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“I DIDN’T FEEL DOCTORAL WORTHY”: MOTIVATING FACTORS FOR BLACK  
FEMALE, FIRST-GENERATION DOCTORAL STUDENTS.

By

Margaret Cole Taylor

University of Memphis

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Leadership and Policy

August 7, 2021

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this body of work to my family. My late mother and father, Georgia and Robert Taylor, are looking down and smiling. Both parents never finished high school, but both knew the importance of education and pushed us to achieve. When my mom decided to get her GED in her forties, I was so proud of her. She showed me that it was never too late to learn, grow, and achieve. My mother would be proud to tell everyone that I am a Doctor; I just know it. My dad would be more reserved but proud, nonetheless. I thank them for all the things they taught me about life, living, and never giving up. My life would be incomplete without the family I was surrounded by. I am only sorry they could not witness this momentous moment in my life. I always had my mom's statement that "nothing can be a failure but a trier" embedded in my head, so I had to keep trying, and mom, I made it.

To my sister, Brenda, my brothers, Robert, Jr., Lloyd, Coleman, and Al, thank you all for supporting me. Thank you for your prayers, your gifts, and your words of encouragement every time we talked. I could not ask for better siblings than you. God knew what he was doing when he put us together. Thank you that we continue to love each other, respect each other, and support each other. We are there when one of us needs the others. I hope I have made you proud.

To my children Candace (Candy) and Ronnie Jamaal (R.J.), I have loved you before you were born, and I continue to love you and support you as adults now raising my beautiful grandchildren, Malique, Macey, Jordyn, and Thomas Jamaal (T.J.). I am so proud of both of you for what you have accomplished in your lives and what you are continuing to strive for. I want you to reach every dream and goal you set for yourself. I

hope I have made all of you proud. Thank you, Kim, for being there more as a daughter than a daughter-in-law; your support and encouragement were so needed and much appreciated. Your extra support in checking references was not a job I wanted to ask you to do, but you took it on with a smile, as always. Thank you for that.

I do not know what comes next, but I am sure there will be another goal I will be striving to reach. I know that whatever is set before me, I will achieve as I know that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Phil. 4:13).”

## **Acknowledgments**

I have to acknowledge the University of Memphis for bringing the Educational Leadership Doctoral program to Jackson, Tennessee. It was forward-thinking and accommodating for those of us in rural West Tennessee. Dr. Reginald Green and the late Dr. McNeil were our first professors in this program, and they taught us so much. The educational genius of these men was phenomenal. Dr. Green taught us so much about equity, diversity, and inclusion through his life's history and wisdom. Dr. Donald Hopper was our guiding light through this program. He never stopped believing in us and continued to provide needed support, comfort, and advocacy.

I must also acknowledge the Alpha Cohort that started this journey in 2014 and worked together to ensure everyone made it through our statistical comp examination. Many thanks to Dawn and John for their statistical knowledge and patience. I am leaving the program with friends whom I would have never met without this program.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge Dr. Derrick Robinson, my dissertation professor. Dr. Robinson is a man of standards and ethics. He always showed me the correct way to proceed, even when I wanted to move things along without taking all the proper steps. He never wavered. Dr. Robinson continued to push me to write when I did not want to write. He edited my work with compassion; never a negative word was uttered from him. He is a man I genuinely respect, and I am proud to call him my professor. Thank you, Dr. Robinson. Thank you for being you, always the same encouraging force that helped me reach my goal.

## **Abstract**

This study examines the motivating factors for Black female, first-generation doctoral students. The critical problem I found was that little is known about how Black female doctoral students persevere to completing their doctoral degrees. Therefore, this study sought to identify factors that influence first-generation Black females to pursue and complete a doctorate. I approached the study through the theoretical lens of Womanism. Womanism is defined as a theory based on Black women's lives experiences, works to change negative images of Black women, and restores a balance to the community through a lens of spirituality. In chapter 2, I identified the critical literature on the topics of (a) historical perspective of Black women in America, (b) first-generation students, (c) how peak experiences affect educational attainment, and (d) previous studies on this group. The study was conducted with ten Black females who self-identified as first-generation scholars who had completed or were completing their doctorates. An open-ended interview protocol was used to allow participants to answer the questions as they felt appropriate.

Four significant factors were identified from the data. First, there is a considerable lack of confidence in first-generation, Black females entering a doctoral program. Secondly, schools attended matter. Racism was present in the PWIs attended, and most participants indicated that if there were the possibility of completing their doctorate at an HBCU, they would have done so. Thirdly, parental support is crucial to the success of Black female, first-generation students. Fourthly, all participants had a strong will to fight it out and complete their degree. No matter the obstacles, they were determined not to give up. They persevered and are now thriving.

## Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Abstract	v
Table of Contents	vi
List of Abbreviations	xi
Chapter 1	1
Introduction	1
Statistics on FGS	3
Factors for FGS Success	6
Statement of the Problem	6
Purpose of the Study	8
Research Questions	9
Expected Outcomes	9
Theoretical Framework	9
Overview and Context of Methods	13
Significance of the Study	14
Background of the Researcher	16
Organization of the Study	17
Chapter 2	18
Literature Review	18
Introduction	18
Black Females	19
Historical Perspective	19
Strides made by females	21
Today's Black Females	23
First-Generation Students	24
Statistics	25
Barriers to Success	25
Lack of Resources	27
Campus Climate	30

Lack of preparation	32
Peak Experiences	33
Definition	34
Impact of Peak Experiences	35
Relevant Studies	37
Resilience & Emotional Intelligence	37
The Strength from Within	38
Conclusion	40
Chapter 3: Methodology	42
Introduction	42
Overview of the study	42
Overview of the Chapter	43
Population and sample	43
Setting	45
Data Collection	45
Introduction.	45
Instrumentation	46
Womanist Methodology and Theory	46
Data Analysis	48
Ethical Considerations	49
Conclusion	49
Chapter 4	51
Findings	51
Introduction	51
Data Collection Instrument	51
Thematic Analysis	52
Themes	53
Support	54
Family support	54
Family Support	54
Off-campus support	55
Parental Support	55



Extracurricular activities	56
Professors	56
Professors invested	57
Hands-on professors	58
Extracurricular activities	58
Extracurricular activities	59
A sorority	59
Representation	60
Professors	60
Professors' encouragement	60
Representation	61
Barriers	61
Imposter Syndrome	62
Imposter syndrome	62
Not belonging	62
Lack of family support	63
Lack of parental support	63
Family pressures	64
Finances	64
Finances	64
Lack of shared resources	65
Diversity	65
Racism	66
Lack of Black students	66
Schools	67
HBCU	67
Small school	68
PWI	68
Large institutions	68
<i>Minimally diverse</i>	69
High School Preparation	69
Lack of high school preparation	70

Self-determination	70
Improvements Needed	71
<i>Improvements needed.</i>	71
Culturally responsive teