the frequency of occurrence of themes present in all but one case (participant transcripts). More than half of the cases and were typical, and the variant included one to three cases. Finally, themes emerging from single cases were placed into a variant category and not reported in the data analysis. Identifying the themes also included identifying repetitions that occurred and reoccurred (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975), similarities, and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The final identification of themes formed from checking the invariant themes against the research participants' transcripts. The researcher found participants' expressions to be explicitly expressed in the complete transcriptions and were compatible if not explicitly expressed. If

expressions were not explicit or compatible, they were not found to be relevant to experiences and were deleted (Moustakas, 1994). Using the relevant, validated invariant themes (general and typical), results were presented in two sections: (a) written descriptive narratives done by clustering the information into themes to describe textures (meaning and depth) of the experiences and referred to as textural descriptions expressing the essence of the lived experiences of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2014), and (b) analysis of significant statements to create structural descriptions by identifying multiple meanings and tensions in the textural descriptions. A list represented participants' experiences, thus creating a composite textural-structural description (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher used the steps recommended by Creswell (2014) as a strategy to convey in the written report the steps involved in the data analysis. These steps included: (a) organization and preparation of data for analysis; (b) review of data to obtain a sense of information gathered, transcribed, and written; (c) coding data into segments and identify phrases to represent categories in the margins (Rossman & Rallis, 2012); (d) coding to generate descriptions of categories and themes; and (e) use of narrative passages and tables to convey the findings of analysis.

Data Collection Methods

Various methods collect data in qualitative studies, and this included semi-structured interviews to focus on the participants' lived experiences as first-generation college students. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), four areas are considered in the process to document the lived experience of the phenomenon to allow each participant to share his/her voice concerning the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). The setting, the participants, the details of their experiences, and the processes are included. Further, the qualitative approach allows researchers

to explore a phenomenon on a deeper level and by multiple participants. Offering descriptions is at the surface, and researchers have the flexibility to make inferences about theory used to interpret experiences of participants (Patton, 2015). For this study, categorizing the perceptions of the lived experiences of African American first-generation students offered a unique opportunity to better understand self-efficacy and subsequently college persistence for the population.

Demographic Questionnaires

Prior to interviews 22 students completed a brief demographic questionnaire to assist the researcher in the collection of considerable amounts of information to save time (see Appendix D). The demographic questionnaire asked prospective participants to report information about their current academic and persistence status, race, age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and parent educational status. Other items assessed how the participants' education was funded (e.g., Pell Grant, loans, scholarships, work-study. Twenty-two students completed the demographic questionnaire, and 18 met the criteria for the study. The first 15 students to respond to an interview time were invited to participate and completed one semi-structured interview.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The process of interviewing allows the researcher to enter into a person's perspective. In a semi-structured interview, researchers attempt to understand themes of the lived experiences from the participants' own perspectives, seeking descriptions of the lived experiences and interpretation of meaning based on the phenomenon (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The researcher provided the structure to lead the discussion toward the topic of college persistence; however, making inferences about college persistence were avoided. With semi-structured interviews, the

researcher is allowed to ask follow-up questions to explore topics in more depth that surface during interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This allowed the researcher to investigate more specific and consistent types of information with each participant. This process generated an exploration of responses from participants that provided the uniqueness of their experiences. Kvale and Brinkmann stated that a semi-structured interview format enables the researcher to obtain "descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomenon" (2009, p. 3). The semi-structured interview was preferred in this phenomenological study to minimize the imposition of predetermined responses and to allow participants to answer in their own words (Patton, 2015). The interviews ranged 45-90 minutes in duration.

Interview Protocol

An interview protocol was created (see Appendix F and used during interviews with each participant, focusing on particular themes with open questions to allow participants to bring forth dimensions they found relevant in the theme of inquiry. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were designed to bring forth perceptions, experiences, views, and opinions of self-efficacy as influences on college persistence. The researcher used the interview protocol to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry were pursued with each participant and acted as a checklist with an opening statement, themes, research questions, and hints to pursue follow-up questions (Creswell, 2003). This process assisted in eliminating confusion related to responses to the research questions and the researcher's interpretation of what was said and observed.

The interview protocol referenced the three sources of self-efficacy information (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 1996; Schunk & Pajares, 2009): (a) mastery/lived experiences, (b) vicarious/modeled experiences, and (c) social/verbal persuasion that all have the potential to

positively or negatively interact and influence an individual's belief in his/her capacity to be successful (Bandura, 1977; Schunk & Mullen, 2012; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Next, self-efficacy related to academic performance, college adjustment, social integration and stress served as four themes that guided the development of the interview protocol. Lastly, the interview protocol included aspects of higher education research that indicated barriers for African American FGCS. A snapshot of these barriers for African American FGCS was found in Table 2.

Observational Protocol

Use of the observational protocol during each interview and with all participants acted as a source to document and collect data (see Appendix G). The researcher used an observational protocol to document descriptive notes, the physical setting, interviews, specific events, and reflections. The researcher's personal thoughts, ideas, impressions, and prejudices were also documented using the observational protocol (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Though the researcher audiotaped interviews, it was important to document observations during the interviews that could not be tracked through audio recordings.

Interview Setting and Procedures

The interviews took place on the campus of GSU in a secure and quiet space yet a familiar location for participants – located in a conference space on the campus of Governors State University (GSU), the university of participants' enrollment. Interviews were scheduled at times convenient for participants and lasted no more than 90 minutes. Use of a digital data recorder minimized the potential disruption that would be caused by the researcher's note taking. Deletion of the digital recordings occurred after transcriptions were checked for accuracy.

Data Analysis

The challenge of qualitative analysis involves making sense of the large amount of data collected, reducing the volume of raw information, focusing on the significant patterns, and constructing a framework for reporting the essence of the material (Patton, 2015). The goal of the data analysis process was to make sense of the meaning from the collected data for this study and assisted the researcher in answering the research questions (Merriam, 2009). The process for data collection and analysis took place simultaneously and was considered emergent and dynamic in order to occur both in and out of the field (Merriam, 2009). The analysis process was, therefore, more formal and complex and was carefully planned with steps and procedures (Creswell, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Strategy

Moustakas (1994) described four key steps to phenomenological data analysis. The first step for the researcher was to bracket experiences, requiring the researcher to dismiss personal judgments about a phenomenon (i.e., epoche) and allowed a fresh perspective to serve as the lens for understanding the phenomenon through the eyes of the participants. Bracketing occurred prior to collecting data and throughout the study. Secondly, each interview was transcribed and followed by a process of horizonalization, which identified each expression relevant to the phenomena and eliminated the expressions that did not contribute to the understanding of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Next, the process of clustering the information into themes describing textures (meaning and depth) of the experiences is referred to as textural descriptions. Finally, the researcher created structural descriptions by identifying multiple meanings and tensions in the textural descriptions. The researcher developed a list that represented participants' experiences to create a composite textural-structural description (Moustakas, 1994).

Bracketing

In an effort to see the phenomenon with freshness, the researcher set aside predispositions and allowed new ideas, experiences, perceptions, and individuals into consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing, along with the epoche process, focused the research away from the researcher and instead focused firmly on the participants' experiences and research questions (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of the process of epoche through reflection is to prepare for new information and knowledge to surface (Moustakas, 1994). The practice of continually reflecting and practicing the epoche process increased the researcher's ability to examine the phenomenon with fresh perspective and openness to receive insight and information (Moustakas, 1994).

One of most critical points regarded the family of the researcher; she was the first in the family to attend college and attain a degree. The researcher was born in Chicago, where the public educational system serves predominantly low-income community areas and is under-resourced and not equipped to prepare students for postsecondary education. Being born into a single-parent household, in a low-income community, was challenging to say the least. However, a well-established support system (extended family, church, and community) helped to rise above the disturbing impact of poverty. Born to a teenage mother, the first five years of the researcher's life involved intense involvement from extended family, predominantly the maternal grandmother. At the age of five, the researcher's mother, baby brother, and researcher were on our own with my mother struggling tremendously to maintain basic needs for the family (i.e., food, clothing, housing). As a result, the family moved from one apartment to the next quite frequently. From pre-kindergarten to 12th grade, the researcher attended over seven different public schools learning to adjust quickly to new communities, schools, peers, and teachers. The

ability to adjust was a skill taught by the researcher's young mother. The researcher observed her mother navigate various systems (housing, welfare, schools, and employment) to maintain the family, and mainly she was successful. For example, the researcher entered kindergarten at three and half years of age. For survival of the family, the researcher's mother enrolled her in school prior to state of Illinois' required age of five. During the earlier years, the researcher felt out of place in the educational setting and eventually repeated the third grade. Feelings of both relief and disappointment occurred. Later, the researcher understood how developmentally not prepared for third grade she was compared to her third grade peers; and this made it difficult for her to grasp new skills and information in the classroom.

Reflecting on earlier educational experiences, the researcher found that education served the family in multiple ways. First, entering school early provided care while her mother worked during the day. Secondly, the family viewed the researcher as the one who would break a curse that had plagued the family for over 100 years – unsuccessful educational experiences. Historically, coming from a working class family that chose to enter the workforce resulted in early departure from the public school system as a requirement to support the family. In order to break the curse, the researcher maintained perfect attendance, participated in educational supports, had strong teachers as mentors, and had a praying grandmother. The researcher developed a strong sense of self-efficacy with confidence in abilities to be academically successful. Positive role models (e.g., teachers, mentors, community) provided positive performance experiences (e.g., grades, school adjustment) and consistent encouragement by mother, extended family, and community kept the focus on the goal. The community continued to be a huge factor that contributing to college persistence, even in the doctoral program enrollment and process. As an African American Christian female, the faith community, more

than ever, largely influenced the college persistence. The members of the congregation encouraged and prayed consistently. Like her family, the church is depending on her to be academically successful and serve selflessly. The researcher, now in the final stages of the doctorate in education, will become the first in her family to earn a bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees. This achievement is an immense honor and with it comes great responsibility to encourage others to pursue the same. The researcher will continue to serve to assist all students in their educational journeys and support their successes. Her educational journey is the foundation of this research study. As a first-generation, African American female in the presence of many challenges, the researcher succeeded and achieved great academic success.

Furthermore, as an African American first-generation college student, the researcher must continue to work to remove all biases and suspend any preconceived opinions as a first-generation college student (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). This further required the researcher to engage in bracketing, where the researcher held the phenomenon for serious examination. Prior, during, and following the research study, the researcher removed herself as a first-generation college student to fully dissect and uncover the essential structures and to define and analyze the data.

Iterative Analysis

The role of iteration in qualitative analysis is a reflexive process for generating insight and meaning of data collected (Srivastava, 2008). Iterative analysis assisted the researcher with understanding the interaction between what the data was saying and what the researcher wanted to know. As a result, gaps in the researcher's understandings of what was happening in the data, and how to proceed. The process required the researcher to use data in a more integrated way and supported centered focus on inquiry. The researcher was alerted throughout the process to

connect thinking between the data and continuous refined focus in order to produce a group of working themes (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985) to explain what was occurring. The researcher continuously checked themes against emerging data patterns to refine, make clear, and challenge the relationships that the researcher observed developing.

The current research study involved 15 African American first-generation college students and their lived experiences for college persistence. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with each student and considered the data generated through interactions between the students and researcher in which they may have discussed for the first time. Analysis was initially pursued as a way to address the following research question: What are the lived experiences for low-income African American first-generation college students who are enrolled and persisting in a public university setting?

As the researcher constructed initial descriptions of each student, the researcher attended to issues of what the data was saying. The researcher found data to be surprising, exciting, confusing, and contradictory to the research literature. The researcher asked continuously what the data was saying what students might not tell someone else. The researcher questioned her role as interpreter. Asking what the researcher wanted to know helped to wrestle with these issues while maintaining a focus on the purpose and goals of the research rather than worrying what others might do with the data.

Through this process the research sub-questions were addressed: What barriers do low-income African American first-generation students identify in college? What are the perceived factors that contribute to college persistence for African American first-generation students? What experiences do African American first-generation students perceive influence their college persistence? What experiences do African American FGCS perceive contribute to their self-

efficacy? The data told the researcher not only that students described their lived experiences for college persistence in different ways but that relationships between any student's descriptions and perceptions were complex and varied. The researcher wanted to learn more.

Eventually the researcher realized that she wanted to know what themes emerged across the students' experiences and perceptions of college persistence, how do their ideas and experiences related to themes vary, and how can concepts from college persistence literature illuminate these variations? For the researcher, the iterative analysis process established a foundation in which the research was clearly highlighted. As the researcher worked more with the data it was found to be (a) parsimonious: articulating important relationships in a simple way; (b) authentic to how analysis felt to researcher and her relationship with data; and (c) fitting with the principles and practices the researcher and others in the literature (e.g. Brown & McIntyre, 1993; Dey, 1993), felt were important to the integrity of qualitative research.

Memoing

The researcher employed memoing as a tool for recording ideas generated during data analysis. Memos are reflective notes researchers write to themselves about the learning from the data. Memos can include notes about anything, including thoughts on emerging concepts, themes, and patterns found in the data; the need for further data collection; comparisons that need to be made in the data; and virtually anything (Johnson & Christensen, 2016). This is an important process during the research study to document insights gained from reflections on data. Because qualitative research is an interpretative process, it is important that the researcher has a way to track ideas and record when they occur. Memoing assisted the researcher in guiding the creation of preliminary lists of coding categories or themes emerging during the interviews.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited that trustworthiness of a qualitative research study is important for evaluating worth. Trustworthiness involves establishing: credibility (confidence in the truth of findings), transferability (showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts, dependability (showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated), and conformability (participants shape the findings and not via researcher bias). Further, Lincoln and Guba described techniques to achieve the criteria. The researcher implemented and adhered to techniques to achieve trustworthiness: epoche, bracketing, peer debriefing, thick descriptions, reflexivity, and external audits.

Phenomenology uses a methodology of reduction and analysis of specific statements in practice to provide detailed and reliable descriptions of lived experiences (Creswell, 1998; Sadala & Adomo, 2001). The researchers' use of critical reflection and reflexivity and the interpretations of participants' experiences are transformed into statements for analysis (Baber, 2012). Phenomenological analysis aligns these statements with theoretical frameworks to provide a broader understanding and view of the phenomenon. For this study, the researcher reviewed interview transcripts, memos, bracketed perceptions, and experiences. The researcher used memoing to document reflections and anything else about the study, including what the researcher was learning or not learning. Participants reviewed transcripts, revised as necessary, and reviewed the emerging findings.

Peer debriefing was utilized for this study to establish trustworthiness too. This included discussions with colleagues, a doctoral student and college professor during data collection, to review and analyze the data in order to avoid any bias (Gerdes & Conn, 2001). This included exploring the researcher's biases, discussing notes, clarifying interpretations, and playing the

devil's advocate (Hanson & Newburg, 1992). Peer debriefing "is a process for exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). This process assisted the researcher in unveiling biases, perspectives, and assumptions (Wolcott, 1994). Through this process, the researcher became more aware of her posture toward data and analysis. The researcher worked to achieve external validity through thick description of the phenomenon, in detail, to support the transferrable conclusions to other times, settings, situations, and persons. This process refers to the detailed

account of field experiences in which a researcher makes explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context (Geertz, 1973; Holloway, 1997).

Next, the researcher included an external auditor to foster accuracy of the research study. This process provided an opportunity for an outsider to challenge the process and findings of the study, and this provided: opportunities to summarize preliminary findings, assessment of adequacy of data and results, and support for the development of stronger and better findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Koch (2006) suggested that a study's trustworthiness was established if a reader was able to audit the events to influence the actions of the researcher. By implementing an audit trail, an external party familiar with the qualitative study, methodology, findings, and conclusions can audit the research decisions and the researcher's process to complete the study and thus confirm its findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher sought the assistance of the National Board of Certified Counselors who had resources to assist doctoral candidates in their research efforts.

The researcher understood her role as an 'instrument,' which required interpretation and

analysis of data and more importantly confrontation of her own perspectives through reflexivity. This required the researcher to engage in a process that resulted in clarifications and articulation of assumptions, experiences, and theoretical orientations influencing the study. As Patton (2002) stated, “Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the origins of one’s own perspective” (p. 65). The researcher engaged in reflection throughout the course of this research to explore any forms of bias that could surface as a result of personal and professional identities.

Finally, the researcher used purposeful member checking to ensure the transcriptions were accurate and consistent with the perceptions and experiences for self-efficacy on college persistence (Moustakas, 1994). This allowed participants the opportunity to check for adequacy of data and preliminary results as well as to confirm specific aspects of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the researcher invited the participants to be co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994); this occurred following the completion of the transcriptions and data analysis. The researcher offered review of final transcribed interviews, emerging themes, and conclusions. This information was emailed to participants for their review and feedback. This process gave the researcher the opportunity to correct errors and challenge what incorrect perceptions, interpretations, and findings. Participants then had the opportunity to make any necessary clarifications and spoke directly to the researcher, if desired.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to selection and contact of participants, the researcher completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process with Governors State University. The IRB application outlined the purpose of the study as well as the methods that utilized to ensure the safety and well-being of the research participants. According to the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics

(2014), all data should always remain in a locked file containing participants' information, including emails, consents, audio recordings, demographic questionnaires, interview protocols, and researcher notes. Additionally, the researcher stored all data on a password-protected computer; only the researcher had the password. Thus, the researcher maintained written documents and audio-recordings in a locked file and a password-protected computer. Audio recordings were deleted immediately after reviewing transcripts for accuracy.

Participants involved in interviewing are human beings and extreme care must be considered and taken to avoid any harm to them (Fontana & Frey, 1998). For this study the process included the informed consent, which served as a written tool to inform potential participants of the following: introduction of the researcher, purpose of the study, time needed if selected, possible risks and benefits for participation; right to privacy (protection of identity); protection from harm (physical, emotional, or any kind); confidentiality; and right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty (Fontana & Frey, 1998). This included ensuring participants that their participation or decision to withdraw from the study was not linked to their academic outcomes at Governors State University in any way.

In addition, the informed consent (see Appendix C) included a statement to consent for participation and for audio recording (see Appendix E) participants' interviews. The researcher reiterated, prior to beginning each interview, the purpose and procedures for the research, including right to privacy, confidentiality, and protection from harm. For example, the researcher reviewed with potential participants in detail specific issues of confidentially, others who would be able to access interview information and notes (i.e., second coder, dissertation committee), the researcher's right to publish interviews or parts, and the participant's right to access the transcripts and data analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The informed consent

required the participants' signatures.

Additionally, the researcher used a delicate balance when describing the purpose of the study and design to avoid the provision of too much information, including aspects of the design (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Describing the purpose of study with precision was imperative as this phenomenological research sought to uncover the essence of college persistence for first-generation students, to draw spontaneous lived experiences from participants, and to avoid leading to specific responses.

The researcher avoided engaging in exploitative activities for gains of research. Participants in this study were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. None of the participants withdrew. To acknowledge the participants' time, each participant received a $50 gift card as a token of appreciation. The researcher behaved ethically to respect participants' rights to privacy and protection of harm. This included the participants who selected to remain anonymous while recognizing the participants who preferred to be credited with their full names. All participants selected to remain anonymous.

According to the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), "Counselors who conduct research are responsible for their participants' welfare throughout the research process and should take reasonable precautions to avoid causing emotional, physical, or social harm to participants" (G.1.e). Additionally, the ACA Code of Ethics provides guidance for research that involves students, and it is the researcher's responsibility to make clear to participants that involvement in study would not affect their academic standing at Governors State University.

Role of the Researcher

Creswell (2012) noted that there is a collaborative element essential in conducting qualitative research, whereby the researcher and participant both play critical roles in the

collection and analysis of data. It is therefore imperative for the researcher to collect in detail the participants' lived experiences by exploring their personal perceptions of the experiences and how the participants make sense of them (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It was important to maintain transparency and report commonalties and traits similar to the proposed research participant, a first-generation college student who identified as African American and journeyed through critical reflective experiences. The focus of the study was of great personal importance and relevance in order to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomenon studied.

Professionally, the researcher has served as a counselor in community mental health settings with racially/ethnically diverse client populations. For the past 10 years, a clear focus involved career development, more specifically, preparing potential first-generation students for college. From this work, the researcher developed the belief that experiences from one's environment matter in terms of influencing student success. This philosophy, supported considerably by the principles of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), was a primary reason this study adopted a more practical focus. This research sought to increase an understanding of how to serve low-income, first-generation, African American students. In this process the role of the researcher was to maintain integrity throughout the study and to recognize the critical significance of utilizing scientific knowledge and sound ethical decision making throughout the process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Finally, this included interpreting all data from the participants' perspectives and "going naïve" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 74).

In attempting to speak more broadly about educational strategies and approaches for first-generation college students, it was critically important for the researcher to remain aware of individual differences. The core philosophy of self-efficacy emphasizes the variable of experience among individuals (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 1996; Schunk & Pajares, 2009) and was

helpful in remembering the limits in generalizing the data to be universally applicable to all FGCS. Needless to say, self-efficacy remains helpful in framing the conversation around first-generation college students in an innovative way that examines their lived experiences rather than highlighting deficits and failure (Green, 2006; Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Phenomenological research seeks to understand the meaning of lived experiences of individuals. This qualitative inquiry sought to understand the persistence experiences for African American first-generation undergraduate students. This chapter presents the qualitative findings for college persistence experiences among 15 African American first-generation college students who were persisting at one public university. The data collection and analysis, description of the participants, themes and findings that emerged from the data are presented in this chapter. Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach, modified by Van Kaam (1959, 1966), was utilized to analyze the data. This chapter describes: (a) overview of research methodology, (b) participant demographics, (c) participant profiles, (d) response to research questions, (e) themes, and (f) textural structural composite descriptions.

Research Methodology

The transcendental phenomenological method was applied to analyze the collected data from the perceptions and experiences of the first-generation African American students persisting in undergraduate programs. One semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant, utilizing an interview protocol to guide the interviews. Participants were asked questions regarding their perceptions and experiences of college persistence. Transcriptions of audio-tapes immediately followed each interview as well as the iterative analysis process (see Appendix H). This study included a research team consisting of a coding team and an auditor (see Appendix I). The research team included the researcher and two doctoral students enrolled in the Counseling Education and Supervision program. The researcher was a doctoral candidate in the same program.

The research team engaged in bracketing prior experiences and assumptions as first-generation college students (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher and one doctoral student served as the coding team and were responsible for identifying expressions of meaningful unit data relevant to the phenomenon. The transcripts were read for the first time to obtain an understanding of the phenomenon and overall experiences for each participant. Next, both coders read each transcript separately to identify meaningful units and segments of data. Identifying meaningful units of data involved hand coding all data from participants' transcripts. The hand-coding process involved underlining quotes, highlighting verbatim passages and key phrases, and labeling those pertinent to the phenomenon. The researcher created a coding form, and both coders transferred segments and meaningful units of data to the coding form. This resulted in each participant having two coding forms, one created by each coder. Creating separate coding forms allowed the research team to examine and compare segments for commonalities, differences, and relationships, which are known as invariant constituents or themes (Moustakas, 1994).

Next, the horizonalization method was utilized (Moustakas, 1994) where the research team engaged in cutting, sorting, and eliminating expressions that did not contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, patterns of expressions of meaningful data relevant to the phenomenon emerged more clearly. The research team met frequently to compare notes and discuss commonalities and differences (Patton, 2002).

The auditor who served on the research team completed an external audit and independently reviewed transcripts and coding documents. The auditor submitted feedback to the coding team. After the coding team assigned 10 cases to categories and incorporated the auditor's feedback, team members finished coding the remaining five cases with the external

auditor continuing to confirm the findings for each case. This process was consistent with Hill et al.'s (1997) recommendations for assessing stability of findings. As a result, textural and structural descriptions created from the data emerged as relevant to the phenomenon. Textural descriptions involve descriptions of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Structural descriptions involve the ways in which participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The textural descriptions provided detailed insight into the meanings that participants experienced of the phenomenon and are invariant constituents or themes. Invariant themes are non-repetitive phrases, statements, quotes, and passages (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, textural descriptions are descriptions of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon and involved the integration of invariant themes. Next, textural descriptions were used to expand through imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994), which provided a structure of the experience for each participant, thus creating structural descriptions. Imaginative variation involves exploring the various possible meanings of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994), which may be unique for each participant. The researcher constructed a list of structural qualities of the experience that involved how each participant experienced the phenomenon.

Participant Demographics

Fifteen participants were selected to contribute to this study, and all met the inclusion criteria as: African American, first-generation, third or fourth year status, enrolled at one public university in the Midwest. Table 3 provides the demographic details for each participant. Of the 15 participants, nine were females, and six were males. Participants ranged in age from 20 years old to 25 years old, with an average age of 21 years. All participants remained in the study with pseudonyms assigned to assist in protecting confidentiality.

Regarding educational levels, three participants were third year students, and nine were fourth year students. Eight participants were transfer students from two and four year colleges and universities. Two students had earned their associate degrees. All students identified as low-income. The educational levels of participant parents' included 15 mothers and 12 fathers who earned their high school diploma or GED certificate. One father earned an associate's degree; the highest level of education for fathers of three participants was unknown.

Table 3:

Description of Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Mother Education	Father Education	Degree Program
Brooklyn	Female	21	High School Diploma	High School Diploma	Psychology
Lauren	Female	21	High School Diploma	High School Diploma	Community Health
Brittany	Female	21	High School Diploma	High School Diploma	Community Health
Leslie	Female	23	High School Diploma	High School Diploma	Psychology
Jake	Male	24	High School Diploma	High School Diploma	Elementary Education
Jay	Male	24	High School Diploma	Unknown	Psychology
John	Male	23	High School Diploma	Unknown	Chemistry
Brandon	Male	21	High School Diploma	Unknown	Finance
Barbie	Female	20	High School Diploma	High School Diploma	Media Studies
Beatrice	Female	24	High School Diploma	High School Diploma	Psychology

Jabone	Male	23	High School Diploma	High School Diploma	Psychology
Lola	Female	23	High School Diploma	Associates degree	Social Work
Zora	Female	25	High School Diploma	High School Diploma	Biology
Charlotte	Female	25	GED	High School Diploma	Criminal Justice
Douglas	Male	24	High School Diploma	High School Diploma	Secondary Education

Participant Profiles

The main emphasis of phenomenological research is the viewpoint of the person experiencing the phenomenon regards to specific situations occurring in his/her everyday world (Higginbottom, 2004). The participants for this study were all African American first-generation college students persisting towards degree attainment in the presence of difficult barriers. This section illuminates their unique experiences. Further, gaining an understanding of their actions, beliefs, and values as participants from their lens and uncovering the thoughts, perceptions, and feelings experienced by participants is appropriate in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The participant profiles provide further insight to the experiences as African American first-generation college students.

Brooklyn

Brooklyn was a 21-year old in her fourth year of undergraduate studies persisting towards degree attainment. She was preparing to graduate following one more full-time semester of coursework. Brooklyn resided in a suburban community area approximately 30 minutes from the university. Brooklyn reported confidence in her academic abilities during high school and currently as a college student. She put forth effort to be academically successfully and was

proud to be a first-generation college student. She described her confidence in her academic abilities:

> I try to keep up with my classes; it is more so like me planning out my papers ahead of time. Switching to APA, that was definitely a change for me, because I am like, the way I cite things in MLA versus APA is completely different and that was like hard, trying to forget all about MLA. That was like one of my biggest struggles. Getting good grades in all my classes, I actually understood the material, and I am able to apply it to my life. (Brooklyn reported unique barriers to college persistence, which included insufficient academic advisement and considering dropping out prior to degree attainment. Even when you went in for meetings, they were never prepared; they never looked at your classes, like to tell you what you needed for your classes. Basically picking a degree, like what did I want to do, what was going to be the best to help me get to the end goal I wanted? It was just how to get there was the biggest challenge of like what classes do I talk to? Like did you do this before, like finding someone who actually understood like what I wanted to do. That was the only time because I 'like there's no way going to graduate and be able to fit in.'

Next, Brooklyn revealed unique factors and experiences that contributed and influenced her college persistence. She identified her parents and extended family members as the main source of support during her college career. Though Brooklyn's parents did not attend college, it was communicated early that she was expected to attend college. She described specific experiences where her family provided emotional support and encouragement, specifically during challenging courses. During Brooklyn's first two years of college, she relied heavily on the support from her family; however, she reported there were times she really needed to connect

with others who were having similar challenges. As a result, Brooklyn spent more time on campus as a commuter student, joined student organizations, connected with peers with similar persistence experiences, and decreased her feelings of isolation. Lastly, Brooklyn shared that she considered departing college prior to degree attainment; however. She was confident that she would graduate following her next semester.

Lauren

Lauren was a 21-year old in her fourth year of college and anticipated graduation following one additional full semester. She resided on campus since her freshman year. Lauren reported excelling in high school; however, she did not take advantage of honor or advanced placement courses. Though Lauren desired to pursue postsecondary education, she lacked confidence in her abilities to be successful. One of the barriers towards college persistence for Lauren was working while managing her full time course load:

> I feel like being an employee that's holding me back from trying my best.
> Working and having a job, I feel like the job is holding me back from doing what I can actually do. I work at Jewel in the meat department, and it's hard work because I lift boxes. I work 20 hours a week, and I have a full 16 hour course load. I would like to dedicate my whole time to school.

Lauren shared that her peers had been a significant support to her and explained the verbal encouragement received supported her college persistence. She explained that her peers viewed her as a role model and observed her overcoming obstacles towards college persistence. Her peers indicated how proud they were of her, and Lauren served as an inspiration to those with similar barriers. As result, though self-efficacy was not a measurement for this study, Lauren's confidence in her academic abilities increased since her initial enrollment in college.

> I had a group of positive friends that always kept me on my feet. They always looked at me as a role model and would always tell me how proud they were of me. They would tell me how they noticed how hard I worked and how I's always dedicated.

Douglas

Douglas was a 24-year old student who transferred from a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) to his current university and was in his fourth year of college. He reported attending a college prep high school in the city of Chicago, where the expectation was for all students to transition to college. He participated in rigorous courses to prepare him for college, and he had always been confident in his academic abilities. He decided that he did not want to attend his neighborhood school, as he believed it was unsafe and would not prepare him for college. Douglas was awarded an academic scholarship and attended a private PWI in Chicago. He experienced difficulties adjusting to the rigor of coursework and the freedom living away from home. Douglas was placed on academic probation and was at risk for losing his scholarship. As a result, Douglas transferred to his current university that is less expensive, and he was a commuter student, traveling 35 miles from Chicago to his current university. Douglas was preparing to graduate following the next semester and maintained a high grade point average (GPA) since his transition to the current university. Douglas discussed his earlier precollegiate experiences during high school that contributed to his belief in his academic abilities and desire to pursue college:

> It was a high school in the neighborhood, and I did not want to go to my neighborhood school, you know, I did not feel safe, I did not feel comfortable. I did not feel like it would have the academic rigor that I wanted, you know. I knew I wanted to go to a high

school that would make getting into college easier. So going to Lindblom, I could count on one hand the people that did not go to college immediately after high school.

A significant barrier for Douglas was adjusting living away from home and adjusting to the rigor of college coursework. Though Douglas reported confidence in his academic abilities, he was placed on academic probation and suffered the loss of his academic scholarship:

> In my freshmen year, I was not confident after my first semester because my grades were not where I wanted them to be. My GPA was very low, like academic probation low. I doubted myself, like why, you know, why are my grades like this? I realized that it was not me being able to perform, but I was not doing it. Actually putting the work into the class or even going to class, you know, those types of things. So I realized that it was not my ability; I had the ability; I had to put the work in. That's when I got the confidence boost. My GPA went from super low to almost perfect.

Since his transfer to his current university, Douglas had been successful in putting forth more effort and time towards academic tasks and developing strategies to improve his academic outcomes.

Lola

Lola was a23-years old student who attended a college prep high school in Chicago. She received support from her high school principal with preparing for enrollment to postsecondary education. Her high school was intentional in its efforts to provide postsecondary services that included mentors, assistance with college applications, and coordination of college tours. She always performed above standards academically and was confident in her academic abilities prior to college enrollment. Lola began her college career at a historically Black college in

Virginia and reported feeling confident in her academic abilities; however, as a first-generation college student, she had concerns and expressed feelings of isolation:

> Academically, I never doubted that. I thought that I would be very successful because I know myself, and I know my work ethic. I know that I will put my best foot forward. My concerns are with completion, completing college and getting my degree and being out of state. I had no, absolutely no idea, what financial aid was or what to do. When it came to me asking my mother for information and asking certain information because she did not go to college, she did not know how to help me. When it came to a lot of new things, like enrolling in college, I had no help at all. Unfamiliarity was a huge challenge for me - not knowing how this process goes. Not knowing how the next day would look like, that was a big challenge for me.

Lola transferred to her current university because she could no longer afford to attend an out-of-state university. This was a significant barrier towards college persistence for Lola, and she considered dropping out following the decision to leave Virginia. Lola revealed a special relationship with a professor that impacted her adjustment to her current university:

> She checked on me. [Professor] was calm. She was more of a spiritual leader; I guess you can say. I came to [CSU] with a lot of anxiety and uncertainty, a lot of frustration and irritation. She sensed that and was just there; her door was open. Her being herself helped me. It was not like 'Come to my office and let's talk and let me mentor you or help you through this situation.' It was just her being herself, her introducing me to yoga, which was calming and distressing. It kind of just helped me overall with how to deal with situations and different things like that.

Since her transition to CSU, Lola was successful in connecting with faculty and overcame challenges adjusting as a commuter student, and she prepared to graduate following her next semester. As a result, Lola learned to put aside her defensive tone and behaviors and improved her overall adjustment to the current university setting. Lola was preparing to graduate the next semester.

Charlotte

Charlotte was a 25-year old student who was in her fourth year of undergraduate studies at her current university. Charlotte attended a public high school in the south suburbs of Chicago. She took rigorous courses in high school; however, she received little guidance and support from her high school counselor to prepare for college. Though Charlotte reported confidence in her academic abilities during high school, her confidence was negatively impacted when she began her college career. Charlotte discussed several barriers towards college persistence such as where she was placed, and she considered dropping out:

> The first semester, the math class really made my GPA plummet, which caused me to be on academic probation after my first semester. I was in bad health, and I did not really tell anyone because no one explained about learning resources that could help you with classes. I did not tell my professors, so I missed a lot of class. It was poverty; I could not afford to live on campus, so I navigated from the south suburbs to downtown Chicago. I did not have resources. I was first-generation, so I spent a lot of money on books; I did not have leverage. I was young, so I could not get a job, and my family really could not provide for me. I also had toxic relationships. I was the only one in my peer group who went to college, and I was really trying to be a college student during the day, but I would go home and be who I was originally before college, like at home. They were not doing

> anything with their lives, so finding balance between, you know, trying to be academic and not like high school, it was not easy for me.

Charlotte discussed her unique experience with overcoming obstacles to college persistence and specific strategies that she executed to be successful. She was currently persisting in her current university and was preparing to graduate following her next semester:

> When you do not meet the academic level to keep your financial aid in that institution, they dismiss you. I had to repay the previous semester, so I thought about dropping out. I enrolled in a community college and decided to get a job until I was able to pay back $6,000 that I owed. I was able to get a job and really earn the money, but I was also able to really take classes and increase my GPA to a 3.5. I was able to transfer those credits and appeal. It was a little frustrating, and I was discouraged.

Zora

Zora was a 24-year old student who had high aspirations to attend college and to become a physician. Zora was in her fourth year of college and anticipated graduating following her next semester. She attended a public high school in Chicago that provided access to rigorous courses and adequate preparation for transition to postsecondary education. Zora was highly successful in high school and was confident in her abilities prior to college enrollment. She began her college journey at a PWI out-of-state and reported struggling academically. Zora transferred to a public university in Chicago. Zora continued to have challenges academically and departed college prior to degree attainment. She spent a year in the workforce and saved funds to support her return to pursue her college degree. Zora enrolled in her current university and reported improved academic outcomes. Zora aspired to attend graduate school to pursue her credentials as a chiropractor.

Zora reported limited financial resources, and family pressure negatively impacted her college persistence. Her mother placed pressure on her to provide financial support to the family, and as a result, Zora had to maintain a full-time job while pursuing her undergraduate degree. Zora also described pressure from her father who set the expectation for Zora to become a physician.

> My dad was open to a lot of stuff. There was a time that I wanted to do physical therapy; he was not open to that. He was not open to like me pursuing nursing; he was always, you know, top level. So it's always like, you know, go to school and be a doctor. When you are going through school, you are trying to figure out still what you want to do. So that was not the support that I needed and that was really challenging for me. Not having money for food, not having money to wash my clothes and pay my bills and when you are work you have to be focused for six, seven, eight, nine hours. It is taking you away from where you need focus. Everything I did on my own. My first year I had to help my mom; she can only help me so much because she is not in a position to help. I would tell her there is certain stuff I cannot do, and I felt like I was not being heard. She was still always asking for like more, and more; and I just do not have more. I just had to shut down; I cannot help you.

She also described her reliance on peer relationships as a source of support. Zora had peers who were persisting in college and those who had attained their undergraduate degrees. When Zora is feeling overwhelmed with managing academics and employment, she often reached out to her peers for emotional support and encouragement. Finally, Zora reported mentoring relationships with faculty members at her current university, which she identified as positive influential experiences on her college persistence.

Brittany

Brittany was a 21-year old student in her fourth year of college. Brittany attended an under-resourced public high school in the city of Chicago. Her pre-collegiate experiences included minimal participation in rigorous coursework, lack of advisement and support to pursue postsecondary education, and uncertainties on how to navigate the collegiate process. Brittany discussed high aspirations to pursue an undergraduate degree and conducted her own college research. She made the decision to enroll in the current university and took the necessary actions to apply for admissions and to secure financial aid to fund her education. As a result, Brittany enrolled in her current university and lived on campus since her freshman year. Brittany revealed that she was confident in her academic abilities and proud of her academic accomplishments during high school.

Brittany described her first year of college as challenging, and she did not understand the importance of getting good grades. As a result, Brittany's first semester's GPA was below average. Brittany discussed her difficulties adjusting to living on campus and understanding course expectations that contributed to her poor performance in coursework. First, Brittany revealed that she was not exposed to rigorous coursework in high school and unprepared to respond to coursework confidently. She also discussed experiencing difficulty establishing autonomy from her family, connecting with her peers on campus, and asking for support. This resulted in negative emotions, isolation, and depressive symptoms:

> Socially in the beginning, my freshman year, I lacked social skills, like communication. I did not know about conflict management, so I was confrontational with my roommates. It led to depression and just feeling really down. I did not want to talk to anyone; I just

wanted to eat a lot and sleep. I have learned other coping skills, but I have yet to seek counseling. I go to the gym at least three times a week.

Brittany's main source of support included her close peer relationships that she successfully established, nurtured and maintained. She admitted that she experienced times where she wanted to depart college; however, she credited her persistence to peers who had encouraged her to persist towards degree attainment. Brittany also noted creating strategies to support successful academic outcomes, and by the end of her freshman year she had accomplished being on the Dean's list.

Beatrice

Beatrice was a 24-year old student who attended a public high school in a south suburban area of Chicago. She credited her school for providing adequate postsecondary resources that assisted her in creating a portfolio, which supported her preparation and transition to postsecondary enrollment. Beatrice discussed that her performance was 'mediocre' in high school, and her effort towards academic tasks was minimal. Though Beatrice was confident in her academic abilities, she did not practice putting forth much effort to excel and indicated that subject areas were not difficult for her. She was also unlikely to seek academic support:

> For some reason, something is wrong with me, and I just do not get down with the tutoring, I just cannot for some reason. In my mind, because I have been so good at it, I cannot teach myself, you cannot teach me. I just cannot sit in front of someone and have them teach me. I may become frustrated if I am not getting it, I would rather be frustrated with myself and go at my own pace. I never went into a tutoring session.

Beatrice began her college journey with enrollment in an out-of-state university for one semester. She experienced difficulty adjusting to a large public university setting and missed

being away from her family. She returned home and continued to persist with enrollment in a community college. Beatrice earned her associate's degree from a community college and transferred to the current university and was in her fourth year of postsecondary education, preparing to graduate following the next semester. She reported transferring from a community college to a four-year university as challenging and reflected on an experience of negative evaluative feedback from a professor:

> 'I do not know what your [university] did to you, but they did not teach you anything. I have a doctorate, and you better refer to me as a doctor. I specialize in this topic, and I would rather you not write because I will tear it apart because I am an expert, and you are not.' It irritated me and made me feel bad. It was like she knocked me done by telling me not to write a paper because it would be hard for me to pass, and she will tear it apart.

Beatrice explained that her professor's comments made her feel that she could not meet the expectations of the writing course. This experience resulted in Beatrice's reluctance to ask professors for support and to seek tutoring support. During her interview she revealed her fear of the stereotypical threat and avoidance of shame and inadequacy. Beatrice persisted through these experiences and improved her writing skills; however, without access to support, Beatrice did not receive the grades she desired for writing assignments. Beatrice reported thoughts of dropping out and noted the level of verbal encouragement she received from her partner along with participation in counseling services supported her persistence and desire to pursue graduate studies.

Brandon

Brandon was a 21-year old currently in his fourth year at his current university. He was preparing for graduation the next semester. Brandon attended a public high school in the south

suburban community of [city]. He received both a rigorous course curriculum and postsecondary services, which he indicated prepared him for transition to postsecondary education. He reflected on his high school counselor who consistently followed up with him to maintain a positive track towards postsecondary education. Brandon attended college tours and received assistance applying for scholarships. He began his journey towards his postsecondary career in a two-year community college setting and later transferred to his current university. Brandon reflected on establishing and maintaining a mentoring relationship with one of his academic advisors, and this was a major source of support towards college persistence. Brandon discussed his strategies for meeting the expectations of challenging courses. This included his positive approach and belief that he would achieve an "A" in all courses, although this did not always occur. His belief that he would be successful led to successful academic outcomes:

> There were counselors that were on you, and they would come to you personally and ask if you applied for this school, and they were there to help you determine your future. I felt that was really big for me. The counselors would take to us to visit colleges during our holiday breaks. My old advisor walked around campus, and she would see me in the halls or in the café. We chatted, and she would ask me to come and see her so that we could have a check-in. That was really a big help when I had her as an advisor. I am a person who is more than willing to learn anything, and I love challenges, so whenever I am going into a course that I have no clue about, my mind is still on achieving an A in the course. Even if I do not get an A, my mind is focused on obtaining an A in the course. If I do not know something, I am going to ask questions; I am going to find out how to do be successful. I have the ability to learn, and I am a fast learner, either way I am going to succeed.

Brandon shared feelings of inadequacy when he observed classmates who appeared to have prior knowledge of a subject area and mastery in skill levels. He reported feeling as though he was in a "race" and had to catch up. Brandon decided to schedule weekly appointments with his professor to develop a clearer understanding of the course content and expectations. As a result, He achieved a successful academic outcome.

Brandon also discussed his commitment to his extended family, particularly his grandmother who raised him. He perceived himself interdependent with his family and felt responsible to provide financial support to his grandmother. As a result, Brandon maintained employment while pursuing his college degree. He is proud to be a first-generation college student and to be able to provide financial support to his family:

> My grandma just retired, and she was struggling financially, and I need to help her. I figured out different ways to make money, so I can help her. I was more focused on getting that done, and school was just a distraction. Instead of school being first and then I will make the money to help, I got to the point that I needed to find a way. I complete my homework, and I would run to photo shoots or get some more hours at work. I hate seeing my family struggle because we have been struggling all our lives.

Barbie

Barbie was a 20-year old student at her current university and in her third year of undergraduate studies. Barbie attended a public high school in a south suburban community area of [city]. She reported that her high school prepared her academically for college; however, it did not prepare her for the "college environment." Barbie began her college experience residing on campus and experienced a significant level of challenges with interpersonal relations with peers, faculty, and staff. She was placed on disciplinary probation for critical incidents that

occurred in the residence hall. As a result, Barbie returned home with her mother and continued to persist at her current university. Overall, Barbie reported a significant number of negative experiences and emotions including feelings of isolation and depression:

> When I got here, I felt people did not like me. I do not know if it was jealousy of other situations, but people did not like me. My friends left school, and those were my only friends here. So they left, and then I felt like I was by myself, and I have issue with being alone. I think everything started to go downhill. I found myself leaving class in my sophomore semester and no one to talk to. On top of that, I felt no one liked me. In the back of my head I would walk passed all these people, and I am still going to class with myself. I had a lot of bad experiences with faculty, and I was on probation when I lived on campus, not academic probation, but probation in general. I did not like being in school; it was just sad; it's been sad as hell.

Barbie was successful in establishing meaningful and supportive relationships with some of her professors and perceived them to be genuine and caring of her academic goals. She reflected on a significant relationship with a professor who challenged her to put forth more effort towards learning. His approach and style to teaching was appealing to Barbie and included group discussions of "real life" events that she and her classmates could relate to, and she felt confident in discussions. The professor also shared his postsecondary experiences, including the challenges and successes. This teaching strategy positively influenced the way in which Barbie approached academic tasks and supported her successful academic outcomes. Barbie also participated in a study-abroad experience [overseas] with her university. She discussed her appreciation and desire to connect with diverse persons, and her strong sense of ethnic identity

supported her experiences with others. She continued to persist towards degree attainment and anticipated completing her undergraduate studies in approximately one year.

Jabone

Jabone was a 21-year old persisting in his current university and was in his fourth year. He planned to attend graduate school following graduation, and he began to prepare his application and request letters of recommendation. Jabone attended a public high school in a south suburban community in [city]. Jabone reported having access to counselors in high school who were supportive in his preparation for college transition; however, Jabone revealed low aspirations to attend college. He reported a history of "down play" which is a term that the researcher identified when participants described avoidance of putting forth efforts to be academically successful. Jabone described significant earlier experiences, both for elementary and secondary education, where "being the smart kid just ain't cool," and he had learned to down play his academic abilities. Jabone had always been confident in his academic abilities; however, he was reluctant to perform to his capacity:

> I performed pretty decently below my capabilities. I mean they told me I should have been valedictorian every day, and I became less interested. I don't know; it just never hung on me. Even today, school never just hangs on me as something that grasps my interest. I have a 3.2 GPA, so I do enough. I have never doubted my academic abilities; I have always known I have it, and I turn it on and off when I want. Sometimes you are more engaged; sometimes you are not. If something really gets hold of my interest, then I perform a little better. When I was younger, especially my demographic, being smart just ain't cool, so you turn that down a lot of times.

Jabone began his postsecondary journey at a private university in [city]. Jabone reflected on a college fair held at his high school, and his counselor encouraged him to apply to a particular university. He was accepted and earned an academic scholarship to support the cost of attendance. One of the barriers that Jabone described in his first year was the conflict between values of college and community. He disclosed that members from his primary peer group did not transition to college or to the workforce following graduation from high school. Jabone experienced negative evaluations from his peers who communicated their surprise of his college persistence.

Additionally, Jabone's aspirations to pursue a career in creative arts were not fully realized in his initial university setting. He discussed a need for career advisement and was unsuccessful in accessing this support from his university. He was unsure of how and where to have these discussions surrounding his career aspirations. As a result of his first year experiences, Jabone transferred to a small public university in Illinois and persisted to his second year.

Jabone reported putting forth more effort towards academic tasks and did not report the "down play" of his academic abilities. He reported being more focused, planning and prioritizing assignments, and "opening my books." Jabone also pointed out that he was no longer distracted by his peers who often pulled him away from focusing on his academic tasks. Jabone was proud to report achieving the Dean's list during his second year of college. Jabone continued and transferred to a university out-of-state for one semester and finally enrolled at his current university, where he continued to persist towards degree attainment.

Jake

Jake was a 24-year old student in his third year at his current university and persisting towards degree attainment. Jake discussed his aspirations to attend college; however, earlier he was uncertain of what to expect. He reported that his parents did not attend college, and his high school lacked resources to support his aspirations to pursue college. However, Jake remained confident in his academic abilities and selected a two–year community college to begin his postsecondary journey. As a result, Jake earned his associate's degree in early childhood education and worked full-time at an early learning center in his community.

Jake shared some of his experiences that have presented as barriers and contributed to his college persistence. First, Jake disclosed that he lived in a community with a high prevalence of violence. He indicated that he was never involved in gang or drug activities; however, his community and high school was saturated with both. These environmental factors motivated Jake, to not only pursue a college education, but to remain and take pride in his community. He pushed through the challenges existing in his community and continued to live and serve there. Jake noted that he had very few examples of peers who transitioned to college, and many who did not complete high school. He reflected on a peer who greatly influenced his college persistence:

> I know you probably already know but [suburb] is known to have violence and basically people categorize kids from [suburb] as not doing nothing with themselves - probably hanging out in the streets and the blocks and not really finishing school - but there are some amazing people that come from [suburb]. I was kind of a little knucklehead. I was never in a gang; I never did drugs. I always wanted something different. There were a lot of males in [suburb] that did not finish high school. There were several programs for

us to go to after school, to hang out and do homework and play basketball, but there were many community programs for kids to go to in [suburb]. There were older people in the community waiting on us after school that would walk with us. I came from a good household, and my mom was such a positive person. A young lady that I grew up with, she was pregnant at the age 13, and I think she had a child at 13 She was like the teacher's pet, and everyone was surprised when she got pregnant because she is so smart. She went to straight to the University of Illinois and is now working on her doctoral degree at 24-years old. I really look up to her.

Jake credited his college persistence to his mother and extended family members who provided consistent verbal encouragement, mentoring programs, and practice of spiritual beliefs. He had always been determined to be the first in his family to graduate, and his belief has assisted him persisting in college. Jake discussed academic challenges and how he accessed professors and the student success center at his current university for support. He was successful with increasing his GPA and achieving good grades. Jake anticipated graduating with his degree in early childhood education in a year and half.

Jay

Jay was a 24-year old student in his fourth year at his current university and persisting towards degree attainment. Jay attended a public high school in [city] that was under-resourced and in a community area saturated with poverty and community violence. Jay discussed his concerns with safety commuting to both his high school and college; and Jay reported that his high school experiences included a high turnover of teachers each year, lack of challenging courses, and lack of confidence in his academic abilities. Jay admitted that in his high school, if one is "smart and has straight 'A's,' one is treated as an outcast and does not have a lot of

friends." Jay reported being aware of how his peers perceived him and chose not to perform to his academic capabilities. Following graduation from high school, Jay found that many of his peers were deceased or incarcerated, and he decided to enroll in college to avoid victimization.

> I do not want to be like this when I grow up, so my environment really helped me in a way, but there were no role models who graduated from college. I did know anyone personally who graduated from college. My father really pushed me to continue my education; although he did not graduate from college or my mother, he was very inspirational. Southeast [community] is where I spent my adolescent years, and it was pretty rough. A lot of my friends either are dead of in jail. It is pretty tough on me; I had to separate myself from that community, so I would not be a victim of my environment. I feel I was an okay student. I like to think I was above average, but I did not perform as I know I can. In high school if you are smart and you have straight A's, you are probably an outcast, or you do not have a lot of friends, so I was conscious of what others thought of me. I would try not to do as well as I could.

Jay began his journey of postsecondary with enrollment to a 2-year community college.

One of his barriers towards persistence was his difficulty asking for support. He admitted that he did not have people who encouraged him to persist and experienced difficulty connecting with faculty; his poor academic performance resulted in loss of financial aid. Jay departed college, entered the workforce full-time, secured savings, and returned to college to pursue his degree. Jay revealed that he was ashamed to speak with his professors when he did not understand the expectations of assignments. Jay described a significant turning point when a professor in his current university reached out to him and provided positive evaluative feedback:

> I was ashamed to talk to my instructors about my low grades and assignments that I was not comfortable with and unsure about. I was afraid to ask my instructors' questions, and I did not utilize resources and go to office hours. My pride would not allow me to ask for help. I am not too afraid to ask for help; I am a little better. Last year one of my professors here at [university] talked to me one day and told me that I was really smart, and you can really do the work, but you become overwhelmed, and you just give up. That conversation that I had with my instructor really changed my mindset. He told me to ask for help; I am here for you.

Jay reported his greatest academic success was making the Dean's list while successfully managing a 15 credit hour course load. Jay credited his success to placing more attention to academic tasks and asking for help to ensure he understood assignments. Jay anticipated graduation in his next semester.

Leslie

Leslie was a 23-year old student in her fourth year at her current university. Leslie discussed upon her graduation from high school she did not believe she would attend college. She was concerned with her lack of financial resources and her lack of confidence in academic abilities. She did not believe she was "smart enough" and reflected on her family background, "My mom did not go to college; my dad did not go to college." Leslie also reflected on her older sister who attempted college; however, she departed prior to degree attainment. Leslie also attended an under-resourced public high school in Chicago that did not prepare her academically for the rigor of college coursework. She described her high school as "chaotic" where she observed physical aggression among peers and "people dying around the area." She was often distracted in/outside of the classroom. Following graduation from high school, Leslie decided to

enroll in a two-year community college where she earned her associate's degree. She received positive feedback and encouragement from faculty to continue her education, and she was currently persisting at her current university and considering graduate school.

Leslie discussed verbal encouragement from her parents, spiritual guidance, and peer support as factors that have contributed to her college persistence. Leslie discussed how the community college setting taught her to reach out for support and where to access help. She continued to practice the utilization of supports in her current university setting and living on campus assisted Leslie with developing close connections with peers and faculty. She discussed feeling fearful of leaving home; however, participation in activities sponsored by her residence hall and university supported her adjustment.

> When I came here, I was a shy person, and I was no opening up, and I was just to myself with peers and professors around me encouraged me to step outside the box, encouraged me to be myself. I definitely adjusted to my roommates and residence hall. Encouraged me to engage in activities, they have activities in the dorms where everyone can participate. My family, it is definitely exciting because I am the first in my family to graduate. I can motivate others that they can do it. Like my dad is talking about going back to school and my sister as well.

Leslie discussed her lack of financial resources, specifically when she attended a community college. She indicated that she often walked to school because she could not afford the cost of public transportation. She credited her determination to a peer that experienced challenges with persistence while caring for a parent with cancer. Leslie observed her peer who struggled maintaining attendance and satisfactory grades; however, the peer continued to persist with successful academic outcomes. Leslie and her classmate became peer supporters for one

another, and both transitioned to a four-year university to continue their education. Leslie anticipated graduation following the completion of the next semester:

> It was a rough time because for a long time before I was able to get a U card to get on the bus, I had to walk to school. I have one best friend, and she is like me; she grew up how I grew up. She struggled, and she went to high school with me, and we graduated together and now she is attending [university]. She was my motivation; the peers around me also pushed me. This girl from [community college], her mom was dying of cancer, and she came here every day, and her mom was dying. You can do it too. She pushed me. Also, my teachers stood up in the middle of class to give testimonies and that also pushed me. Like I can do this, if they can get through it, I can do it.

John

John was a 23-year old student in his third year at his current university. John was a transfer student from a two-year community college. John attended a Catholic high school in [city] and received adequate academic preparation for transition to postsecondary education. He indicated that he had learned two important skills during high school that contributed to his strong work ethic, which included time management and volunteerism. John received assistance applying for colleges from his high school counselor; however, he was unsure what to expect in college, including how to navigate the process. As a first-generation college student with a learning disability, John was concerned with his anxiety during exams and was not sure how and who to communicate to regarding this. John began his postsecondary journey with enrollment at a two-year college. John admitted that he was not very confident in his academic abilities; however, he was determined not to use his learning disability as a "crutch." John reflected on his experiences of learning and his "style of learning." This process supported John's understanding

of course expectations and successful academic outcomes. John revealed his strategy to prepare for exams and explained that he took the time to rewrite his class notes; this had been helpful in increasing his understanding of the course content:

> I have a learning disability… to memorize information and to apply it to test taking… it was hard to memorize a lot of information for tests and then on test day, I became nervous, and it is even harder for me to study. That is the most challenging for me, most classes…sometimes I would rewrite notes. It helps me to understand it better. My mom did not tell me what it was, and when I learned about it, my learning style, I do not use that as a crutch though. I try not to think about that. I can still learn; it's just my thinking. It affects my ability; sometimes I overthink things.

Another example that John provided included his love for science. As a chemistry major, he learned to spend more time outside of class with science course material. He reflected on failing a biochemistry course and wanting to drop out; however, his mother encouraged him to retake the course during the summer. Without the stressor of other courses, he was successful. John consistently met with his professors outside of class for support as well. He anticipated graduation in another year and moving onto graduate school at [university]:

> The course was challenging, and I put a lot of time in it, but then there was material I still did not get. At that point I wanted to drop out of college. It was challenging each time going to class and trying to make sure the problem was solved and make sure I had the right answer. Sometimes I did not get the right answer or did not take the steps to solve the problem, so in that class. I did talk to the professor, and he gave me advice for what I should I do and how to go about it.

The experience of being an African American first-generation college student is one

bombarded with challenges and barriers. It is one oftentimes characterized by institutional, external, personal and internal barriers that cause emotional, financial, academic, and social turbulence for students. The African American first-generation college students in this study were determined to be successful and to persist in the presence of their unique barriers and experiences. Having a support network, sense of belonging, confidence, and organization/execution of actions to persist were important for students. Some of descriptions of their actions included reaching out and connecting with faculty and staff, participating in campus organizations and study groups, accessing campus supports, remaining in the workforce, and putting forth more time and effort towards tasks. First-generation college students value their relationships with family, peers, faculty, staff, and community people. Students also value participation in campus organizations and connections with peers. African American first-generation college students enter college with confidence in their ability to be successful; with access to supportive persons and resources, their sense of belonging, academic success, and college adjustment often results in positive outcomes.

Response to Research Questions

The overarching research question for the study was: What are the lived experiences for low-income African American first-generation college students who are enrolled and persisting in a public university setting? The following sub-questions were part of this qualitative study as well:

1. What barriers do low-income African American first-generation students identify in college?
2. What are the perceived factors that contribute to college persistence for African American first-generation students?

3. What experiences do African American first-generation students perceive influence their college persistence?
4. What experiences do African American FGCS perceive contribute to their self-efficacy?

The participants' responses to the research questions resulted in the emergence of two themes: (a) college persistence in the presence of barriers, and (b) perceived factors and experiences that contributed to and influenced college persistence. Table 4 provides the clustered response frequency, which is known as the subthemes.

Table 4

Clustered Response Frequency

Participants	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Totals
Under-Resourced High School	3	2	3	2	6	15	0	0	1	5	0	0	2	2		41
Discouraging Experiences	15	16	13	15	19	17	7	22	28	24	8	22	21	7	9	253
Financial Barriers	5	4	0	10	1	3	3	10	5	2	3	14	6	3	8	77
Support Network	18	6	11	7	15	10	4	13	4	5	0	6	9	4	8	120
Sense of Belonging	10	0	4	5	3	4	4	15	3	10	0	20	6	8	2	76
Organized/ Executed Actions to Persist	19	11	16	7	15	8	18	11	3	6	7	5	5	1	2	134
Confidence	13	7	8	2	12	5	7	7	4	14	11	12	6	5	16	129
Difficulty asking for support	7	3	4	6	4	8	12	3	5	7	6	4	2	4	12	87
Difficulty Adjusting to college environment	12	7	12	4	6	10	4	12	16	14	15	6	8	6	7	139

Participant Pseudonym Coding for Table 4: 1-Brooklyn, 2-Lauren, 3-Brittney, 4-Leslie, 5-Jake, 6-Jay, 7-John, 8-Brandon, 9-Barbie, 10-Beatrice, 11-Jabone, 12-Lola, 13-Zora, 14-Charlotte,15-Douglas

Table 5 summarizes the themes, subthemes, and frequency. The subthemes were described separately and included general, typical, and variant themes following Hill et al.'s (1997) recommendations and were organized in descending frequency of representation. General themes are reported first, typical themes second, and variant themes third. Using these guidelines, a general theme was considered if it was represented in all cases; typical was observed in 10-14 cases. Variant themes were observed in 7-9 cases. The findings emerging in fewer than seven cases were not considered sufficiently stable and dismissed from further analysis and consideration. Table 5 provides a snapshot of the themes, subthemes, and frequency for participant responses.

Table 5

Themes, Subthemes, and Frequency Responses

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency
Persistence in presence of barriers	1. Difficulty adjusting to college environment	General
	2. Financial barriers	General
	3. Under-resourced high school	Typical
	4. Discouraging experiences	Typical
	5. Difficulty asking for support	Variant
Perceived factors and experiences that contributed and influenced college persistence	6. Support Network	General
	7. Confidence	General
	8. Organized/executed actions	General
	9. Sense of Belonging	Typical

Note N = 15, general = all cases represented, typical = 10 – 14 cases represented, variant = 7 - 9 cases presented

Themes

Through the process of analysis, the research team highlighted by hand 1056 passages related to participants' persistence experiences and included segments of meaning related to

research questions. The process of analysis resulted in an extensive list of preliminary codes that involved the research team reading each transcript line by line and cutting, sorting, and underlining key phrases. As a result, the research team identified segments of meaningful data from participants' expressions. The research team repeatedly reviewed the initial groupings of meanings through the context of participants' complete responses to research questions. The process of analysis assisted in cross reference to overall meaning with the development of clusters. The data was further refined through first and second cycle coding efforts. Through the analysis processes, the researcher grew more confident through thinking, working, and immersing with the data (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher was able to move from multiple codes in the first cycle of coding to a few major themes (Saldana, 2013). The process of clustering was used as the strategy for re-categorizing earlier codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Developing coded clusters continued to change as data refined and themes emerged. As a group, participants presented invariant statements, quotes, passages, and phrases that supported the emergence of two themes: (a) college persistence in the presence of barriers, and (b) perceived factors and experiences that contributed and influenced college persistence.

Persistence in the Presence of Barriers

The first theme analyzed was participants' persistence in the presence of barriers. In the interviews, participants described specific barriers related to their college persistence, including individuals, relationships, and experiences. General, typical, and variant themes emerged from this analysis. Five subthemes emerged for participants' ability to persist in the presence of barriers and included: (a) difficulty adjusting to the college environment, (b) financial barriers, (c) under-resourced high schools, (d) discouraging experiences, and (e) difficulty asking for support.

Difficulty adjusting to college environment. Difficulty adjusting to the college environment was a barrier for students and was an external factor impacting their adjustment. As first generation college students, they were without 'college-going' information to assist them in navigating the complexities of college. Further, most students reported lack of academic advisement and support from the assigned advisor and expressed feelings of isolation and confusion. For example, several students who resided on campus had difficulty living away from home and creating new relationships. Students described being encouraged by peers and parents to participate in campus activities; however, very few reported being encouraged by staff to connect with activities and student organizations. For working and commuter students, adjustment to college was as challenging as well. Spending more time on campus though helped them to connect with other students, activities, student organizations, and faculty. A student described her difficulty adjusting to college in terms of feeling isolated:

> When I got here, I felt people did not like me. I do not know if it was jealousy of other situations, but people did not like me. My friends left school, and those were my only friends here. So they left, and then I felt like I was by myself, and I have issues with being alone. I think everything started to go downhill. I found myself leaving class in my sophomore semester and no one to talk to. On top of that I felt no one liked me. In the back of my head I would walk passed all these people, and I am still going to class with myself. I had a lot of bad experiences with faculty, and I was on probation when I lived on campus, not academic probation, but probation in general. I did not like being in school; it was just sad; it's been sad as hell.

Another student described experiencing difficulty with her professor and understanding the content of the course:

> The teacher had a really thick accent, and it's not like I didn't understand, I understood what she was saying, but she just, she was going with her pace, how she wanted it to go. It was just like she constantly kept teaching all day long, until the class was over. I had it twice a week, so it was a challenging course because I didn't understand it at all. But when I got to the class it's not like it was hard just that I have questions. She'd be upset because we didn't know, we couldn't get the concept. She's like it's easy, and it was like you can't do that, so that was challenging. Oh, I didn't pass the class. Um, if I tried, if I tried harder, I probably would've got a better grade but at the same time like to pass the class I needed to like have that break down of what's going on.

Financial barriers. Financial challenges were consistent for most participants. For example, students described not having enough money for food and transportation and not having financial support from their parents. Thirteen out of the 15 participants reported part or full-time employment, and it employment was required to persist in college. Low socio-economic status was a tremendous barrier for most students. One student described the loss of an academic scholarship, and a few students discussed experiences with difficulty in maintaining satisfactory academic progress, which resulted in loss of federal financial aid. One student described dropping out for a year, working full-time, and returning after he had saved enough money to do so. Students' descriptions related to being low-income and working students. One participated stated:

> It was poverty. I could not afford to live on campus, so I navigated from the south suburbs to downtown Chicago. I did not have resources; I was first-generation, so I spent a lot of money on books. I did not have leverage. There were times that I went to school hungry and did not have transportation to attend school.

Another student described being a low-income working student:

> I feel like being an employee - that's holding me back from trying my best. Working and having a job, I feel like the job is holding me back from doing what I can actually do. I work at Jewel in the meat department, and it's hard work because I lift boxes. I work 20 hours a week, and I have a full 16 hour course load. I would like to dedicate my whole time to school.

A participant described experiencing financial difficulties and was unable to access support:

> I was going through like a financial crisis, like it was times that, that me not having a job and me not call, can't call my parents. They do the best they could be, they couldn't do much. It was times like I would go to school like hungry and stuff and not have stuff to eat and then on top of that like having to go to school, like do all this school work, and I'm taking six classes, so it's like what, what has it come to like it feels at times like I can't do this, like I want a job now, like I'm here with no job. I can't depend on nobody to like help me and stuff like that. I'm struggling to get a job so that was like really stressful and that was definitely a time I'm like, okay I want to drop out, like I can't do this.

Under-resourced high school. Another institutional factor found to be consistent for most students was their attendance at an under-resourced high school lacking sufficient guidance counseling and resources to support their transition to college. In addition, students reported attendance at a high school located in community with a high prevalence of violence. Students described pre-collegiate experiences where they were "on my own" and "searched for colleges" without assistance from their high school counselors or staff. Further students described being underprepared for college and did not have prior academic knowledge needed to be successful in

their college courses. A student described being aware of classmates who possessed skills and knowledge that she did not. This resulted in the student expressing feelings of inadequacy and failure of the course. This is an example of the external/institutional barrier for difficulty asking for support.

Attending an under-resourced high school was to be an institutional factor; the majority of participants described attending a high school in low-income community areas that were inadequately resourced to prepare them for college success. Included in descriptions were references to feeling unsafe, lack of guidance counseling, lack of participation in college-level courses, lack of motivation to apply for college, and underperformance on standardized tests. Related to this finding, one participant described:

> They really didn't go into details about how college would be, so, I don't think they really prepared us for it. They kind of like glanced over, you know, application, what it's like, how to fill it out, but no one was there to help me do applications. It's pretty tough on me; I know I had to, you know, separate myself from that community, so I wouldn't, you know, be another victim of my environment. School had a high turnover of teachers. It was like freshmen year and then like after that we had like five different teachers for two courses. It was a lot of students who didn't come back, so it was a significant drop in the enrollment.

Another student described his experience in his high school where he was encouraged to attend college; however, he was not provided resources:

> I mean, I really didn't know much about college during my years in high school. But a lot of teachers and staff really pushed it, 'you gotta go to college to get a degree and get a good job.' But, they really didn't go into details about how college would be, so I don't

> think they really prepared us for it. They kind of like glanced over, you know, application, what it's like, how to fill it out, but no one was there to help me do applications. But my parent helped me to apply for financial aid.

Discouraging experiences. Students who participated in this study discussed discouraging experiences during their collegiate careers. One example included descriptions of ambivalent and uninvolved faculty/staff. For example, one student shared her experience with an advisor:

> The advisor I have now, word around the street is he's like known for not being the greatest advisor in the world. I won't say he's terrible because I don't know him personally. I mean, he's a really, he's almost too mellow, and too chill. It was more like a, 'Hi, my name is Troy. I'm alive, just to let you know.' He didn't say like, 'Hi, my name is Phillip, um, I'm gonna be your advisor. I'm gonna help you do this, this, and this. We're gonna get on top of it.' It's almost like I feel shot down. He doesn't even check on me. He doesn't send emails, like promoting different opportunities or anything.

Thus, due to the shock of the complexities involved in successful navigation of the collegiate system, combined with difficulty adjusting to the collegiate environment, and discouraging experiences with faculty/staff, external/institutional factors should be considered when serving African American first-generation college students. Several participants described discouraging experiences that were found to be institutional factors during their college careers that included connecting with faculty and staff. One participant described her experience with their academic advisor:

> Even when you went in for meetings, they were never prepared. They never looked at your classes, like to tell you what you needed for your classes. Basically (it was) picking

a degree, like what did I want to do, what was going to be the best to help me get to the end goal I wanted. It was just how to get there was the biggest challenge of like what classes, whom do I talk to? Like did you do this before, like finding someone that actually understood like what I wanted to do. That was the only time because I like there's no way I'm going to graduate and be able to fit in.

Another participant described her experiences in the classroom with faculty:

Sometimes I feel like the teacher would give a certain type of work, and I feel like I didn't have the knowledge of it and that kind of discouraged me. So, it was the work. Like because I'm like, I'm going to fail, I'm not going to do good, like I'm not going to make it in college and stuff like that, so that was a like a challenge to me, like the work, like transferring to high school and on to college like I really scared.

A participant discussed experiencing anxiety and worry at the risk of losing his academic scholarship:

I can remember calling my mom, having anxiety attacks, like all the time my sophomore year because it was just really expensive going to my uh school. My GPA wasn't the best, so I didn't get um the full scholarship money that the school gives. They give an academic scholarship, and so um I wasn't able to capitalize on that. So financials, adjusting to the workload, so like time management and things of that nature. And the mental aspect of it, um you know, freaking out about financials, freaking out about do I have enough time to do all of this. So really just that mental aspect of, of my mental wellness, I think was a big challenge.

Further, a student described feeling discouraged when she did not sense she had prior knowledge to successfully manage a course:

> I would say like the work. I, sometimes I feel like the teacher would give a certain type of work, and I feel like I didn't have the knowledge of it and that kind of discouraged me, but they also like pushed me like, they've got resources like, go get help and stuff like that. So it was the work. Like some of the teachers would like explain but not further explain, that really discouraged me because I'm like, I'm going to fail. I'm not going to do good, like I'm not going to make it in college and stuff like that, so that was a like a challenge to me, like the work, like transferring to high school and on to college. I was really scared.

Difficulty asking for support. Difficulty asking for support was an external factor that perpetuated fear of stereotype threats. This included interactions with faculty in the classroom, staff, and administrators. A student described experiencing difficulty understanding the content in her economic course, and when she attempted to obtain clarity from her professor, she felt ashamed about not understanding. This resulted in the student giving up, facing difficulty seeking resources outside of class, and failing the course.

Participants reported difficulty asking for support which was determined to be an internal/institutional factor. This difficulty often stemmed from the fear of negative perceptions. One participant stated:

> I was ashamed to talk to my instructors about my low grades and assignments that I was not comfortable with and unsure about. I was afraid to ask my instructors questions, and I did not utilize resources and go to office hours. My pride would not allow me to ask for help. I am not too afraid to ask for help; I am a little better. Last year one of my professors here at Governors State talked to me one day and told me that I was really smart, and you can really do the work, but you become overwhelmed, and you just give

> up. That conversation that I had with my instructor really changed my mindset; he told me to ask for help, I am here for you.

A significant number of participants described times where they considered dropping out of college prior to degree attainment. A participant described difficulty with a challenging course:

> The course was challenging, and I put a lot of time in it, but then there was material I still did not get. At that point I wanted to drop out of college. It was challenging each time going to class and trying to make sure the problem solved and make sure I had the right answer. Sometimes I did not get the right answer or did not take the steps to solve the problem, so in that class, I did talk to the professor, and he gave me advice for what I should I do and how to go about it.

Several participants' descriptions of their experiences persistence often emerged in their descriptions of social supports and confidence in academic abilities. Examples of support included family, peers, faculty, staff, and community members. Participants described verbal encouragement and vicarious experiences to be highly valued and significantly contributed to their persistence in the presence of barriers. References to confidence in academic abilities included remaining confident in the face of challenging academic coursework and overall adjustment to college. Both social supports and confidence in academic abilities were distinct examples of college persistence in the presence of extreme barriers for participants.

Factors Contributing to College Persistence

The second theme that emerged from participants' lived experiences were the factors that contributed and influenced their college persistence. Participants identified individuals, relationships, resources, interactions, and activities that supported their persistence. Participants

also described positive verbal statements, messages, experiences, and interactions they had encountered from others that positively influenced their college persistence. There were four subthemes that emerged for participants: (a) support network, (b) confidence, (c) organization and execution of actions to persist, and (d) sense of belonging.

Support network. Having a support network which included family, peers, faculty/staff, community and campus organizations was important for students. They depended on their support network for emotional, academic, and social support. Many expressed experiences where their support network intercepted their decision to depart from college prior to degree attainment. One student in particular discussed wanting to give up; however, with the help of peers and faculty, she continued to persist.

> I feel like I need that extra push he gave me that extra push, like, this, I wanted to give up at times too, but he gave me that extra push that I needed. I don't have moments when I did struggle. I have a peer; we have a very, very, very strong relationship. We met my sophomore year, first semester, and ever since then we do everything together. She's a part of like all study groups and everything like every class we take together; we changed our majors together. Actually a few days ago one of my professors, he changed my outlook on like everything.

Another student described difficulty adjusting to her current university after leaving an out-of-state school where she felt connected. However, the student could no longer afford to attend college out-of-state without financial support. The student enrolled in her current university feeling disconnected and angry. She described how her professor approached and encouraged her to meet during office hours. After connecting with her professor, the student was provided not only academic guidance, but personal guidance as well. The student described

introductions to yoga and mindfulness by her professor, and the resources helped her to reduce stress and improve her adjustment to her current university.

Another student discussed receiving career guidance from her professor which supported her decision to pursue a specific career goal and then was connected with an internship opportunity that created an employment opportunity as well. The students who benefited from connecting with supportive faculty/staff reported reliance on those relationships which in result supported their persistence.

The most important and identified source of support for students was supportive parents and family members. This was an external factor obtained through praise for students' accomplishments and emotional support in the presence of challenges. Though parents and family members were without collegiate experiences, students described their parents and family members as remaining consistent sources of emotional support and encouragement. Faculty and peers were described as sources of support for students as well. One participant described her peers:

> I had a group of positive friends who always kept me on my feet. They always looked at me as a role model and would always tell me how proud they were of me. They would tell me how they noticed how hard I worked and how I's always dedicated. I have one best friend; she's like same as me, she also grew up like from not a wealthy background, struggles, well she went to high school with me. We graduated together, and now she is at Western Illinois University. I'm here, and she was my motivation because when we left from high school, I was not sure about college. I kept telling her I wanted to go to the Navy, like I did not want to go to college. I don't think I can do it, and she pushed me. If it wasn't for her, I don't think I would have went. She pushed me like that.

Another participant described the influence of his mother:

A guiding parent, you know, so I would, I'm, I'll say I'm blessed. I would say it's from my mom being such a positive person, and this is something that always stick with me, my mom always uses this, this term, it might not be so, you know, professional, but she always say, 'Be a go-getter,' I took that in a way as to always going after what I want. She always embedded important to me and my brother that's under me, be a go-getter, always find a way. She'd say, 'Hustle and be a go-getter." I took that, and I looked at it in a broader spectrum.

Faculty support was reported by participants, and they described connection:

But in my experience, um, I had a couple of professors that, you know, said, 'Hey, you're missing an assignment, or I notice you've missed a couple of classes, and I have a strict attendance policy.' You know, so they would reach out to you. They would send an email and then the next class if they see you they might, you know, say something to you in class or, but the, they most definitely would send an email to you and just let you know, uh, you know, you missed a day, or you missed an assignment, or, you know.

Support from administrative staff was reported by a participants and was influential in his college persistence

When I was on academic probation, they were going to cancel my financial aid, so I had to meet with the financial aid department and talking with her, it just, it, it gave me motivation to want to do better in school because she genuinely wanted, you know, to see me do well, you know. She uh she was a Caucasian, and so that was, I don't want to say weird, but just different that this older Caucasian lady cared so much about making sure that I'm still in school, that my financial aid is still gonna come through. And I would

check in with her every month, you know, like hey my grades are up, hey my grades are up.

Participants identified supportive individuals who consistently provided verbal encouragement and feedback. This included peers who provided evaluative feedback based on their similar experiences as first-generation college students. Participants were successful in comparing themselves with peers and one participant described:

> I can think of maybe just like one person. I think a lot of my success comes from my friends though because I do have a good group of friends who have, you know, graduated from college, have their undergrad, are in, you know, graduate school programs. So having them to relate to that experience is helping me a lot. Um, so that's what I would say would be like a positive experience, like, you know, somebody that's really there for me to, you know, to kind of push me along. It is honestly just as simple as me calling them on the phone and just having a breakdown and them just being there and just, you know, listening to me vent and then just being like, 'Okay, you gotta do this now, you gotta do this, you know what I mean? You gotta get back structure and just keep going.' Like it's not even, you know, anything crazy, it's just them like just being there, just them listening to the tears, or you know, if it's a break time, and we get together, and we get food and like whatever it is, like that's like the stuff that keeps me going.

Confidence. Students began their journeys in pursuit of their undergraduate degrees with confidence in their abilities to be successful. Many students discussed their confidence in themselves during the interviews and included examples of their pre-collegiate experiences where they pushed through challenges prior to college enrollment. In spite of the challenging

experiences prior to college, students believed in themselves and moved forward to enroll in college. A student reflected on a meaningful experience prior to college enrollment:

> Well, first off I would like to say that I have always been like self-driven and different, like I always wanted to just be successful, just be successful drove me. I always wanted to be successful. I was like, I was just like excited. I'm like what is college, like how's it going to be, like what type of people I'm going to meet, like will it be hard? Because people say, you know, you go to college, you know, it's not easy, but it's worth the degree, so okay, I know you probably already know but [suburb] is known to have high violence and basically people categorize and put [suburb] in the statistics of kids not doing anything, probably hanging out on the streets and the blocks and not really finishing school. I wasn't like really like bad to the point where like I've, I've never was in a gang. I never did drugs, always wanted, again, it's just always something about me, always wanted something different.

Students described remaining confident in face of course work. Students presented pre-collegiate barriers associated with under-preparedness for college; however, they also described confidence in their academic abilities. Lastly, students described specific strategies and behaviors engaged to support their persistence:

> In my freshman year I was not confident after my first semester because my grades were not where I wanted them to be. My GPA was very low, like academic probation low. I doubted myself, like why, you know, why are my grades like this? I realized that it was not me being able to perform, but I was not doing it. Actually putting the work in to the class, or even going to class, you know, those type of things. So I realized that it was not

> my ability, I had the ability, I had to put the work in. That's when I got the confidence boost. My GPA went from super low to almost perfect.

Next, a student shared her confidence in herself to pursue college; however, she experienced doubt:

> Because I had confidence but I was still like underestimating myself like are you ready for this, like can you do this? But the peers around me also pushed me, like I graduated with this girl from Kennedy-King, and her mama was dying with cancer, and she was like, 'I come here every day. If I can come here every day, and my mom is dying of cancer, like you can do it too.' She pushed me, so the peers was very good. Also, the teachers, like stand up in the middle of class and give testimonies and push out of each bubble (not sure) so that also like pushed me like okay you can do this. If they can get through it, you can do it.

Organized and executed actions. Students consistently provided examples of where they organized and executed actions to support their persistence. For example, some of the actions included participation in study groups, meeting with faculty outside the classroom, participation in student organizations, maintaining employment, and dedicating more time and effort towards tasks. For example, one student described completing homework assignments prior to due dates, rewriting class notes, and selecting which courses to spend more time for preparation to excel. Another student described the decision to attend a college outside of his community saturated with violence and poverty with the goal to avoid distractions from his goal to graduate from college. Most students discussed participating in student organizations that required them to spend more time on campus connecting with peers and faculty. Examples of

students executing actions to support their persistence were important for them and contributed to their college persistence.

All participants in the study described specific actions they executed to persist in college that positively supported their academic outcomes. A description is provided for a participant:

> Specifically for my classes, one strategy that I said I was gonna do was doing homework the day it was assigned. Um, that helped. So like I wouldn't put things off to, you know, the night before it was due. Um, what else helped? Studying, I learned how to study efficiently. Um, so like for my math classes I would go through all of the notes and make a summary of those notes, do all of the problems from the lectures, do all of the homework problems, and then uh I'd go through previous quizzes and tests that we had, and I would look through those and be like, all right, this is what's coming up on the next exam so let me make sure, you know.

Participants also discussed their experiences with accessing tutoring, advisement, and counseling services. Though this was not a general or typical finding among participants, it was noted as execution of actions that supported college persistence for some participants. A participant described her experience accessing tutoring support:

> So she didn't really explain it, and I went to my resources, and they was like doing tutoring that day, so I went then. They helped me out; they also said like, 'Do, go to our class hours.' Which I did, her office hours I mean, and I went to her office hours She was able to like sit down with me, talk me through it and that got me through it.

Sense of belonging. Sense of belonging was another factor important for students and influenced their persistence. Students described the acceptance and support by peers and faculty. Examples included students' descriptions of initially feeling unconnected and isolated upon

arrival to college. One student described a faculty member reaching out to him to encourage and challenge his commitment to the coursework. A student described how that interaction changed the way in which he approached challenging assignments and tasks. Another student shared that he had not been successful with connecting with faculty outside of the classroom; however, the outreach from his professor encouraged him to not give up, and he became more confident to seek support from other faculty members. Another student described participating in a student organization and taking on leadership responsibilities.

Students reported spending more time on campus, which resulted in participation in student organizations, service learning, research with faculty, volunteer opportunities, study abroad, and establishment of relationships with others from diverse backgrounds, which appeared to contribute to their sense of belonging and connection to their university and colleagues. For example, a student described her study abroad experience to China:

> Right, so like the overall trip was fine, it was fun. I got to experience a lot of stuff. I got to meet a lot of new people, like I have friends across the world now. And then, um, one of the girls from here, one of the girls from Governor's State, we was all out somewhere, it was only like four of us; it was me and like three other people. One of the guys was this guy I met named Suihko, he's from Slovenia. He was nice. It was two guys from Slovenia; he was the nice one. We were sitting around talking about, you know, like different races and how they grow up and everything, and Suihko, he said he's in school for law, and he wants to come to the U. S. to help out African Americans in the law enforcement, like, like side, and I'm like you're gonna be the cool police officer? And he was like, basically, like that's what he wants to do.

Another student described spending more time on campus accessing resources, involvement with campus organizations, and serving others, which appeared to support her sense of belonging:

> Faculty and peers motivated me, also challenged me to take advantage of my resources at GSU. They also pushed me to take advantage of their resources, get involved, stay motivated. I joined the psychology club. Also, I took advantage of volunteer work, feeding the homeless or also going to events they're talking about, like how could you get involved in more stuff like being a peer mentor and stuff like that. My leadership skills, like motivating others, helping others, and stuff like that, like if you see one of your peers down you help them, or you reach out to people you think may be in need of help, so my leadership skills.

Textural Structural Composite Descriptions

Participants identified multiple findings that presented as both barriers and supported their college persistence. Students described factors presented as barriers towards persistence that included attending an under-resourced high school, discouraging experiences, financial barriers, difficulty adjusting to the college environment and asking for help. In the presence of barriers, students remained in college and persisted towards degree attainment. Students identified factors contributing to their persistence: (a) support network; (b) confidence; (c) organized/executed actions to persist; and (d) sense of belonging. The identified factors by students should be considered when creating ways to more effectively serve African American first-generation college students.

The final step in Moustakas' (1994) data analysis process involved textural and structural descriptions, which emerged as relevant to the phenomenon. Textural descriptions encompass

descriptions of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Structural descriptions involve the ways in which participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The emergent themes provided the textural descriptions (meaning and depth) of the experiences. Structural descriptions provided the structure of the experiences, multiple meanings, and tensions (Moustakas, 1994) and were unique for each student. Finally, the researcher developed a list that represented participants' experiences, creating a composite textural-structural description

Composite Textural Descriptions

The composite textural description focused on a group description of the phenomenon of college persistence for African American first-generation college students. Using the noted themes, the data revealed group descriptions of what it was like to persist in the presence of significant barriers. In addition the themes revealed factors that participants identified as contributing to their college persistence.

All students described difficulty adjusting to their college environment and experiencing financial challenges as low-income African American first-generation college students. Difficulties with adjustment to the collegiate environment included students' difficulty connecting with resources and asking for support. Further, students reported negative interactions with academic advisors, faculty, and staff. Students struggled to develop a sense of belonging and to feel valued, supported, and accepted in their university. Furthermore, students mentioned struggling with course content and feeling inadequate although they were confident in their abilities prior to college enrollment. Some students reflected on attending an under-resourced high school and feeling underprepared for the rigor of coursework, yet they experienced difficulty reaching out for support.

All participants reported discouraging experiences on campus that led to negative emotions and thoughts of departing college prior to degree attainment. These participants expressed negative emotions and described “anxiety,” “depression,” “anger,” “inadequacy,” “frustration,” “sadness,” and “isolation” that highlighted the experience of discouragement. Only two students sought counseling services to address their difficulties with adjustment and negative emotions. Difficulties adjusting to college also related to challenges when navigating the complexities of the collegiate system, including selection of courses and a major. Students reported feeling lost in the system and lacking adequate guidance from academic advisors. All students reported negative experiences with their academic advisor or no interaction at all. The students who did report having sessions with their advisors found the resource to be not helpful and unsupportive.

All but one student was in the workforce either part or full-time and still carried a full-time academic course load. Financial stress was reported by all students but one, and over half of the students experienced extreme financial challenges resulting in loss of academic scholarships and housing. Two students reported lacking resources for meals and transportation; however, they continued to attend school in spite of barriers. Lastly, all students reported difficulty with course content and reported feelings of inadequacy and reluctance to seek academic support.

Regarding factors that contributed to students’ persistence, all but one student described significant relationships, interactions and experiences with peers, faculty, parents, campus organizations and community persons which served as emotional and social supports. Relationships were important for students and served to support their persistence at college. In addition, most students were confident in their capacity to be successful in college and shared

their testimonies about wanting to achieve their undergraduate degrees. Further, all students revealed specific actions taken to be academically successful. Their organization and execution of behaviors included spending more time on academic tasks, reaching out to faculty, and participating in campus organizations. Having supportive people, confidence in abilities, sense of belonging, and putting forth effort to persist were all reported as factors that supported the students' persistence.

Composite Structural Descriptions

Exploring the phenomenon of college persistence among African American first-generation college students not only related to barriers but also to assumptions of characteristics of racially/ethnically diverse first-generation students. Many students arrived at college without understanding how to navigate the complexities or how to access resources to support persistence. The structural descriptions focused on the backgrounds of how students persisted in the presence of barriers and assumptions.

Almost all the students reported a history of experiencing academic unpreparedness prior to college enrollment. Most participants believed they lacked guidance and support academically and with postsecondary services during high school; most attended high schools that were underfunded in low-income community areas. Some students reported poor access to rigorous courses, lack of preparation for ACT college entrance exam, ambivalent/high turnover of teachers, and witnessing violence in/around their school community. The factors made it difficult for students to be successful academically and were not supportive for students' transition to college. Even with the presence of barriers, students reported feeling confident towards pursuing their goals of college enrollment to pursue undergraduate degrees. The students illustrated a level of confidence, executed actions to persist, and did not embrace past

academic experiences as a roadmap for future experiences. Unfortunately, students reported ambivalence and negative experiences with faculty, similar to their high school experiences. However, these students remained confident and put forth effort to persist.

Students indicated that family, peers, and some of the faculty largely impacted their ability to persist in college. Students revealed positive experiences with their support network that affected college persistence. During positive experiences with peers, family, and faculty, students identified as strong students, developed a stronger sense of belonging, and achieved an improved adjustment to college and academic success. Students recalled peers who were there for them during emotional and academic crises. Meeting with faculty outside of class sessions to receive support for assignments provided a catalyst for academic advisement and emotional support. Parents and family relationships provided consistent encouragement to persist and celebrate achievements. Although parents lacked college experiences, parental involvement was important for students and served as a major resource for college persistence. Students also reported participation in campus organizations and activities that supported leadership development, helping others, and a sense of belonging.

Textural-Structural Synthesis

Students reported attending under-resourced high schools and did not feel prepared for the rigor of college coursework. Low GPAs, difficulty in grasping course content, and perceptions that peers were more prepared all contributed to feelings of inadequacy and difficulty seeking support. Furthermore, students revealed specific negative experiences in high school such as lack of exposure to rigorous courses, high teacher turnover, and chaotic academic environment/community. Some students indicated helpful teachers and staff in high school encouraged them to pursue college and assisted them with college and financial aid applications.

As first-generation students without parents who could provide direct guidance on how to navigate challenges, students often experienced confusion and discouragement. Students were all from low-income families and unable to access financial support from their parents. As a result, students realized a priority to work and reported challenges managing work and coursework. As working students, most spent limited time on campus and often did not learn about resources and did not connect with peers and faculty outside of the classroom.

Students experienced ambivalent faculty and negative feedback from faculty that contributed to poor academic performance and reluctance to seek support. Some students reported attempted to engage with faculty; however, they were unsuccessful in connecting in ways to support learning. Some students perceived faculty as uncaring and unconcerned about their academic success, which resulted in negative outcomes. Some students reported extreme negative comments and feedback from faculty that seemed to negatively affect their confidence.

Conclusions

Through the interview responses, 15 students shared their experiences of college persistence as African American first-generation college students. The themes that emerged from the data were: a) college persistence in the presence of barriers, and (b) perceived factors and experiences that contributed and influenced college persistence. The subthemes that emerged from the themes were: (a) difficulty adjusting to college environment, (b) financial barriers, (c) under-resourced high schools, (d) discouraging experiences, (e) difficulty asking for support, (f) support network, (g) confidence, (h) organization and execution of actions to persist, and (i) sense of belonging.

The themes related to college persistence in the presence of barriers and factors that contributed and influenced college persistence were real life experiences for students. Students

entered college with pre-existing barriers compounded by further barriers as they persisted. Students shared lived experiences of negative occurrences and emotions. In addition, students felt isolated, depressed, frustrated, inadequate, and anxious as they struggled to navigate the complexities of college and coursework. All students expressed thoughts of wanting to depart college during difficult times that included academic failure, financial barriers and negative experiences with faculty and staff. All students eventually shared experiences of academic success, a sense of belonging, effort to persist, confidence, and improved college adjustment. In addition, success came as result of supportive persons in their lives who provided encouragement and positive evaluative feedback when most needed. Students also reported their observations of successful peers, many of whom had similar experiences as first-generation college students. Overall, students benefited from developing a sense of belonging, effort toward tasks, supportive persons, and confidence in their beliefs to be successful.

The experience of being an African American first-generation college student is one bombarded with challenges and barriers. Oftentimes institutional, external, personal and internal barriers cause emotional, financial, academic, and social turbulence for students. The African American first-generation college students in this study were determined to be successful and to persist in the presence of their unique barriers and experiences.

Having a support network, sense of belonging, confidence, and organization/execution of actions to persist led to importance for students. Some of descriptions of successful actions included reaching out and connecting with faculty and staff, participating in campus organizations and study groups, accessing campus supports, remaining in the workforce, and putting forth more time and effort towards tasks. First-generation college students valued their relationships with family, peers, faculty, staff, and community persons. Students also valued

participation in campus organizations and connections with peers. African American first-generation college students entered college with confidence in abilities to be successful, and with access to supportive persons and resources, their sense of belonging, academic success, and college adjustment resulted in positive outcomes.

In Chapter 5, the researcher presents findings from the research related to past literature. The themes, student descriptions, and theoretical framework of Bandura (1994, 1997) are reviewed. The implications, recommendations, and areas for future research are described.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of self-efficacy for college persistence among African American first-generation college students who were persisting in undergraduate programs. Fifteen students participated in semi-structured interviews to share their persistence experiences including rich descriptions of their lived experiences. The chapter provides a discussion of findings reflecting on the research question and exploring the perceptions and experiences of self-efficacy among African American first-generation college students. The researcher provides a synthesis of research findings related to current literature

involving first-generation college students. The findings also are explored through self-efficacy as a theoretical lens. Further, the implications for this study, recommendations for serving for serving African American first-generation students, research, limitations, and suggestions for future research are provided.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study showed that African American first-generation participants in this study persisted in the presence of difficult barriers. The data collected from the participants enabled the research question to be answered: What are the lived experiences for low-income African American first-generation college students who are enrolled and persisting in a public university setting? Students provided insight into the complexity of barriers for the population, factors, and experiences that contributed to their persistence, in spite of their barriers. The researcher reviews the research findings and ways in which the current literature aligns with findings.

Barriers for First-Generation Students

First-generation college students are more likely than continuing-generation college students to present with additional characteristics that may be barriers towards persistence (Bui, 2002). For students in this study, barriers were attained similar to what was found in the work of Bui (2002) and others (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004) who argued that first-generation college students present with additional characteristics that may be barriers towards persistence.

As for the first theme, persistence in the presence of barriers described the ways in which

students persisted in spite of barriers. The following themes were identified: (a) under-resourced high schools, (b) financial barriers, (c) difficulty adjusting to college environment, and (d) difficulty asking for support.

Under-resourced high schools. Most students resided in low-income community areas where inequitable academic resources in their high schools presented as a huge barrier for transition to college. Some of students felt that their high school teachers did not do an adequate job teaching them, and a high prevalence of teacher turnover was also indicated. A student described, “I had three different math teachers in my sophomore year, and the next year we had all new teachers, no one returned.” Pascarella (1982) study found that half of all high school students are unprepared to succeed academically in college.

Under-resourced school systems are challenged with higher concentrations of poverty, greater racial/ethnic diversity, and more frequent rates of student and teacher mobility (Kincheloe, 2010). Policies ignored the victimization of students through segregation by failing to account for the causes of inequality. Current policies built on this assumption cannot produce the desired outcomes and may even perpetuate existing inequalities in educational systems (Orfeild, 2004). Socio-demographics have a significant impact on how urban schools are structured. The concentration of poverty and racial isolation matters as a direct relationship to school processes including funding and impacts student achievement outcomes (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

The challenges of under-resourced schools cannot be separated from the socio-demographic context (Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011). Under-resourced schools face challenges both structurally and culturally. Specifically, structural challenges include school policies and practices that impede student success and fail to adequately address students’

needs. The findings for this research study, based on students' descriptions, were consistent with structural challenges. Cultural challenges are those policies, practices, and sets of beliefs that contribute to misperceptions of students' intellectual abilities, particularly for those students who are racially/ethnically diverse (Noguera, 2003).

Structural challenges for under-resourced school systems disturbed the ability to effectively educate racially/ethnically diverse low-income students (Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011). The structural challenges included: (a) persistent, low student achievement, (b) lack of instructional consistency, (c) inexperienced teachers, (d) poor funding and business operations, and (e) low expectations for students (Kincheloe, 2010).

Cultural challenges faced by under-resourced schools presented as critical barriers in the form of policies, practices, beliefs, and outcomes including: (a) perceptions of race and class as limiting predictors of school achievement, (b) perceptions of different learning styles versus intellectual deficiencies, and (c) lack of cultural responsiveness in current policies and practices (Ahram et al., 2011). For example, research indicated that African Americans and other racially/ethnically diverse groups are perceived by society as intellectually inferior, and students may present school failure based on negative stereotypes about their racial/ethnic group intellectual abilities (Steele, 1997). Intellectual inferiority was seemingly an important factor for students in this study in descriptions of their feelings of isolation, confusion, and experiences for stereotypical threat.

Practices for addressing both structural and cultural differences calls for those who serve first-generation college students to engage in conversations about how teaching matters in learning outcomes for students. Faculty, counselors, and higher education administrators were found to frequently cite the family and community (i.e., poverty and limited access to social and

cultural capital) as reasons why under-resourced low-income and racial/ethnic students struggle academically (Ahram et al., 2011). However, a need exists to address the issues related to cultural differences and requires: (a) clarity of the institutional mission that focuses on cultivating talent, confidence, and competence in all students; (b) demystification of school success; (c) embracing racially/ethnically diverse students and their culture; (d) building strong relationships between faculty and students; and (e) building partnerships with parents and critical stakeholders (Ahram et al., 2011). The complex realities facing under-resourced school systems are not new phenomena but rather historical and include both structural and cultural dimensions.

Given the complexity and challenges, under-resourced school systems require a deliberate and thoughtful examination of the context for teaching and learning (Ahram et al., 2011). The findings for this research study were consistent with the cultural and structural challenges examined by scholars. Students described their lived experiences for attending under-resourced high schools and how those experiences presented as barriers for college persistence.

Financial barriers. Financial barriers presented as a consistent obstacle for low-income students in this study. Thirteen out of the 15 students worked either part or full-time, and this was important for students. Some of the students revealed that managing school and work was a balancing act and caused some stress; one student described leaving school for a year because he could no longer afford to attend school. In alignment with Terenzini et al. (1996) and Jenkins (2007), first-generation student demographics noted that racially/ethnically diverse first-generation students were more likely to be poor.

First-generation college students are often vulnerable to financial stress, which can disrupt their college persistence (Lyons, 2004). Among a group of 957 who responded to a study conducted by the Community College Survey of Student Engagement in 2006, which found 50%

of first-generation college students indicated a lack of financial support that was either likely or highly likely to cause departure prior to degree attainment. In addition, students are forced to work to address the gap of expected family contributions because their family cannot or will not contribute (King, 2003). Employment, loans, and credit cards filled the gap for family resources and federal aid assistance. First-generation college students are familiar with dropping classes and taking on extra work with negative outcomes for college persistence (Pascarella et al., 2004). The lack of support from family may force decisions related to work and debt that compromise the student's best intentions of persistence and degree attainment (Christie, Munro, & Rettig, 2001). Students perceived financial aid to be a mysterious process where universities controlled application requirements and award amounts, and their real needs were not considered (Christie et al., (2001).

Further, participants for the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2006) did not acknowledge their role as first-generation college students who included shortcomings that had to be compensated through increased effort and knowledge seeking that their continuing-generation counterparts did not experience. By being overwhelmed by the financial aid process, yet not assuming control of their own destiny, many participants felt frustrated and helpless (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2006). Money was a constant source of worry for students, and this finding is consistent with the participants in this study who described considerable stress and worry about money as they persisted in college.

Financial aid had considerable control over not only the student's tuition and books but was also linked to housing and the ability to have food to eat during the semester (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2006). Multiple students reported that if they did not get financial aid, they would not only be unable to attend school; but they would also have no

place to live and nothing to eat. Without family support, many participants, particularly those who were older, single or divorced, were entirely dependent on financial aid for survival. Not knowing how much money they were going to have from financial aid created an uncertainty about the future. Money constrained living as well as occupational goals. A desire to become a doctor compromised with becoming a nurse because the availability of long-term financial aid to continue education was an unrealistic perception. Three students for the current study described career choices based on financial aid as an obstacle.

Employment impacted persistence and graduation rates among first-generation college students (Billson & Terry, 1982; Christie et al., 2001; Community College Survey of Engagement, 2006; Inman & Mayes, 1999; King, 1999, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004). The necessity of working to pay bills in order to survive was a reality for many of the students in the current study. Further, the study conducted by the Community College Survey of Engagement (2006) found that earning more money was seen as a more acceptable financial management skill than expertise in managing what they already had.

This researcher anticipates that effective financial literacy programs would improve persistence and graduation rates, but the results revealed that many other factors in the lives of these first-generation college students who would not be remedied or improved through the narrow focus. Yes, increased financial literacy could improve the current lives of the research participants for the current study and could actually increase their potential to persist and complete their undergraduate degrees without intervention in areas. Financial literacy education might relieve some of the pressures related to daily financial struggles with increased resource management techniques, but it is doubtful that increased financial literacy alone would be anything more than the graduation remedy anticipated by some of the participants.

Difficulty adjusting to college environment. Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) argued that first-generation college students are at a disadvantage when navigating the world of higher education because of their unique characteristics and challenges, and they have more difficulties adjusting to college. Although students' descriptions of their persistence experiences encompassed many challenges and uncertainties, this research did support the earlier literature. In addition, students' descriptions were consistent with Pizzolato's (2005) who noted diverse students are often skilled at tolerating ambiguity and making sense of a new environment. Students described feelings of uncertainty and isolation, however, continued to persist.

Difficulty asking for support. Difficulty asking for support was a barrier described by students. Students reported feelings of inadequacy prior to enrollment and entered the collegiate setting with uncertainties and apprehension. Scholars suggested that African-American students perceive their college environment to be less supportive than White students (Carey, 2004; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella et al., 1986). Students who perceived faculty and staff to be inaccessible and unsupportive revealed their decisions to withdraw from seeking support. Students described extreme difficulty with faculty made them feel "not good enough."

In contrast to the students who described faculty as supportive, genuine, and caring, some students reported difficulty connecting with faculty and staff at their university. Three students described feeling humiliated and belittled during interactions with faculty and staff. Research found that educators are critical of institutional and classroom practices that place underserved students at a disadvantage for success (Rosenberg, 2003) and that include the concept of nonviolent communication. At the same time, this perspective urges teachers to be self-reflective of their actions through compassion as a daily commitment. Rosenberg suggested that this communication approach would help teachers counter institutional barriers and oppressive

pedagogical practices that impede FGCS success.

One issue discovered in the literature that is relevant for this study related to instructors being from different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds than their students (Rosenberg, 2003). These instructors had trouble communicating with students; even their body language was different. They also had trouble comprehending what students needed to succeed in their courses (Rosenberg, 2003). Drawing from Rosenberg's (2003) nonviolent communication (also known as compassionate communication), it aims for people to listen compassionately and express themselves in ways likely to receive a compassionate response in others. The goal, therefore, is to better serve first-generation college students with use of critical compassionate pedagogy as a pedagogical framework by intersecting compassionate communication with critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy deals "not only with questions of schooling, curriculum, and educational policy but also with social justice and human possibility" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 7).

Implementing critical compassionate pedagogy is important because many teachers do not consider the pedagogical needs of underserved student populations that often negatively affect the students' likelihood to succeed academically (Kincheloe, 2005). So, as critical compassionate pedagogues, teachers should be critical of institutional barriers and current oppressive pedagogical practices and be compassionate as teachers to help first-generation college students to succeed. Rosenberg's (2003) compassionate communication is "founded on language and communication skills that strengthen the ability to remain human, even under trying conditions . . . [it] trains us to observe carefully, and to be able to specify behaviors and conditions that are affecting us" (p. 3). In addition, compassionate communication emphasizes

the importance of minimizing resistance, defensiveness, and violent reactions. Rosenberg also highlighted that compassionate communication does not always happen quickly but rather is a process.

Compassionate communication involves the following four components: observation, feeling, need, and request. Observation is the intent to observe without making an initial judgment or evaluation. During the observation process, “We observe what is actually happening in a situation: what are we observing others saying or doing that is either enriching or not enriching our life” (Rosenberg, 2003, p. 6). Second, compassionate communication is about expressing one’s feelings and asking oneself if one is hurt, scared, joyful, amused, irritated, etc. According to Rosenberg, expressing feelings tends to increase connection between people. Unlike thinking, expressing one’s feelings enables identification and communication in ways that do not imply judgment, criticism, or blame toward others. Third, compassionate communication connects a person’s needs to the feelings identified. Rosenberg pointed out that needs are universal, shared, and the root of one’s feelings. By identifying needs to each other, an understanding is created that allows a person to move toward the process of becoming.

The students in this study experienced interactions with both faculty and staff that interrupted their decisions to ask for support. Therefore, a reference occurred to the results for difficulty asking for support and was consistent with the literature. The use of compassionate communication and Rosenberg’s (2003) compassionate communication with critical pedagogy would seemingly serve to support the persistence and degree attainment of racially/ethnically diverse students who enter college with overwhelming uncertainties. Teachers often fail to realize that the education system has failed many students from the start, and there is a need to

make an effort in giving compassion as teachers to help first-generation college students succeed academically.

Discouraging experiences. The student's discouraging experiences were consistent with both stereotype threat and imposter syndrome. Stereotype threat is negative stereotypes about socially marginalized groups (Steel & Aronson, 1995) that perpetuates lack of success due to internal deficits rather than social, historical, or situational injustice (Steel & Aronson, 1995). Imposter syndrome occurs when one minimizes his/her success to external or coincidental factors instead of abilities. Both stereotype threat and imposter syndrome have negatively affected academic performance, social integration and emotional health for racially/ethnically diverse students (Calude & Imes, 1996). Moreover, first-generation students more commonly internalized their educational attainment (Aspelmeier, 2012). This internalization placed students at increased risk for experiencing stereotype threat and imposter syndrome, and the literature is consistent with students' decisions to seek support. While students reported interactions with professors and staff that were caring, respectful, and supportive, they also described interactions that were ambivalent, uninvolved, and belittling. Scholars presented sufficient data to support findings observing that racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college student are less likely to seek support (Carey, 2004; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella et al., 1986); however, very little in the research explored why this occurs across institution types. The students in this study described a number of discouraging experiences with faculty and staff that brought concern and pause.

Persistence Factors for First-Generation Students

As an emerging second theme, persistence in the presence of barriers, four subthemes were identified. These external, internal, and institutional factors included: (a) support network,

(b) sense of belonging, (c) organization and execution of actions to persist, and (d) confidence. Students described the factors that they believed may have contributed to their college persistence.

Support network. Involvement with peers, family, faculty, and campus organizations were influential for college persistence with students in this study. The literature supported relationships as an important factor in student persistence (Astin, 1984; Lundberg, 2014; Reason, 2009), particularly for racially/ethnically diverse students (Deil-Amen, 2011; Grimes, 1997; Walker, Pearson, & Murrell, 2010. This included relationships with faculty (Gayle, Cortez, & Preiss, 2013; Pascarella & Ternezini, 2005; Wilson & Gore, 2013), peers (Booker, 2008; Bordes, 2008; Fischer, 2007; Freedman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007), parents (London, 1989; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Westbrook & Scott, 2012), and campus organizations (Guiffrida, 2005). All had a critical influence on student outcomes. Students' descriptions of involvement with supportive persons contradicted research that suggested first-generation college students are also less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences during college, such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities, and using support services (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Students described consistently meeting with faculty outside of class, contacting parents and family for emotional support, connecting with peers for both academic and emotional support, and participating in campus organizations and activities. Having close connections with others was important for students and supported their persistence.

The role of supportive relationships was evident in a study by Harper (2012) where African American men with bachelor's degrees credited their success to having connections with influential people. Participants in the study did not credit their achievements to being an

exceptional student; instead, they attributed their success to having close relationships (family, faculty, and peers) that supported and encouraged them. Harper's findings gave importance to relationships and how they can aid in students' adjustment, development, and persistence. The scholars' research confirmed the descriptions of lived experiences for students in this study. The literature strongly supported the importance of relationships and was shown to be important for students in this study.

Faculty. Relationships with faculty and staff at the university are perhaps the most impactful. As representatives of the university, faculty and staff serve as critical links to information and support that to promote student persistence (Lee & Ransom, 2011). For racially/ethnically diverse students, faculty and staff serve as mentors, cultural translators, mediators, and role models (Museus & Quaye, 2009). They also provide support (Deil-Amen, 2011) and assistance with procedures (Karp, 2011; Lundberg, 2014) to help navigate the complexities of college. According to Walker et al. (2010), African American students put more effort into establishing and maintaining relationships with institutional persons than White students did, possibly to compensate for having cultural obstacles. Establishing and maintaining relationships with faculty and staff was important for students in this study, and their descriptions supported the research literature presented.

University faculty and staff were credited with helping underprepared students persist. In a qualitative study by Capps (2012), participants taking developmental education courses acknowledged that faculty and advisors deeply affected their feelings and decisions about college. Students for this study described similar experiences, for example, a student described his professor reaching out to him and his classmates when absent from class and with failure to submit assignments. The student described his professor contacting him in person, through

email, and with phone calls when he was "slacking," and the student described feeling as though his professor genuinely cared about his academic progress and outcomes as a first-generation student. He discussed how his professors' actions changed his behavior and though the course was challenging, the student responded to assignments with more effort and improved his attendance.

Other participants described faculty as "mentors" where they had access to their professors outside of class to discuss academic and personal challenges. For example, students felt understood and connected as faculty shared their postsecondary experiences and strategies. The idea of faculty and staff serving in this way challenged Tinto's perspective, which postures that a student was the "author of his or her success" (Deil-Amen, 2011, p. 58) and responsible for his/her own engagement. Instead, Deil-Amen recommended against institutions of higher education putting the responsibility completely on students to navigate and integrate with their collegiate environment. He suggested that colleges intentionally place faculty and staff in a position to guide and assist students, especially those who at risk for dropping out. In addition, Harper (2012) agreed that the relationship between engagement and retention well documented, and faculty and staff "must assume greater responsibility for engaging undergraduates who complete college at lower rates" (p. 22). Intentional engagement was effective in several of the descriptions of interactions for students in this study. Students described faculty reaching out to them, requesting to meet after class, spending additional time to address additional barriers (e.g., financial aid), and encouraging students to participate in study abroad experiences.

Literature supported the importance of the interactions for students. Faculty has the opportunity to be powerful conduits for stimulating students' motivation to learn (Afzal, Ali, Khan, & Hamid, 2010; Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010), and therefore, they are

powerful facilitators of student success (Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin, & Castro, 2010; Greene, Marti, & McClenney, 2008; Reason, 2009). Students described faculty as genuinely caring about their academic outcomes, easy to engage and connect, and understanding. Their descriptions of faculty were consistent with Deil-Amen (2011) who described effective faculty as those perceived by students as "understanding, respectful, encouraging, and accessible" (p. 339). In addition, students want faculty who are approachable and provide safe spaces to ask questions without risk of embarrassment. This is particularly important for African American first-generation college students who may present feelings of inadequacy (Sandovol-Lucero, Maes, & Klimgsmith, 2014).

Parents/Family. Studies in the past have indicated that first-generation students receive less support from their parents than their continuing-generation peers relative to their desire to attend college (Fallon, 1997) and suggested that parents who lack college experience are unlikely to provide their students with needed support in college. Students described their reliance on emotional support and encouragement from parents and family members. Although parents were without postsecondary experiences, their influence on the college persistence of their students was important. Students described receiving emotional support and encouragement from their parents and extended family members. Most students consistently reported maintaining involvement with their family, and their relationships were explained in the following ways: (a) parents encouraged students in the presence of barriers and failure, (b) students' college attendance was a family goal, (c) parents communicated expectations for students to attend college, and (d) students desired to make their family proud. The data was not consistent with seminal college retention theory that suggests successful college students need to break away

from their families and friends from home in order to become integrated into the social and academic realms of college (Tinto, 1993).

An overview of the literature indicated that family involvement is an important link to positive outcomes in academic achievement for African American college students (Herndon & Moore, 2002). Family support was important for students and was consistent with research that indicated family support is a strong predictor for racially/ethnically diverse college students (Guiffrida, 2005). Therefore, this finding supported more recent literature that determined parents had an integral role in the development of students' social and cultural identity. This parental role can be even more important for racially/ethnically diverse FGCS (Taub, 2008). Experiences with parents were consistent with earlier research that found parents had an influential role in supporting their first-generation college students through encouragement, reassurance, and emotional support connected to problems in college (Valery et al., 1997). Scholars are just starting to understand the relationship between family and student persistence. Studies established that families influence students' perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and ultimately persistence decisions (Crisp, 2010; Reason, 2009).

Family influence was positively impactful for students in this study. For example, a student described wanting to drop out after failing a course. As a diverse learner, the student could have benefited from additional supportive services; however, he struggled in his math course. A discussion ensued with his mother who shared her experiences with life failure and how she "pushed" her way through difficulties. The mother's disclosure encouraged her son to retake the course in a community college setting during the summer, where he was able to focus on the one math course. The student reported a successful academic outcome and continued to persist at his current university. The mothers' encouragement, reassurance, and support

influenced her student's attitude towards persistence. The example of a parent's influence on persistence supported the research that indicated the effects of family support are impactful for African American students (Haussman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). A study of community college students in developmental education found that students were highly motivated to make family members and friends proud of them, hence, their efforts to persist (Van Ora, 2012). Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, and Klingsmith (2014) suggested that family members and other close acquaintances provide familial capital, which sustains students through their academic programs.

Peers. Astin (1993) asserted, "The student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years (p. 398). Evidence suggests that the experiences African American first-generation college students have with their peers may be the biggest predictor of belongingness overall (Booker, 2008; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Hasusman et al., 2007). When students feel valued and accepted by their peers, they reported experiencing a stronger connection to their campus community (Booker, 2016). They felt safe enough to share experiences, engage in thoughtful discussions, and offer support to others. Students' descriptions of peer relationships supported the research literature. Students discussed feelings of acceptance from their peers and reliance on their relationships for support and encouragement. Additionally, students felt supported and connected with peers with similar backgrounds (first-generation) and were addressing similar barriers towards persistence. For example, most students discussed their peer relationships in terms of supporting and encouraging one another, particularly during difficult times. Students discussed encouraging peers to attend class and to complete assignments, and the expectation that their peers would do the same for them. In addition, students provided support with primary needs, including food, housing, and transportation. A student described where he provided housing for a peer who could no longer

afford to live on campus.

The absence of support increases the likelihood that a student will not persist in college. Research suggested that peer support and encouragement relates to persistence (Bean, 1980; Cabrea et al., 1993; Reason, 2009). Further establishing close relationships with college peers was beneficial to academic, social, and emotional adjustment for racially/ethnically diverse students (Senson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). Kuh et al. (2005) provided the benefits associated with peer support and discovered, "By becoming involved with people with similar interests inside and outside the classroom, students develop support networks that are instrumental to helping them deal effectively with academic and social challenges" (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 260). The literature was consistent with the descriptions provided by students for this study who reported peers as a major resource for support and encouragement for college persistence.

Sense of Belonging. College persistence relies heavily on students' perceptions that they are academically and socially integrated into campus life (Huratado & Carter, 1997). Integration leads to an increased to an increased sense of belonging, which in turn helps mitigate barriers to persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). However, the challenge of the integration perspective is placed on assimilation and acculturation, whereby the different backgrounds and experiences of racially/ethnically diverse students is minimized (Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa, 2005; Kraemar 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000).

In general terms, sense of belonging represents a feeling of relatedness or connection to others (Booker, 2016). For racially/ethnically diverse first-generation students, a sense of belonging depends on their ability to identify with an environment that allows for the feeling of inclusion. This includes identifying with fellow students, finding a belonging with student

groups or organizations, providing instruction in various ways for various subjects (IHEP, 2010). Students who are first in their family to attend college often feel the least included in the college or university environment. Social involvement relates to students involved on campus in different clubs and organizations and their interaction with other students (Barbatis, 2010). Much of the literature indicated that involvement outside the classroom contributes positively to student success (Astin, 1993). A student described her first experiences before engaging in a campus organization:

> For my first two years here, I did not stay on campus. I went to my classes and then returned home. I was not comfortable on campus. I was like, quiet, nervous, shy. But then I became involved with [club], and it was like a family.

More than half of the students were involved in some kind of campus organization and reported feeling more connected to their university and peers. Feeling connected was an important factor for students and supported their persistence. This study found that many of the students frequently expressed many benefits of social involvement when sharing their experiences; however, as pointed out by Astin (1994) and Tinto (1975), social involvement and academic integration do not entirely address the needs of racially/ethnically diverse students.

The researcher found participants' descriptions consistent with research that suggested when African American students share a sense of membership with peers and faculty, they are willing to take risks and challenge themselves with a greater focus on mastery experiences (Booker, 2016). In this respect, the reward for such behavior is greater confidence in one's ability, higher academic performance, and positive peer relationships (Booker, 2016). Students for this study benefited from modeled experiences from peers. They also described that togetherness led to feelings of support and encouragement. In addition, evidence suggested that

the experiences African American college students have with their peers may be the biggest predictor of belongingness overall (Booker, 2008; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). When students felt accepted, valued, and welcomed by their peers, they reported experiencing a stronger bond to their campus community. They felt safe enough to share experiences, engage in thoughtful discussions, and offer support to others (Booker, 2008). Student's experiences were consistent with the research, and they described participation in: (a) student organizations, (b) peer study group, (c) volunteer opportunities to support other students, (d) social activities, and (e) study abroad experiences that contributed to their sense of belonging and college persistence.

Organization/execution of actions. One of the themes that emerged from the students' data was descriptions of their organizations and execution of behaviors and actions to persist. The researcher found students' descriptions to be consistent with the literature: (a) creation of strategies to master difficult courses, (b) participation in study groups, (c) spending more time with coursework, (d) meeting with faculty outside of class, and (e) working part or full-time. Students revealed that when they put forth more effort towards tasks, positive outcomes resulted. Students revealed that specific courses of actions that they chose to pursue included the amount of effort to be utilized. In the face of barriers and failures, students described their ability to cope and persevere in the presence of their barriers.

Students discussed specific strategies such as completing homework the day assigned, constructing summary notes from class notes, and completing correct responses to past quizzes and tests. This study did not support previous research (Cabrera et al., 1999) and challenged the notion that under-preparedness is the primary reason for low academic achievement and persistence rates among African American students. African American students face challenges beyond academic preparation and ability, which influences their persistence and success

(Guiffrida, 2005). Students for this study reported overcoming their earlier academic experiences and overcoming their earlier experiences as students who attended poorly-funded high schools.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as "student confidence in mastering academic subjects" (Chemers et al., 2001, p. 56). Self-efficacy was the theoretical lens of this qualitative study that included the exploration of the perceptions and experiences of persistence. Bandura (1997) suggested that individuals with strong self-efficacy were found to be more likely to remain in college, achieve degree attainment, and utilize intrinsic motivation to press forward (Allen, 1999; Johnson, 2006). Students persisted through barriers and academic challenges and accessed support to succeed; this was consistent with the literature (Bandura, 1998; Solberg & Villareal, 1997). Previous researchers discussed the impact of self-efficacy on undergraduate students. A study included 192 freshman students (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). These results revealed that generational status significantly predicted self-efficacy; however, the researchers utilized a quantitative approach to investigate the association between self-efficacy and academic outcomes for first-generation college students. Pascarella et al. (2004) state, "Although we appear to know much about first-generation college students with respect to their academic preparation, transition to postsecondary education, and progress toward degree attainment, surprisingly little is known about their college experiences" (p. 250). According to Moustakas (1994), the primary source of knowledge in phenomenological research is perception, which cannot be questioned. The advantages of phenomenology allow the researcher to study the phenomenon in ways not achievable through quantitative research methods. The phenomenological approach to research allows the researcher to explore the essence of an

experience rather than seeking for measurements and explanations.

In contrast, researchers conducted a study designed to measure the effects of academic self-efficacy and optimism on students' academic performance, stress, health, and commitment to persist for first-year students (Chemers et al., 2001). The researchers used a quantitative approach, and though racially/ethnically diverse students were represented in the study (Hispanic and Asian), it was unclear if African American students participated in the study. The findings supported the role of self-efficacy and optimism in first-year college students. Data from Majer's (2009) longitudinal study was collected on 96 racially/ethnically diverse first-year students. Majer found a positive relationship for self-efficacy, education, and cumulative GPA at the end of students' first year. Although Majer's study included racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college students, of the 96 students, only 7.3% were African American. In contrast, Usher and Pajares (2008) conducted a study designed to measure construct validity of self-efficacy for self-regulated learning for students in elementary, middle, and high schools. They did not evaluate first-generation college students. However, Usher and Pajares' study did find self-efficacy having a positive influence on academic outcomes for students.

Findings of the influence and contribution of self-efficacy on persistence for African American first-generation students showed strong influences. Findings of doubt, but much more confidence, emerged from the coding process. The students' beliefs in themselves, support of parents/family, peers, faculty, and community; sense of belonging; and execution of actions to persist assisted students in college. The ability to persist through barriers and access resources to succeed related to self-efficacy as seen by Bandura (1997). The ability to use skills in an effective way, regardless of task difficulty, truly affected persistence for students who demonstrated lower self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Being an African-American first-generation college student was a factor for this group of students; however, they did not allow their circumstances to determine their persistence outcomes. Pascarella et al. (2014) discussed that the level of postsecondary education has a significant incidence on the nature of both academic and nonacademic experiences during college. Pike and Kuh (2005) reviewed the different struggles that first-generation college students experience compared to continuing-generation students. However, the students stated that their support network, confidence, sense of belonging, and execution of actions to persist assisted them during times of struggle, even in their third and fourth years of college. In addition, the researcher did not seek to explore self-determination as a factor contributing to persistence; however, in discussion with the students, self-determination was revealed, as defined by Ryan and Deci (2000). Persons are found to be curious, vital, and self-motivated. At their best, persons are inspired, strive to learn, and master new skills. Further, according to self-determination theory, persons evidence commitment to their lives to be exceptional (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, factors may undermine motivation and well-being, and the human spirit can be crushed and diminished, which results in a person rejecting growth and responsibility (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, the findings for this qualitative study supported self-efficacy as being a factor in the experience of persistence for African American first-generation college students.

Of the 15 students in this study, there appeared to be extreme barriers as to whether they would persist; however, their beliefs in their capacity to be successful served as an important factor for students' persistence. Also, as African American FGCS with a strong desire to persist towards degree attainment, they were willing to put forth the effort to succeed no matter the barriers. Overall, all of the students were highly confident in their abilities, and though their

characteristics suggested that they would not persist, the opposite occurred.

Self-Efficacy Theoretical Lens

According to Bandura (1977), the development of self-efficacy involves the selection, assessment, and integration of four major informational sources: mastery, vicarious/modeled, verbal/social persuasion, and emotional arousal. The researcher explored the first three sources of self-efficacy for this study. In addition, there are three causations for learning: (a) behavioral factors, (b) personal factors, and (c) external factors (Bandura, 1997). The actions (behavior) that a student takes, influences the student's ability to learn new information. This falls under the causation of behavior. Cognitive (thoughts) events fall under personal factors. Academic and social influences are external factors that affect learning. Zimmerman et al. (1992) explained the ways in which self-efficacy is a significant and major resource for an individual, which allows one to have control over his/her functioning, affecting and influencing feelings, thoughts, motivation, and behavior. The researcher provides clarity by demonstrating how self-efficacy was evident for students with their college persistence. Further the researcher shows how the sources of self-efficacy connected with the themes and the causations of learning.

Students for this study reported the following themes: (a) support network, (b) sense of belonging, (c) organization and execution of actions to persist, (d) confidence, (e) difficulty adjusting to college environment, (f) financial barriers, (g) under-resourced high schools, (h) discouraging experiences, and (i) difficulty asking for support. Ways in which self-efficacy influenced their behaviors, thoughts, academic and social factors were consistent with Zimmerman et al. (1992). When exploring the themes in this study, students' self-efficacy was based on their abilities to persist towards degree attainment in the presence of barriers.

Students reported behavioral factors that included their organization and execution of actions to persist. Personal factors were associated with students' confidence in their abilities to persist and abilities to address financial barriers. External factors were associated with students' descriptions of achieving a sense of belonging, success in spite of attending an under-resourced high school, adjustment to the college environment, coping with discouraging experiences, challenges asking for support, and their support network. The relationship between these factors are so interwoven that it is difficult to analyze the influence of a single factor on student persistence, leading to the conclusion that persistence is the result of a complex set of interactions (Swail, 2003).

Based on the findings from the present study, the researcher developed Tables 6 to provide a snapshot of the themes, sources of self-efficacy, and factors for causation of learning for African American first-generation college students.

Table 6.

Themes, Sources of Self-Efficacy, Causation of Learning

Themes	Subthemes	Sources of Self Efficacy	Causation of Learning
Persistence in Presence of Barriers	1. Difficulty Adjusting to College	Mastery/Vicarious/Verbal	External
	2. Financial Barriers	Mastery/Vicarious/Verbal	Personal
	3. Under-resourced High Schools	Mastery/Vicarious/Verbal	External
	4. Discouraging Experiences	Mastery/Vicarious/Verbal	External
	5. Difficulty asking for Support	Mastery/Vicarious/Verbal	External
Perceived Factors and Experiences that Contributed and Influenced College Persistence	6. Support Network	Mastery/Vicarious/Verbal	External
	7. Confidence	Mastery/Vicarious/Verbal	Personal
	8. Organized/executed Actions	Mastery/Vicarious/Verbal	Behavioral
	9. Sense of Belonging	Mastery/Vicarious/Verbal	External

Mastery experiences. Mastery/lived experiences involve direct and personal

experiences with one's environment that will either influence their efforts towards a task or discourage their efforts towards a task (Bandura, 1995). Students described mastery experiences in spite of external barriers: (a) attending under-resourced high schools, (b) ambiguity and uncertainty, (c) lack of college-going information, (d) lack of resources and poor preparation, (e) parents without college-going experience, (f) wanting to attend college in spite of being low-income, (g) attaining employment to support persistence, (h) managing feelings of inadequacy and isolation to support college adjustment, (i) managing academic tasks and negative emotions without institutional support, and (j) negative verbal feedback and interactions from/with faculty, staff, and parents. The barriers resulted in students having thoughts of wanting to depart college prior to their degree attainment; however, all persisted.

As a result of the barriers for persistence described by students, mastery experiences that supported their persistence and self-efficacy included: (a) establishing, nurturing, and maintaining supportive relationships; (b) connecting with resources to support adjustment; (c) taking additional courses; (d) attending community college to increase GPA; (e) studying with peers; (f) use of time management/study skills; (g) meeting with professors outside of class; (h) setting goals and created plans for success; and (i) putting forth more effort towards tasks. Lastly, mastery experiences that supported students' self-efficacy included students: (a) remaining confident in face of challenges, (b) perceiving self as confident, (c) increased GPA, and (d) aspirations to attend graduate school.

Vicarious/modeled experiences. Vicarious/modeled experiences involve modeling and social comparison, which affects self-efficacy. Social comparison occurs when individuals judge abilities based on the capabilities of others (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997; Wood & Bandura, 1989). The vicarious/modeled experiences that presented as barriers for students were described

in the following ways: (a) students observed peers in their community and school who were not persisting to college, (b) observation of frequent teacher turnover, (c) ambivalent/uninvolved teachers, (d) lack of guidance counseling, and (e) student descriptions of difficulty connecting with faculty/staff/institution.

The vicarious experiences that supported students' college persistence and served as a source of self-efficacy included their descriptions for: (a) observations of students with similar backgrounds persisting in spite of low-income status; (b) observations of peers with similar backgrounds persisting in spite of difficulties managing academic tasks, negative emotions, and successfully responding to obstacles; (c) observations of peers with similar backgrounds persisting in spite of discouraging experiences; (d) modeled behavior from peers that used specific strategies to persist; (e) observing faculty as supportive and caring; and (f) participation in campus organizations and activities.

Verbal/social experiences. Verbal persuasion, also known as social persuasion, occurs when an individual receives realistic and verbally persuasive feedback/messages and may increase one's self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997; Wood & Bandura, 1989). The verbal/social experiences that presented as barriers for students included: (a) lack of encouragement to pursue postsecondary; (b) lack of social and verbal persuasion based on skills and desire to attend college; (c) negative verbal feedback from parents, faculty, and staff; (d) students' descriptions for persisting in spite of negative experiences when seeking institutional support; and (e) negative feedback from peers who did not transition to college.

Students described verbal/social experiences that supported both their persistence and self-efficacy. Their experiences included: (a) encouragement from parents, family, faculty,

staff, peers and by and community members; (b) encouragement from faculty/peers/parents to use strategies to persist; (c) verbally encouraging messages that increased confidence to respond to difficult tasks.

Parents and extended family are instrumental in the lives of racially/ethnically diverse students (Barbatis, 2010). Additionally, family support seemed to be the upmost in importance for students. Although parents were not active in the college-going process for participants, they reinforced the importance of college. Several participants in the study reported that they depended on their parents for emotional support during challenging times.

All students reported positive academic outcomes and continued to persist towards degree attainment. Overall, all three sources for self-efficacy (mastery, vicarious, verbal persuasion) served as powerful resources for students. They perceived themselves as confident, executed strategies and actions to persist, accessed support networks, and reported a sense of belonging, which contributed to their self-efficacy and college persistence.

Previous research suggested that mastery experiences are most influential in developing self-efficacy (Schunk & Pajares, 2009) and are based on personal and direct experiences. However, it is relevant to challenge this position for African American students. For example, students responded to questions regarding vicarious/modeled and verbal/social persuasion experiences with greater frequency. All but one student described positive vicarious experiences. The participants described considerable interactions that included positive verbal messages supporting college persistence. Therefore, for this phenomenological exploration for African American first-generation college students, the participants found both verbal persuasion and vicarious experiences as important factors that influenced their self-efficacy and college persistence.

Implications and Recommendations

In order to further understand, support, and assist African American first-generation college students who attended a public university, the researcher the following recommendations for future students, parents, counselors, and higher education faculty, staff, and administrators. Cultural dynamics, parental engagement, effective teaching strategies, proactive/intrusive advising, help for students to develop self-efficacy, and culturally competent advisement were beneficial to support persistence among African American students (Bahr, 2010; Denley, 2014; Glennen & Baxley, 1985; Howard, 2006; Kim & Sax, 2009; Orange & Ramalho, 2013; Pea, 2014; Peters, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Cultural Dynamics

Culturally, the academic environment is impacted. According to Bahr (2010), the American educational system is a socioeconomic "sorting machine" (p. 210) that directs students to opportunities based on their income level and status. Racially/ethnically diverse students may experience additional stress due to managing the expectations of their institutions and parents, which may differ. Consequently, minority students who are new to the college environment and culture must negotiate an unfamiliar and seemingly unwelcome landscape, learning to how to move in and out of multiple social contexts as an accelerated pace (Museus & Quaye, 2009; Swail, 2003).

Further, in order to understand African American parental involvement in the education of their children, those serving first-generation college students must dismiss notions of the Eurocentric values of normative family life present in the Anglo American, middle class communities (Asante, 1991). Further Asante (1991) explained that inappropriate Eurocentric values are exposed when such models misrepresent Anglo reality as "universal" human reality.

For example, in many schools Eurocentric pedagogy creates a "bell curve" environment that marginalizes African American children and focuses on a "one learning style fits all" approach (Hale, 2001). Asante also stated, "Schools are reflective of the societies that develop them, for example, a White supremacist-dominated society will develop a White supremacist educational system" (p. 170). Parental involvement that differs from the Eurocentric norm are considered to be deficient, abnormal, or inferior (Smith, 2008). When scholars choose not to view differences as deficits, they are free to utilize culturally relevant strategies that reflect African American parents' expectations that their children can pursue higher education in the absence of parental experience in higher education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Freeman, 2005; Perez, 2000; Staples & Johnson, 1993).

Parental Engagement

Positive association for parental involvement and college student outcomes for postsecondary settings has been documented (Harper, Sax, & Wolf, 2012). The researchers argued that culturally specific and inclusive relationships between parents/families, students, and institutions can offer a unique approach to addressing the large disparities in persistence and degree attainment among racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college students, and racially/ethnically diverse students are required because of the lower rates of persistence (Synder & Dillow, 2012). The goal for those who serve this population, including counselors, researchers, faculty, and higher education administrators, is to learn more about the ways in which families are involved and invested in their students' education. With knowledge, strategies can be developed to foster and support what parents are doing well and address any gaps in resources, support, or information for parents, students, and institutions of higher education (Kiyama et al., 2015) Based on the findings, the researcher recommends engaging

parents in both pre-collegiate and collegiate discussions.

In addition, an important recommendation relevant for this study supported embracing the viewpoint of parents and families as partners (Kiyama et al., 2015). For example, educating those who serve first-generation students on the importance of engaging families is imperative. Those serving first-generation college students need to keep various family and support structures in mind because students are being supported by many individuals, including foster parents, spouses, partners, grandparents, siblings, and other extended family members.

The participants in this study indicated that their parents consistently showed interest in their college experiences, desired to gain more information about college, and desired to understand more about when and how to provide encouragement and guidance to their students. A platform can be provided for parents, created by postsecondary institutions, to educate and introduce parents to the specific and unique issues for first-generation college students. Parental influence may be enhanced through this process as they participate regularly in informational sessions offered by postsecondary institutions. If the stress associated with being a parent of a first-generation college student can be alleviated, and parents are not minimized to myths and negative associations, parents can support their students in other supportive ways (Munoz-Flores, 2013). Secondary and postsecondary institutions have the capacity to fight against these negative stereotypes by using parent-specific programming.

For example, “I’m First,” a program that requires first-generation college students to create videos to educate prospective first-generation students on the college application process, could provide parents of prospective first-generation students with the guidance they need (Strive for College, 2017). Parents of current first-generation college students could provide narratives and advice from their own experience and in their native language if it is not English. Programs

like this would give the parents access to resources as they navigate the path to college alongside their student.

Many universities have instituted departments and organizations dedicated to forming an alliance with parents such as the Office of Parent and Family programs at University of California at Los Angeles and the Office of Parent Programs at the University of Southern California (AHEEP, 2015). Multicultural centers like El Centro at USC have implemented programs such as the Latino Parent Association to guide parents to better understand the issues that directly affect students and Latino parents (Munoz-Flores, 2013). Forming a collaboration between parents of racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college students and postsecondary institutions would be creation of programs within these departments designed to gain the trust and partnership with parents. Applying to college is a difficult process for all students, and even more for racially/ethnically diverse students. Postsecondary institutions can strive to make it as painless as possible for all involved, parents included.

Counselors

Counselors are in unique positions to prepare African American students and their families for the challenges they may face when transitioning to college and to support their persistence towards degree attainment. Additionally, counselors working in college counseling centers and in various academic advising programs are ideally suited to provide the support for African American students (Guiffrida, 2005). However, although counselors have become leaders in promoting equity in education and disseminating research on effective multicultural counseling, little attention was paid in counseling literature towards helping counselors understand the African American college student experience. However, research is available in higher education that has explored the African American college students' experience. A

number of researchers learned the following from racially/ethnically diverse college graduates: (a) students feel like an outsider; (b) supportive relationships help to persist; (c) guidance and reassurance from caring adults help; (d) students require support remaining true to themselves in a new environment; (e) students should be informed of systematic obstacles prior to college enrollment; (f) high school courses require integration upon arrival to the new territory of college environment; (g) academic advisement should include students and their parents; (h) college graduates should serve as speakers in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary settings; (i) counselors in all educational settings are to be integrated in course curriculums; and (j) conduct college tours as a part of course curriculum (Cushman, 2007; Horn, 1998; Tinto, 2000).

Educational settings, including elementary, secondary, and postsecondary, can integrate counselors in classroom settings to encourage students to become active in student organizations and to facilitate and support their social integration into college. Counselors can be empowered to have discussions to assist high school and college students in managing relationships with their families and peers. In addition, counselors can support parents to understand the complexities of college persistence, including the importance of financial aid, academic advisement, faculty involvement, student organizations, and support services. Most importantly, counselors can be instrumental in preparing students and families for the emotional losses they may experience as the students transition to college (Guiffrida, 2005). Implementing support programs designed to include and collaborate with families in order to help them navigate the college environment allows college counselors and advisers to effectively assist the African American students. Many of the services may be integrated into the course curriculum and conducted across classrooms.

Counselors can connect with students' families and home communities by engaging in

ethnographic or autobiographical assignments. Counselors may have more opportunities to have discussions regarding students' relationships with home, decrease negative feelings (Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004), and exert great influence on the connections students make with the counselor and classmates. Future research can address all of these ideas and also give counselors an opportunity to consider how they establish a sense of community through specific strategies, relational dynamics, and engaged practice.

School counselors. School counselors play a critical role in assisting students with college and career readiness and postsecondary planning (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), first-generation students are more likely to be African American or Hispanic and come from low-income families (Chen, 2005). Cholewa, Burkhardt, and Hull (2012) examined the factors that may impact a school counselor's ability to provide services related to college access and attainment, and an interesting result relevant for this study occurred. African American, first-generation students were more likely to name their counselor as having had the greatest influence. Given the implications of the research, it is important to examine the factors that may affect a school counselor's ability to provide services related to college access and attainment.

The American School Counselor Association and the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012a, 2012b) charge school counselors to be systems' change agents and to promote access to postsecondary educational opportunities for all students. As such, it is important to understand not only if school counselors are meeting the basic needs of students with regard to disseminating social capital for postsecondary education but also if school counselors are serving as significant influencers toward a student's pursuit of postsecondary education. Given the

findings that African American students were significantly more likely than their White peers to identify the school counselor as the most influential person and the fact that first-generation students are more likely to be students of color (Chen, 2005), this is an important finding.

Therefore, school counselors' recognition of the unique needs and strengths among this population is essential. All students deserve college counseling, but the findings of this study indicated that targeting first-generation students could be especially influential to the particular students who may have less access to social capital. Identifying which students on school counselors' caseloads are prospective first-generation is critical. When first-generation college students are identified, they should receive the same postsecondary services targeting high-performing students. In addition, preparation for the potential obstacles as first-generation students (financial, emotional, social, and academic) should be addressed. First-generation college students need awareness of campus resources and the importance of establishing and cultivating a supportive network with peers, faculty, staff, and the community.

School counselors are called upon to promote equity and access for all students (ASCA, 2012a, 2012b), which includes promoting access to and planning for postsecondary education and advocating for underrepresented students. Because of their skill set and knowledge base, school counselors are uniquely positioned to supplement this information for students who may have less access to the necessary social capital (Bryan et al., 2011; MacAllum, Glover, Queen, & Riggs, 2007). School counselors should be aware that first-generation college students who do not receive adequate guidance to support postsecondary enrollment are less likely to complete their college degree (Johnson, Rochkind, & Ott, 2010). Additionally, school counselors should be aware of the barriers for first-generation college students and use counseling strategies to assist students with overcoming those barriers (Fallon, 1997; Shoffner, 2004). Counseling

strategies can focus on academic preparation (Hargrove, Godin, & Dodd, 2008); accessing college information (Thayer, 2000); application processes (Saenz et al., 2007); selecting a college (Saenz et al., 2007); financial issues (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Streeter, & Mason, 2007); making the transition (Reid & Moore, 2008); and college engagement (Pike & Kuh, 2005);

Faculty

Based on the findings for this study, faculty is in a unique place for the lives of first-generation college students in that students are continuously exposed to faculty. Faculty is in a great position to shape the lives of first-generation students' persistence (Tinto, 1997). For this study, many students described interactions that were meaningful and helpful; however, there were students who reported hesitance in approaching faculty. Students may be intimidated by faculty, and therefore, they should make efforts to reach out to students (Tinto, 1997). Faculty could work more closely with advisors and offices created to serve first-generation college students. Faculty are encouraged to make intentional efforts to consult with college staff (i.e., advisors, student affairs, office of first-year students), and this may assist in developing a deeper understanding of ways in which to serve racially/ethnically diverse students. Faculty can then begin to create strategies to provide a more inclusive classroom for all students and celebrate the diversity of students and their experiences (Tinto, 1997). Affirming and validating learning environments is critically important in serving racially/ethnically diverse students (Rendon et al., 2000).

In addition, experiences and interactions that occur outside of class, between faculty and students, are of great importance such as providing accessible office hours for working students, requiring mandatory one-on-one sessions during the semester, serving as informal/formal mentors, volunteering in the campus counseling center, guest lecturing/teaching during first-year

experience courses (McCarron, 2012). Reaching out to students to participate in research opportunities may decrease feelings of intimidation and academic marginalization. In addition, faculty has the opportunity to facilitate peer interaction and to develop course curricula for peer-to-peer learning and group projects.

First-generation college students often hold back in classroom discussions, potentially unfamiliar with the practice of academic discussion (Rendon, 1995). Feelings of anxiety are more frequently and more acutely experienced by first-generation college students (Martinez et al., 2009). Researchers attribute this anxiety to imposter syndrome and stereotype threat phenomenon (Davis, 2010; Peetet, Montgomery, & Weeks, 2015). Imposter syndrome occurs among high-achieving persons, and they may feel that their success has nothing to do with their efforts or talents. Instead, they attribute their success to external factors such as luck, coincidence, or ease of a task. The feelings of "phoniness" negatively affect academic performance (Clance & Imes, 1978: Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, & Russell, 1996). Stereotype threats are negative stereotypes about socially marginalized groups and hold that any lack of socioeconomic success may be attributed to internal deficits rather than social, historical, or situational injustice (Steel & Aronson, 1995). Both of these factors may contribute to first-generation students' hesitance to speak out in class, and the students are less likely to have positive interactions with faculty compared to continuing-generation students (Kim & Sax, 2009).

While students reported having professors who were genuine and caring, they also discussed feelings of isolation and separation. Students frequently mentioned loneliness while in their courses and not wanting to ask for support out of fear of misperceptions, stereotypes, and assumption based on their race. The constant weight of being "other" and not fully integrated

into the life of the course was difficult for students (McCarron, 2012). Research showed that faculty who take a culturally responsive view of teaching and learning (Gay, 2010) are willing to teach from the perspective that is inclusive of all student experiences and do not interact with students of color only when the lesson requires it. Faculty must also be aware of how slight, biting comments and questions that students pose in front of each other can have a deleterious effect on student performance. When students feel on edge, guarded, and defensive, learning is minimized (Dunlosky, Rawson, March, Nathan, & Willingham, 2013).

Additional teaching strategies. The following are the most impactful recommendations for teaching first-generation college students (McNair, Finley, & Winkelmes, (2016) :

- transparency
- use of rubrics
- modeling discussions
- incorporation of first-generation experiences
- development of personal relationships
- promotion of grit
- building cultural capital

Faculty should be transparent as possible about their expectations in every activity and assignment. The collegiate environment comes with many unwritten rules, both cultural and academic (McNair et al., 2016). Where continuing-generation college students may have more familiarity growing up with college-educated parents, first-generation students are without these experiences. In a pilot study of 1180 students, McNair et al. (2016) found when faculty practiced transparency, an increase in students' academic confidence, sense of belonging, and mastery of skills were observed. Transparency promotes equity in the classroom and allows

students access to the unwritten rules of college (Berrett, 2015).

Rubrics provide clear criteria for evaluation of assignments, promote equity in grading, help students to focus their efforts for an assignment, and allows faculty to track student progress and adapt learning activities to meet students' skill levels (Stevens & Levi, 2005). Rubrics are effective with first-generation college students. Next, faculty is encouraged to model an ideal discussion throughout the semester. Modeling along with discussion with students helps when, all together, students analyze an in-class discussion in order to reflect on the processes.

Incorporating first-generation experiences into the curriculum should also be done in the same way diversity is attended to dispel the invisibility of first-generation students. First-generation college students lack role models, and faculty should give attention to this. For example, faculty should assign texts by first-generation authors, have discussions that center on the experiences of first-generation students, and make resources available for first-generation students. Whether a faculty member is first-generation or continuing-generation, first-generation students benefit from close interactions with faculty, both in-and outside the class (Filkins & Doyle, 2002; Smart & Umbach, 2007). Students described positive experiences and interactions with faculty from diverse backgrounds, including African American, Asian, and Caucasian, and reported those experiences as supportive. In addition, when students revealed negative experiences with faculty, their descriptions included faculty representing diverse backgrounds, including African American. Overall, students appeared to appreciate diversity in faculty and in the student population at their university.

Perseverance was a consistent predictor of success in education (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007) and referred to as "grit" (Duckworth, 2016). It is noted that first-generation students may enter college with resiliency compared to their peers (Rodriquez, 1983;

Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993). Stereotype threat and imposter syndrome may contribute to first-generation students' hesitance to speak out in class, and students are less likely to have positive interactions with faculty (Kim & Sax, 2009). Fortunately, students can be taught to be "grittier." Some ways to achieve this includes: (a) promote intellectual curiosity in the face of challenge, (b) encourage students to think about the process of research as much as final product, (c) accept multiple drafts of writing assignments, (d) assign difficulty material – complex novel or research article –- and spend time picking it apart (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Building cultural capital is another source of creating positive learning experiences for first-generation college students. It is the difference in cultural capital that divides first – and continuing generation college students (Lederman, 2013). Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) found that increased levels of social capital increases engagement and social integration. For faculty, in the classroom, they may avoid assuming that students know certain culturally-specific information or experiences because they represent a particular social (class, race, gender, etc.) position. Instead, faculty should integrate privileged cultural elements from various communities and cultures. This removes the belief that Western culture is the universal culture. Faculty should seek creative ways to gain cultural capital to serve students in other classes and later in life. For example, Wofford College integrated the "Novel Experience" in the first-year student program and pays for students, faculty, and authors of the novels to engage in fine dining, while discussing an assigned novel (Dunlap, 2012).

Academic Advisors

Academic advisors are perceived as a source for career guidance and support for racially/ethnically diverse students (McCarron, 2012). However, for the students in this study, academic advisors were difficult to engage, were unprepared during meetings with students,

made minimal effort to contact and schedule appointments, were ineffective in providing career guidance, and frequent changed. Overall, students for this study reported dissatisfaction with academic advisors and did not perceive them to be a source of support. Similar to faculty, advisors are in a unique position to influence and contribute to persistence for students (McCarron, 2012). According to Torres (2009), advisors are gatekeepers who can provide a safe place for students to ask questions and become more familiar with the complexities of the college environment. Advisors can work with faculty and student affairs professionals to create strategies to more effectively serve racially/ethnically diverse students. Additionally, advisors can work with first-generation and parent resource initiatives on their campuses, as suggested by Hicks (2002). Orientation programs assist the engagement of the parents and families of first-generation students in an effort to validate students' home lives and help parents and families understand their important roles in the college careers of their children.

In addition, the use of early warning systems should be implemented where students are provided early and consistent feedback from faculty with opportunities for academic advising (Barefoot et al., 2012). Academic advisors and faculty should work together to effectively integrate early warning system to guide FGCS to use academic support resources on their campus (Darling & Smith, 2007). As indicated by participants, faculty who are caring and supportive of academic outcomes were valued by students. The researcher recommends that the warning system serves as resource to celebrate students as well, and this requires reframing the processes.

Establishing consistent appointments to develop supportive connections within the institution, providing available cultural-specific campus resources, connecting students to high impact activities, supporting self-efficacy, and being a supportive advisor are additional

strategies recommended to support the persistence and degree attainment of African American FGCS (Glennen & Baxley, 1985; Kuh, 2008; Pea, 2014; Seidman, 2005). High impact practices include that advisors helping students feel connected to an institution from their first semester by connecting students to resources and activities on campus (Gardener, 2011; Kuh, 2008). This begins with advisors being aware of the factors that increase persistence, providing support, and assisting with degree attainment. In advising sessions, advisors must be purposeful in teaching students how to reflect on their involvement, personal development, and cultural development inside and outside the classroom. Students are more successful when they integrate information from college to be personally relevant by applying learned information to their own worldviews (Kuh, 2015). Advisors may use these tools of reflection, integration, and application to support the success of African American students (Harrell, 2006).

According to current research, one of the factors that influence the academic success of African American students includes self-efficacy (Grier-Reed, 2013). Self-efficacy focuses on the importance of the student's belief in his/her ability to be successful (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy can be applied through offering support and encouragement and by providing ways to overcome personal and academic challenges within; it can be a central role for academic advisors and their work with students.

To improve the academic outcomes for African American students, the use of an intrusive and proactive advising approach is often effective (Denley, 2014; Glennen & Baxley, 1985; Pea, 2014). This involves engaging students before situations develop and then educating students on all options. Glennen and Baxley showed that a proactive advising approach can reduce attrition and increase persistence; this approach lays a foundation for advisors charged with providing services for students to assist with persistence as well as the student experience in

college. Intrusive and proactive advising involves deliberate interventions to enhance student confidence (Harrell, 2006). Advisors reach out to African American students and show interest and involvement with students. This is achieved through mandatory appointments throughout the semester based on academic preparedness, testing, structural course options, supplemental education, and goal setting. These strategies increased persistence and decreased attrition rates (Glennen & Baxley, 1985).

Creation of welcoming environments in the advising appointment and connecting students to academic, social, and financial resources increases the persistence of African American students (Arredondo et al., 1996). A welcoming environment is important because African American students "often do not have the advice system that surrounds a student whose parents or other relatives have been to college" (Denley, 2014, p. 61). A welcoming environment includes assistance with breaking down institutional barriers for students navigating through the university system (Arredondo et al., 1996). This includes introducing students to supportive minority and non-minority groups through clubs and organizations, connecting students to encouraging faculty for possible internships and research opportunities, implementing regular advising appointments, and reinforcing the importance of building these support systems within the institution.

Advising strategies that are specifically beneficial in increasing African American FGCS' persistence includes utilizing a proactive advising approach, establishing consistent appointments to develop supportive connections within the institution, providing available cultural-specific campus resources, connecting students to high impact activities, supporting self-confidence/self-efficacy, and being a supportive advisor. These strategies assist African American students in

improving their skills and developing a connection to the institution (Glennen & Baxley, 1985; Kuh, 2008; Pea, 2014).

Developing Self-Efficacy

Both African American and Hispanic students with low self-efficacy exhibited lower participation in self-regulatory behaviors and strategies compared to African American and Hispanic students with higher self-efficacy (Orange & Ramalho, 2013). Orange et al. made several recommendations meaningful for this study. The recommendations are modified to fit the postsecondary setting. First, faculty members are encouraged to administer a self-efficacy measure in their classes and use the results to determine their students' level of self-efficacy. Faculty may choose to use the results to integrate their teaching methods. For example, students may be paired together based on the self-efficacy measurement results. Student pairs are assigned to work on group projects throughout the semester and supported by faculty throughout the process. A student project may include having student pairs create profiles and a checklist with their strengths and areas needing improvement. The faculty further invites student pairs to help identify their concerns and opinions of the university or college. Students' attitudes about learning and the willingness to learn are identified. Faculty would then assist students with creating an action plan using their ideas and information and discard old thoughts and ideas that may present as obstacles.

Finally, faculty can help students with asking for support and develop strategies for study skills. Seeking support is encouraged as faculty encourage students to work together in groups, exchange contact information, and compare notes/exchange notes. Improvement of the classroom learning environment is also relevant and can be achieved by making it more conducive to asking questions, welcoming student mistakes, and offering gentle criticism

(Orange & Ramalho, 2013). Providing motivational talks, encouragement, and personal affirmations can be integrated into the classroom setting as well (Orange & Ramalho, 2013). These recommendations specifically address the issues revealed in this study.

Deficit Model

Most of the research on first-generation college students focused on what is wrong with the population. Many educational databases highlight deficits ranging from lack of academic engagement and motivation to low self-esteem. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2010), first-generation college students are more likely to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and less likely to be academically prepared for college, are satisfied with their major, and ultimately graduate. Further, first-generation students earn lower GPAs and repeat more courses than their peers. As a result, statistically, even those first-generation students who actually graduate take longer to do so than their continuing-generation counterparts.

Findings such as these are important. As counselors, educators, higher education administrators, and researchers alike, it is critical to fully understand the challenges that first-generation students face. However, a continual focus on deficits and gaps resulted in the expectation for deficiency and failure. It is the norm, so much so that words like “poverty” and “uneducated” come to mind before “family-oriented” and “determined” when thinking about first-generation college students. When considered this way, the mind-set of first-generation college students produces deficit-oriented strategies.

For example, research literature consistently indicated college students are more likely to graduate if they break away from their family, social, and cultural aspects and adopt a more independent way of college attendance (Tinto, 1993). If students’ view themselves as separate

from their communities of origin, they are more likely to assimilate into their university's institutional norms and expectations, including graduating from college in a reasonable time frame (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003). Stephens et al. (2012) indicated that colleges and universities operate on a set of shared middle-to upper-class cultural norms unknown to many first-generation college students. These norms define how a person relates to others socially. They maintain that a person from a middle- to upper-class background was likely raised to value independent ways of relating to others in the social world. For example, this student is taught to "influence the context, be separate or distinct from others, and to act freely based on personal motives, goals and preferences," (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 3). These students come from families where their self-importance was promoted, and their individual preferences were honored. They had opportunities to choose, control, and influence their lives because they had enough economic and social capital to do so.

Conversely, first-generation college students, one-half of whom are low-income or working class (Saenz et. al 2007), were raised to value interdependent ways of relating to the social world. For example, they were taught to "adjust to the conditions of the context, be connected to others, and to respond to the needs, preferences, and interests of others" (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 3). Children raised to embrace the interdependent norms have a history of limited economic capital. They had few opportunities for choice, control, and influence. Their self-importance was not the primary focus of their families. Independence should not be considered as a deficit but a value and strength for FGCS.

Further, the research thoroughly highlighted that African American college students who are first generation and low income usually do not have family members or neighborhood contacts who either know or can explain the complexities of college (Winkle-Wagner, 2009) nor

how to capitalize on the career knowledge of professors, career counselors, and other university personnel. Students who do not know the value of these interactions are less likely to engage in them. They are also less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities such as membership in professional organizations. This is described as a social capital deficit (Lin, 2001) such that Blacks tend to be embedded in social networks containing few resources, unlike Whites' networks, which often offer many resources. The descriptions provided by students for this study contradicted the latter.

It is the aforementioned research that continues to perpetuate a deficit perspective for those who are responsible for serving African American first-generation college students. Scholars neglected to thoroughly examine the historical context in which racial and ethnic disparities exists. Pitre and Pitre (2009) explained, "Over several decades in the United States, African American, Hispanic, Native American, and low-income students have completed high school and attended college at consistently lower rates than their White and higher income student counterparts" (p. 98). In 2008, White students comprised 63% of students enrolling in postsecondary education, a proportion 4.5, 5.25, and 9 times greater than African American, Hispanic, and Asian students (Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013). Around 40% of Hispanic and African American college students graduate with a four-year degree, whereas over 55% of White and Asian students graduate nationwide (Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013). Despite increases in the U. S. minority population from 22% to 43% between 1972 and 2006 (Pitre & Pitre, 2009), the underrepresentation of minorities in college and those who persist to graduation still exists.

Further, little attention has been given to qualitative research that explores the unique barriers that racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college students face and the data which supports the number of students who obtain an associate's and bachelor's or higher (Chen, 2005).

Multiple elements contribute to their success and include levels of participation in college readiness programs as well as academic and social integration, personal characteristics, and family support. Most successful FGCS reported that a combination of these factors helped them finish college and obtain a degree (Pitre & Pitre, 2009; Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013; Wilkins, 2014).

In addition, racially/ethnically diverse FGCS, due to social and familial circumstances, develop the problem-solving skills to navigate the college process on their own (Wilkins, 2014). FGCS often describe themselves as hard working, goal oriented, independent, and mature (Wilkins, 2014). Another valuable quality is self-efficacy; students who believe they are capable of being academically successful are more likely to engage in learning strategies that lead to better academic performance (Naumann, Bandalos, & Gutkin, 2003). Confidence and personal attributes play an active role in persistence and academic performance necessary for college persistence and degree attainment. However, much of the research literature focused on the demographics for first-generation college students, comparing the population to continuing-generation students and measuring their postsecondary outcomes with universal norms. A shift in focus away from quantitative data warning of a tendency to fail is required. Choosing success requires one to reject the overwhelming urge to react to the deficits reported in the literature for racially/ethnically diverse college students. Higher education professionals have a choice - an alternative perspective for supporting first-generation students.

Cultural Competency

Those who serve racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college students are required to be culturally competent if they are to effectively support and assist African American students (Dreasher, 2014). Cultural competency begins with awareness of one's own identity and how

one is personal perspectives may impact those from other cultural backgrounds. This process includes understanding and reflecting on one's beliefs, practices, and identity in order to consider how this worldview may influence student interactions (Dreasher, 2014). The researcher provided information on actions that can be taken and why it would be beneficial.

Culturally competent counselors. In 1992, the framework to address multicultural issues in counseling was established with intent to raise cultural consciousness in the field of counseling (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). This required counselors serving all persons to: (a) become aware of one's own assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal limitations and other negative approaches; (b) actively attempt to understand the world view of one's own culturally different clients without negative judgments; and (c) develop and practice appropriate, relevant, and sensitive intervention strategies and skills in working with culturally different clients. Each of these dimensions, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and skills was developed to respond to the need for counselors to understand how traditional counseling may clash with the cultural values of marginalized groups. The recommendation called for counselors to "have knowledge of minority family structures, hierarchies, values, and beliefs" (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 1998, p. 9). The cultural competencies for counselors are most relevant in their approach for serving African American first-generation college students.

Counselors who are culturally self-aware and understand the significance of discussing culture with students (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1994) are prepared to assist students with developing goals and objectives in the absence of imposing their own cultural values and beliefs. Serving African American first-generation students requires listening to students, being respectful in the counselor-student relationship, and able to embrace the student's uniqueness

(Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1994). Counselors are more effective when they can meet clients where they are and join in the postsecondary journey with students. Multicultural competent counselors do not measure students by their own values and cultural beliefs and avoid negative stereotyping. Multicultural counselors are most effective when they can find a safe place to address their biases and discuss their experiences perpetuating negative stereotypes and participating in stereotype threat and imposter syndrome as examples. Multicultural counselors are also open and aware of addressing societal norms forced on all persons, including diverse populations. Race and ethnicity are a part of the conversation; however, gender, sexuality, age, family structure, socioeconomic status, and interpersonal characteristics are as relevant and deserve discussion since student characteristics are complex and highly valued. Therefore, multicultural competence is a life-long process that works towards inclusiveness rather than separation. Students deserve competent, safe, engaging, and real advocates (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1994).

Counselors can lead parents, students, community, and education leaders into alliances to work together to prepare African American first-generation college students for college success. They can refuse to entertain the endless blaming of schools, parents, or communities for the state of education for African American students (Bemak, 2000; Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Adelman, 2000). Using strength-based counseling approaches, problem solving, and mediation, counselors can take actions to tackle the challenge of persistence for African American first-generation college students. Collaboration among parents, students, and community can move partnerships forward in productive ways (Bemak, 2000; Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Taylor & Adelman, 2000). Counselors can use their training and skills as multicultural counselors to create ways to engage schools, families, and

communities to acknowledge a gap in the bridge with embedded cultural distrust rooted in histories of oppression, marginalization, and prejudice that may exist between education and the African American community (Noguera, 2001, 2003).

Considering the stereotypes and assumptions made about racially/ethnically diverse students and their participation in college may subject students to discrimination and racism (Eaton, 1988). There is pause in identifying a student as "diverse" or "a minority" considering that stereotyping may potentially and intentionally create barriers for students (Eaton, 1988). Therefore, those who serve racially/ethnically diverse students are to challenge themselves to view all students first as interested in furthering their education and secondly from a cultural lens. According to Richardson and Skinner (1992), most interventions launched across universities to support racially/ethnically diverse FGCS are based on generalizations and assumptions of racially/ethnically diverse students. Additionally, assuming that racially/ethnically diverse students' unique qualities are always visible or that those who serve students depend on a particular body of knowledge concerning FGCS based on the culture with which those who serve assume students' identify can alienate students from potentially helpful service, including counseling (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

As a result, diversity is a crucial topic in discussions about serving racially/ethnically FGCS. Yet, the word diversity can potentially present a barrier for serving the population (Deutsch, Doberstein, & White, 2008). Specifically, if those who serve the population use diversity as the foundation for serving all students with similar backgrounds (Deutsch et al., 2008), barriers may result. Diversity includes more than race, gender, class, or ethnic backgrounds. Recognizing and embracing diversity in the academic setting does not consist only of accepting various groups of people. Counselors, counselor educators, faculty/staff, and higher

education administrators should understand that students within the same racial group, for example, are shaped by different life experiences (Deutsch et al., 2008).

While it is important to acknowledge the influence that a student's background or identity could have on his/her college experience, it is also important not to expect this to negatively affect a student's performance in college. For example, an advisor might encourage a first-generation college student who is a Hispanic mother of two towards a less demanding course load because of stereotypes concerning the priorities of Hispanic families and the financial concerns of first-generation students. However, such advice is potentially harmful if the adviser does not bother to ascertain individual needs before dispensing advice based on minority stereotypes or cultural factors. Advisers need to understand that if they want to embrace diversity, they must do so while understanding that each student is different regardless of the specific racial or ethnic groups (Deutsch et al., 2008).

The word diversity often fails to highlight these different needs, as the term groups people together based on similarities instead of acknowledging individual priorities and needs. All providers need to embrace diversity while understanding that transfer students; nontraditional students; Hispanic, African American, Asian, and international students; and even White American students have individual needs. Therefore, the word diversity should mean difference, rather than serve as a generalization for students who can be associated with specific minority groups (Deutsch et al., 2008).

The first step, however, is to recognize that such stereotypes exist within society and the mind. To pretend that society is free from prejudice is not helpful to FGCS. After all, once providers interact with a member of a specific group, they tend to apply what was learned from the individual to the group in general, and these generalizations are in turn applied to other

individuals from that group (Chavez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory. (2003).

Stereotypes, whether they are positive or negative, become a barrier for serving racially/ethnically diverse FGCS because the student is not seen as an individual. It is important to learn how to recognize and challenge these generalizations in order to provide adequate assistance to each student served. Low or stereotypically based expectations are barriers to a culturally diverse student's education and success (Chavez et al., 2003). Acknowledging difference, while expecting the same level of sophistication and achievement from all students, can significantly improve a diverse student's college experience (Gibbons, 1993). For instance, one female scientist in charge of a successful university lab expects excellence from all of her students, regardless of their academic or cultural backgrounds, and she receives only excellence from them (Gibbons, 1993).

Diversity (or lack thereof) goes beyond the classrooms and the student body. An institution of higher learning is truly diverse when faculty and staff members come from different backgrounds. Some institutions find themselves at a disadvantage when members of hiring committees are hesitant to hire or promote employees who seem different; they do not realize that those who are different can become an asset to the institution rather than a hindrance to its advancement (Silver, 2002). An institution that does not promote diversity among faculty and staff will struggle to provide a welcoming environment for a student body that is diverse.

Lastly, it is imperative that multicultural providers address issues not only of race and gender but also of intergroup differences and, perhaps most importantly, allow for feedback and self-reflection as well as challenges traditional stereotypes (Deutsch et al., 2008). Those who are positioned to serve and assist racially/ethnically diverse students will serve more effectively

when they are trained on how to interact with students of different backgrounds (Masterson, 2007). In addition, counselor educators must explore ways that counselors-in-training can experience and process rich community partnership engagement within counseling practicums and internships. Given the demands of the school counseling profession and the need for school counselors to enter the field as leaders and advocates prepared to engage in servant leadership practices, counselor educators must consider new, innovative ways to build competencies in counseling training programs (Deutsch et al., 2008).

Counselor educators. Counselor educators are well positioned to answer the call of the counseling profession and participate in improving the rate of college persistence for African American first-generation college students. Using well-established theories and models of practice along with innovative and emerging research and models, counselor educators can effectively initiate and facilitate partnerships with African American students, families, and communities. It is important that counselor educators consider ways to incorporate training in college admissions into their school counseling programs, perhaps with a focus on the needs and issues of underrepresented students and their families. The ASCA National Model (2012) outlined expectations that school counseling programs address for career development and academic needs of all students in schools, with an emphasis on closing achievement and opportunity gaps through social justice and systemic change initiatives. Despite these expectations, The National Association for College Admissions Counseling reported only 42 counselor education programs offered a course in college admissions, although there are 466 school counseling programs according to the American Counseling Association (O'Connor, 2010). School counselors are expected to identify and address achievement and opportunity gaps for underrepresented students, which is difficult without training on how best to negotiate the

college admissions and transitions process.

School counselors are expected to promote equity and access to educational programs, strive to close achievement gaps, and prepare all students for postsecondary opportunities. This study provided initial information regarding underrepresented students' experiences and expectations of school counseling support for accessing college. These results and future research may help provide school counselors with strategies and information regarding how to better assist underrepresented students prepare, gain admittance, and succeed in college.

Social justice educators. As the Black Lives Movement has developed, students have played a pivotal role (Bacon, 2015). College, high school, and even middle school students have staged protests and school walkouts in cities around the country. Black students take these risks because they know their lives and futures are at risk - from police violence on the streets; from the dismantling of their communities through foreclosures, gentrification, and unemployment; and from the destruction of their schools through corporate reform (Bacon, 2015).

The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was originally created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, African American female activist, as a call to action after George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of Trayvon Martin in July 2013. The Black Lives Matter movement inspires one to fight the structural racism, after decades in which anti-racism was defined in excessively personal terms through anti-bias or diversity training. Anti-bias work focuses primarily, and often exclusively, on internal and interpersonal racism. In other words, if one strives to not be biased in your relationships, that is good enough (Bacon, 2015).

Definitely a place exists for personal reflection and discussion of biased attitudes and beliefs. There is no doubt that those who serve racially/ethnically diverse FGCS need multicultural training and are held responsible for their actions. However, that is not enough, as

the statistics on school suspension, dropout rates, inequitable school financing, and school closures make clear (Bacon, 2015). These are all sharp indicators of structural racism. It would be difficult to understand, teach, or change what is happening in this country if structural racism is not a part of the discussion (Cokley, 2018). Being an effective social justice educator means taking the Black Lives Matter movement seriously.

As the Black Lives Matter movement has grown, some have questioned whether “All Lives Matter” is a more inclusive slogan (Victor, 2016). Although recognition of the serious impact of racism and other forms of oppression on many groups of people in the United States, it is important to understand and have discussions with others about the historical and current realities behind this specific demand. As Alicia Garza, one of the movement’s originators, explained:

> When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. It is an acknowledgment that one million Black people are locked in cages in this country. #BlackLivesMatter does not mean your life isn’t important - it means that Black lives, which are seen as without value within a White world, are important to your liberation. Given the disproportionate impact state violence has on Black lives, we understand that when Black people in this country get free, the benefits will be wide-reaching and transformative for society as a whole. Within that framework, how teachers apply this understanding will obviously vary from classroom to classroom, depending on how old the children are, their experience and knowledge about the issues involved, and the level of community that has been built in the classroom. (Bacon, 2015)

Making Black lives matter in education includes what occurs inside the classroom and

ways in which African American students are prepared for and engaged within institutions of higher education. Providing a social justice curriculum that gives students the historical grounding, literacy skills, and space to explore the emotional intensity of feelings around the treatment of Blacks in America is required (Cokley, 2018). At the same time, deep discussion of these heavy issues needs to build on strong classroom community. Students cannot launch into discussions of racism without a basis of trust and sharing among students and between students and those who serve them (Cokley, 2018). That is the slow, steady work of meaningful classroom conversation, purposeful group work, reading and writing about critical social and personal issues, and shared writing. Teachers need to nurture communities of mutual respect and empathy. Supporting students who want to have conversations about the Black Lives Matter movement outside the classroom, in campus organizations, or during campus activities is important for social justice educators (Bacon, 2015; Cokley, 2018). Educators supporting the work of Black Student Unions in schools across the country helped transform the school climate. Black students' sense of pride and self-worth helped ignite this new civil rights movement. This is the moment for which social justice educators have waited.

Limitations for Study

Limitations are present in this study. While the researcher focused on the essence of the lived experiences of African American first-generation college students, other factors that may have contributed to college persistence for this population were not explored. For example, perseverance and resilience appeared to be factors, which contributed to college persistence for students. Perseverance was a consistent predictor of success in education (Duckworth et al., 2007) and is referred to as "grit" (Duckworth, 2016). It is noted that first-generation students

may enter college with resiliency compared to their peers (Rodriquez, 1983; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993)

All participants were enrolled in one university. Though the researcher engaged in purposeful sampling to capture the lived experiences of participants, selecting African American first-generation college students who were persisting at one public university excluded the perceptions and experiences of other African American FGCS. This limited the breadth for understanding the processes involved in college persistence for other types of universities. For example, experiences may be different at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) or a predominantly White institution (PWI).

The researcher explored the experiences of African American first-generation college students who transferred from a community college setting to a four-year university. Thirteen out of the 15 participants had attended both two and four-year postsecondary institutions prior to their current university enrollment. One-third of the participants attended three or more universities prior to enrollment at their current university. In addition, another limitation would suggest that the findings may not apply to students who did not transfer from another university, and their experiences could be different.

Another limitation for this study was not having perspectives from parents, peers, faculty, and staff. Participants reported interactions and persistence experiences with parents, peers, faculty, and staff, but those perspectives were not explored. The limitations impact how well the findings apply to the general student population. According to Moustakas (1994), the primary source of knowledge in phenomenological research is perception, which cannot be questioned. The advantages of phenomenology allow the researcher to study the phenomenon that is not achievable through quantitative research methods. The phenomenological approach to research

allows the researcher to explore the essence of an experience rather than seeking measurements and explanations (Moustakas, 1994).

Suggestions for Future Research

This research study sought to gain a greater understanding of how participants perceived the factors and experiences that influenced their college persistence. The results of this research study indicated several implications for future research and practice in the field of counseling education. Overall, the results of this study aligned with the previous findings of the literature reviewed prior to conducting this study. This qualitative study discovered the essence of some factors that contributed and influenced college persistence for African American first-generation college students, and there are areas of this study useful for future research. There are lessons for future research and essential elements to address the growing disparities for racially/ethnically diverse first-generation college students.

Servant Leadership

Counselors must recognize and take on their role of servant leaders (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leadership begins with one wanting to serve first and then lead as a servant. In 1977, Robert K. Greenleaf introduced the concept of servant leadership, and it begins with one wanting to serve first and then lead as a servant. The theory provides instruction when it comes to first-generation college students for two reasons. First, in explaining what is servant leadership, Greenleaf posed the question, "Do those served grow as a person; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become leaders" (1977, p. 4)? Personal growth is the focus when it is decided whether or not to choose success for first-generation college students.

Next, Greenleaf described servant leadership as "a long-term, transformational approach to life and work-in essence, a way of being-that has the potential for creating positive change throughout our society" (1977, p. 4). This statement is complex and rejects deficit-oriented approaches to serving. Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership aligns with the counseling profession taking more active roles as social justice educators, counselors, and advocates. Improving society by challenging systemic inequities has always been a major objective of the counseling profession (Lee, 2007).

Scholarly research focusing on the tenets of servant leadership may serve as valuable information to better prepare counselors to serve racially/ethnically first-generation college students. In fact, the researcher was not able to find any counseling research that focused on servant leadership, which is fundamental to the counselor identity. Counselor training programs have not been given attention by research scholars, including counseling and education researchers. The absence of scholarly research in this area continues to perpetuate Eurocentric norms for independence, and responsibility for self is the norm. The lack of research in servant leadership is a gap in the research literature that does not support counselors, counselors-in-training, and counselor educators in their responsibility to serve, including educational settings.

Continuing Education

An area of research in need of attention is the development of social justice and advocacy continuing education (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar , 2009). Self-care is an area that should be continually addressed (Toporek et al., 2009). Counselors work on difficult problems, including challenging and oppressive conditions, and a network of support is essential. Some problems are addressed with interventions; however, others have existed for decades and involve very large

systems. Counselors, therefore, are at risk for burnout or learned helplessness if they believe an issue cannot be resolved when working with their clients. Supporting counselors on having a problem's perspective, the scope of the systems involved, and the agency of change, can help both counselors and clients in their role as advocates.

In addition, more attention is needed in the development of social justice and advocacy continuing education (Toporek et al., 2009). As with the development of multicultural competence, counselors and counselor educators require more opportunities for professional development in the area of ethical and effective advocacy in counseling. Helping counseling professionals to be more aware of the complexities of their roles as advocates will assist them with responding to students/clients' needs with best practices.

More attention, however, is needed to train counselors in systems-level issues and interventions as well as in ethical concerns regarding advocacy roles (Toporek et al., 2009). To be effective, this training should be integrated throughout the curriculum and treated as part of counselors' roles including relevant theory, skills, and applications in core and practicum courses. Very little attention has been given to research focusing on advocacy in counseling. The field of school counseling has provided a foundation for search on client/student advocacy. In addition, more research is needed in the implementation of advocacy competencies and multicultural competencies, the use of systemic interventions, the outcomes of advocacy training on counselors' skills, and multicultural aspects of advocacy.

Social Justice

The increasing economic divisions between the social classes, the achievement gap in education, and the struggle for equal rights for same-sex couples are prime examples of social inequities (Lee, 2007). Professional counselors have both a professional and personal stake in

actively participating in the struggle to ameliorate such social inequities (Lee, 2007). It is their ethical and moral obligation as helpers to actively participate in social justice initiatives and in the process promote the development of a more equitable society that promotes access for all people (Lee, 2007).

Social justice places a focus on issues of oppression, privilege, and social inequities. For counselors, social justice implies personal and professional conduct that opposes all forms of discrimination and oppression opportunities (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003; Lewis et al., 1998). In addition to working at the interpersonal level with clients or students, a counselor must also be able to accurately perceive environmental influences on human development and possess skills to intervene at a system-wide level to challenge environmental barriers that stifle potential and block opportunities (Lewis et al., 2003; Lewis et al., 1998).

Counseling for social justice is more than a professional obligation; it is about living one's life in a manner dedicated to promoting access and equity. The following are examples of social justice counseling initiatives (Lee, 2007).

One issue that relates to social justice is that the literature has failed to question the contribution institutions of higher education have in reproducing racial hierarchies that favor Whites (Baber, 2012). In addition, the way that scholars explain, discuss, and theorize racially/ethnically diverse groups in student achievement, including higher education, is consistently disaggregated (Harper, 2012). With an increasing demographic diversity in postsecondary education and at the same time a growth of first-generation college students (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998), future research in social justice is required, with focus of efforts on improving college persistence and success among populations that are underrepresented in higher education, including low-income

and racially/ethnically diverse students.

Self-Efficacy

A lack of qualitative studies exists directly focused on the lived experiences of African American first-generation college students. In addition, from a persistence perspective, there is a lack of studies focusing directly on the influence of self-efficacy on college persistence for this population. Additional studies are needed to explore the sources of self-efficacy to identify ways in which self-efficacy supports college persistence and degree attainment among racially/ethnically diverse FGCS. Scholars have begun to give attention to self-efficacy (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011; Chemers et al., 2001; Devonport & Lane, 2006; Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Gore, 2006; Majer, 2009; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Vuong et al., 2010; Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008) and found self-efficacy to be a strong predictor for college persistence; however, scholarly research has not addressed self-efficacy sufficiently, specifically for African American FGCS. Research attention focusing on which sources of self-efficacy have greater influence on persistence is needed. Further understanding the intersection for self-efficacy and support networks for the population could inform those serving African American first-generation college students with effective program models and strategies to support the development of self-efficacy.

Students with strong self-efficacy are more likely to persist in college and attain their college degrees (Allen, 1999; DeFreitas, 2012). Higher self-efficacy was directly linked to higher grades for college students (Cavazos et al., 2010; Choi, 2005). Although several studies examined self-efficacy on college persistence for racially/ethnically diverse, the literature has not given much attention to self-efficacy on college persistence for African American FGCS.

Persistence

According to the literature, scholars explored and identified specific factors found to support college persistence for racially/ethnically diverse first-generation students, which include: (a) sense of belonging (Huratado & Carter, 1997); (b) academic advisement (Darling & Smith, 2007); (c) academic achievement (Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2003); (d) ethnic identity (Fife et al., 2011); and (e) successful balance for both community and college environments (Choy, 2001). Very little is known on how previous findings support improving persistence rates among African American first-generation college students.

Finally, there are lessons for future research. Both an absence in the current research as well as new concepts can be explored. A notable omission is the lack of studies directly focused on the experiences of African American students. From a programmatic perspective there was a lack of studies focusing directly on the factors that contribute to college persistence, including the resources of self-efficacy. Given that academic success is related to the campus social experience with helpful support programs, additional studies should explore the role of self-efficacy for racially/ethnically diverse students. Majer (2009) recognized this potential, but research has not addressed this issue. A second programmatic research effort that can be enhanced is the study of counselors and their role as social justice advocates for bringing change in the way the population is served in institutions of higher education. Research attention focusing on the ways in which counselor education programs are training and continuing education among counselors is required to assist in insuring more successful academic outcomes for students. These concepts plus the omissions suggest possible important directions for future research.

First-generation college students may enter college with various barriers and be underprepared to meet challenges academically, emotionally, financially, and culturally (Astin &

Oseguera, 2005; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Mehta et al., 2011; Parks-Yancy, 2012; Pobywajlo, 1989; Snell, 2008). As a result, scholars and approaches have focused on the rehabilitation of students rather than understanding and nurturing their capacity towards success and exploring the meanings of their experiences through qualitative research (Green, 2006). With a steady increase of the first-generation college student enrollment in postsecondary institutions (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003), it was important for the researcher to understand the persistence experiences of African American FGCS and to gain insights for understanding how to better serve them. The participants' lived experiences for this study addressed a significant gap in the research literature.

Summary and Conclusions

The preceding chapters provided a description and rationale for this qualitative study. Previous literature confirmed the overwhelming and unique challenges that racially/ethnically diverse FGCS face (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Majer, 2009; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Richardson & Skinner, 2004) and provided the relevance for exploring the perceptions and experiences of self-efficacy for college persistence among African American first-generation college students for this study. Self-efficacy is an empirically supported construct that was adopted as a theoretical framework for the study and that intended to identify opportunities for enhancing educational practices for African American first-generation college students.

The methodology chosen to conduct this study was transcendental phenomenology as defined by Moustakas (1994). The overarching line of inquiry that guided this research was: What are the lived experiences of low-income African American first-generation college students who are enrolled and persisting in a public university setting? This study identified both commonly shared and individual themes for participants as it related to college persistence. This

study can provide significant implications for educators, counselors, and institutions of higher education on how to assist racially/ethnically diverse FGCS with more strength-based approaches. The development of practices and methods to support, build, and/or increase the rate of college persistence among African American first-generation college students were identified.

Next, critical gaps in the literature were addressed as a result of this study. The qualitative design was conducive to exploring college persistence for African American FGCS. In addition, careful identification of prominent themes provided core meanings commonly experienced for the population (Patton, 2015). Previous studies focused on the demographics or characteristics of FGCS, presented FGCS as deficient, but did not explore their strengths or the insights and perspectives of FGCS.

Findings from this study aligned with research on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 2001: Schunk & Mullen, 2012; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). In terms of understanding how first-generation African American college students perceived their self-efficacy, participants described vicarious/modeled and verbal/social persuasion as influential sources of self-efficacy during college. Additionally, the influence of the three sources of self-efficacy examined in this study were described by participants and contributed to their persistence. Through their responses, participants were observed as confident, resilient, and motivated, which are all associated with the development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 2001; Multon et al., 1991; Zimmerman, 2000).

Overcoming obstacles through the sources of self-efficacy was consistently reported from the voices of the African American first-generation college students. Overall, the belief in themselves and the encouragement received from family, peers, faculty/staff, and community

persons fueled their determination to persist. Participants persisted in spite of their enormous obstacles with the utilization of sources of self-efficacy. Recommendations encourage counselors, educators, higher education administrators, and research scholars to consider the findings of this research to address ways to support persistence and degree attainment for all students.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

Participants Needed

Are you an African American first-generation college student beyond the second year of coursework towards an undergraduate degree?

To be included in this study, participants must:

- **Identify as African American**
- **Be First-Generation (a student whose parents did not pursue postsecondary education**
- **Be beyond their second year of coursework towards an undergraduate degree**

Participation will include completing a brief demographic questionnaire and a 60-120 minute interview.

Those who are selected and complete the interview process will be given a $50 gift card as a token of appreciation.

If you are interested in participating in the study contact:
Christine M. Brown, Doctoral Candidate, Governors State University
XXXXXX.govst.edu

Note: Approved by the Governors State University Institutional Review Board Protocol number 17-10-01

APPENDIX B: EMAIL TO PROSPECTIVE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Dear Respondents,

I am doctoral candidate at Governors State University, and I am writing my dissertation under the direction of my dissertation committee chaired by Dr. Sonya Lorelle, who can be reached at XXX-XXX-XXXX or XXXXX.edu.

I am conducting a qualitative research study on the lived experiences of African American first-generation college students who are persisting toward degree attainment. The study is entitled: *The Underprepared and Underrepresented: Perceptions and Experiences of Self-efficacy on College Persistence among Low-Income African American First-Generation College Students***.** I am emailing to ask if you would like to participate by completing an in-person interview for this research project. Governors State University's IRB requires research projects to provide informed consent to the research participants.

Participants must identify as African American, a third or fourth year student at GSU, and first-generation college student (a student whose parents/guardians did not attend college). If you would be interested in participating in the study, **please complete the attached consents and demographic questionnaire and forward to XXXXXX.**

All participants shall be given a $50 Visa gift card for participation in the interview.

Your decision to participate or decline the participation in the study is voluntary. You may decline to answer any questions, and you have the right to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal will not affect your relationship with Governors State University in anyway.

If you have any questions about the study, contact the investigator, Christine M. Brown at XXX-XXX-XXXX or c[redacted]govst.edu.

Governors State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed study ##17-10-01 and approved it on November 1, 2017.

Questions about your rights as research participant:
If you have questions about your rights or have concerns about any part of the study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board Chairperson,
Dr. Renee Theiss by phone at [redacted] or email at [redacted]

Thank you in advance for your time and interest in participation.

Regards,

Christine Brown, NCC, LCPC
Doctoral Candidate
Governors State University

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Christine Brown, Doctoral Candidate, Governors State University, Doctoral Candidate Counseling Education and Supervision, XXX-XXX-XXXX;

PROJECT DIRECTOR: Sonya Lorelle, PhD, LPC, Assistant Professor, Governors State University, College of Education, Division of Psychology and Counseling,

TITLE OF STUDY: Underprepared and Underrepresented: The Perceptions and Experiences of Self-efficacy on College Persistence among Low-Income African American First-Generation College Students

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:
This study is being conducted by Christine Brown, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education, Counseling Education and Supervision at Governors State University, to understand the experiences of college persistence for African American first-generation college students.

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY: The research study is seeking low-income, first-generation African American college students who are persisting in an undergraduate program. Approximately 12-15 persons will be interviewed for this research study.

WHAT I AM ASKING YOU TO DO/PROCEDURES:

- I am asking you to participate in one time, face-to-face interview for approximately 60-120 minutes.
- The purpose of the interview is to learn more about the experiences of college persistence for African American first-generation college students.
- The interview will take place in a conference room located on GSU campus.
- Prior to interview, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and consent form that will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.
- A follow-up phone conversation for clarification from the first interview may be requested and this process will take no longer that 10 minutes.
- If a follow-up becomes necessary, an email will be sent indicating the need for additional clarification along with a request for the best day and time to speak.
- Your interview will be audio taped, and you will be asked to review the transcription and analysis to verify themes identified in your interview; however, this is no way required.

RISKS AND/OR DISCOMFORTS:
The potential risks for participating in this study are minimal, and no harm is anticipated; however, memories may bring on negative feelings or difficult emotions. Should you require counseling or additional resources, I will give you a referral on your behalf to the GSU counseling center, which will be no cost to you.

There are not direct benefits for participating in this study. Findings of this study may serve as a meaningful exchange to help better serve first-generation African American college students; including faculty, counselors and higher education administrators.

CONFIDENTIALITY:
All information gathered during this study will be kept confidential, and steps will be taken to protect your identity. An alias with date of interview will be assigned. Throughout the time of data collection, all records of this study will be maintained in a private and protected location to the fullest extent provided by law. Reports of the findings may be published and will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Your research record will be stored securely, and only the research staff will have access.

You will be asked to identify an alias name, which will be used for the duration of the study. The information obtained during this study may be published in social science journals or presented at conferences and/or meetings in accordance with the confidentiality procedures described here.

All transcripts, physical records, and audio recordings will be maintained on a password-protected computer. Further identification of your identity will be removed from the transcript the assigned alias will be substituted for your personally identifying information.

COMPENSATION:
A $50 VISA gift card will be provided at the conclusion of the interview for participating in the study.

RIGHT TO DECLINE OR WITHDRAW:
Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw, revoke consent, and not respond to any specific questions that you want, at any time, without any penalty of prejudice.

PROJECT DIRECTOR CONTACT INFORMATION:
The Project Director: Sonya Lorelle: XXX-XXX-XXXX;

RESEARCHER CONTACT INFORMATION:
If you have any questions about the purpose, procedures, or any other issues relating to this research study you may contact the student researcher, Christine Brown at XXX-XXX-XXXX or or Project Director, Dr. Sonya Lorelle at or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

IRB CONTACT INFORMATION:
If you have questions about your rights or have concerns about any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board Chairperson, Dr. Renee Theiss by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX or email at edu.

Finally, I understand that my consent to participate in this research study does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or any redress I might have as a result of my participation. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form

Your Name (please print):____

Your Signature for research participation:______________________________________

Contact Number & Email Address: ____

Date:____

** Please complete the attached demographic questionnaire and return with copy of your consent form.

Thank you.

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONAIRE FORM

1. How old are you? _______

2. What is your race?

   _____ Asian American or Pacific Islander
   _____ Black or African American
   _____ Hispanic or Latina
   _____ Native American or American Indian
   _____ White, Caucasian, European, not Hispanic
   _____ Biracial or Multiracial (Two or more racial backgrounds)
   _____ Other (describe): ______________________________

3. What is your current academic year?

   _____ 1st year of undergraduate coursework
   _____ 2nd year of undergraduate coursework
   _____ 3rd year of undergraduate coursework
   _____ 4th year of undergraduate coursework
   _____ Beyond 4th year of undergraduate coursework

4. What is the highest level of education completed by your mother/primary female guardian?

   _____ completed 8th grade or less
   _____ completed high school
   _____ completed high school or high school equivalent (GED)
   _____ completed associate's degree
   _____ completed bachelor's degree
   _____ attended graduate school
   _____ completed advanced degree (i.e. master's degree/doctorate degree)
   _____ other (specify):______________________________________

5. What is the highest level of education completed by your father/primary male guardian?

   _____ completed 8th grade or loess
   _____ completed high school
   _____ completed high school or high school equivalent (GED)
   _____ attended any college (did not complete degree)
   _____ completed associate's degree
   _____ completed bachelor's degree
   _____ attended graduate school
   _____ completed advanced degree (i.e. master's degree/doctorate degree)
   _____ other (specify):______________________________________

6. Describe how your college education is funded.

_____ Grants (i.e., Pell, MAP, other state or federal funds)
_____ Work-study
_____ Scholarships
_____ Student loans
_____ Family support
_____ Employment and/or savings

7. How many person(s) are part of your family household?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+

8. For the most part, what type of household were you raised in?

____ Single parent
____ Two parent household
____ Grandparent or other blood relative led household
____ Other
Explain ____

9. Expected graduation date (example: May 2018) _______________

10. Major: _______________________

APPENDIX E: AUDIO RECORDING & TRANSCRIPTION CONSENT FORM

Underprepared and Underrepresented: The Perceptions and Experiences of Self-Efficacy on College Persistence among Low-Income African American First-Generation College Students

Christine M. Brown, Doctoral Candidate, Governors State University

This study involves the audio recording of your interview with the researcher. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio or audio recording of the transcript. The researcher (Christine Brown), transcriber (transcription service to be determined), Dissertation Chairperson (Dr. Sonya Lorelle), and IRB Chairperson (Dr. Renee Theiss) will have access to recordings.

The tapes will be transcribed by a transcription service and erased once the transcriptions are checked for accuracy. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as voice) will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from the study.

By signing this form, I agree for the researcher to audio record the interview as part of this research study. I also understand that this consent for recording is effective until the following date: May 31, 2018. On or before that date, all tapes will be destroyed by the researcher.

RIGHT TO DECLINE OR WITHDRAW
Participation in this study is voluntary, and I may withdraw, revoke consent, and not respond to any specific questions that he/she wants, at any time, without any penalty of prejudice.

RESEARCHER CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have any questions about the purpose, procedures, or any other issues relating to this research study you may contact Christine Brown at XXX-XXX-XXXX or cbrown15@student.govst.edu or faculty dissertation chair, Dr. Sonya Lorelle at slorelle@govst.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

IRB CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have questions about your rights or are dissatisfied at any time with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board Chairperson, Dr. Renee Theiss by phone at XXX-XXX-XXX or email at [redacted]vst.edu.

Finally, I understand that my consent to participate in this research study does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or any redress I might have as a result of my participation. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant's name (please print):______________________________________
Participant's signature for research participation:____________________________
Contact Number & Email Address: ______________________________________
Date:____

APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Pre-interview Checklist:
______ Purpose of study _____ Confidentiality _____ Length of interview
______ Review Consent Forms _____ Signature on Consent Forms

Introductory Questions (intended to establish/build rapport with participants). What were some of your thoughts about college before you enrolled? What are your thoughts about college now?

Part I – Mastery/Lived Experiences

1. How confident were you in your abilities to be academically successful in college?
    a. Can you tell me more about that?
    b. What examples or experiences can you provide?
2. If you think back to college, what were some of your most challenging experiences?
    a. How, if at all, did you overcome those challenges?
3. Tell me about your greatest successes during college?
    a. What contributed to those successes?

Part II – Vicarious/Modeled Experiences

1. What individuals, relationships, and experiences have helped you remain enrolled in college? In what way(s)?
2. What individuals, relationships, and experiences have hindered your ability to remain enrolled in college? In what way(s)?

Part III – Social/Verbal Persuasion

1. Describe any positive verbal statements, messages, experiences or interactions encountered from others that have impacted your college experience.
2. Describe any negative verbal statements, messages, experiences of interactions encountered from others that have impacted your college experience.

Part IV- Self-Efficacy/Academic Performance

1. What has been your most challenging courses in college thus far?
    a. How have you addressed challenges in courses?
    b. What resources did you use?

Part V – Self-Efficacy/College Adjustment

1. Tell me about your adjustment to college.
    a. What kind of activities and resources on campus have you found supportive or non-supportive to your college adjustment?

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Part VI – Self-Efficacy/Social Integration

1. How, if at all, were you able to integrate socially to college?
    a. How has this contributed to your persistence in college?

Part VII – Self-Efficacy/Stress

1. What, if anything, has caused you the most stress since you enrolled in college?
2. What did you do to address the stressors?

Part VIII - Barriers for AA FGCS

1. As a first-generation college student, what specific barriers related to your college persistence can you identify?
2. Is there anything else you would like to share that I have not asked?

APPENDIX G: OBSERVATIONAL PROTOCOL

Participant: ____

Interview Date: ____ Time:_________________

APPENDIX H: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT FOR USE OF TRANSCRIPTION SERVICES

Research Study Title:
Underprepared and Underrepresented: The Perceptions and Experiences of Self-Efficacy on College Persistence among Low-Income African American First-Generation College Students

1. I, ______________________________, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality of all research data received from the researcher related to this research study.

2. I will hold in strictest confidence the identity of any individual that may be revealed during the transcription of interviews or in any associated documents.

3. I will not make copies of any audio-recordings, or other research data, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher.

4. I will store all study-related data in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession. All audio recordings, transcripts and all other research data will be stored in an encrypted format. I will adhere to the VShell file transfer software, selected by the researcher, that provides strong encryption, user authentication, and date integrity features to control secure file transmission.

5. All data provided or created for purposes of this agreement, including any back-up records, will be returned to the researcher or permanently deleted. When I have received confirmation that the transcription work I performed has been satisfactorily completed, any of the research data that remains with me will be returned to the researcher or destroyed, pursuant to the instructions of the researcher.

6. I understand that Governors State University has the right to take legal action against any breach of confidentiality that occurs in my handling of the research data.

Transcriber’s name (printed) ____

Transcriber's signature ____

Date ____

APPENDIX I: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT FOR USE OF CODING SERVICES

Research Study Title:
Underprepared and Underrepresented: The Perceptions and Experiences of Self-Efficacy on College Persistence among Low-Income African American First-Generation College Students

1. I, ______________________________, coder, agree to maintain full confidentiality of all research data received from the researcher related to this research study.

2. I will hold in strictest confidence the identity of any individual that may be revealed during the coding of data or in any associated documents and data.

3. I will not make copies of any transcripts, or other research data, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher.

4. I will store all study-related data in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession. All transcripts and coded data will be stored in an encrypted format required by the researcher.

5. All data provided or created for purposes of this agreement, including any back-up records, will be returned to the researcher or permanently deleted. When I have received confirmation that the coding of data that I performed has been satisfactorily completed, any of the research data that remains with me will be returned to the researcher or destroyed, pursuant to the instructions of the researcher.

6. I understand that Governors State University has the right to take legal action against any breach of confidentiality that occurs in my handling of the research data.

Coder’s name (printed) ____

Coder's signature ____

Date ____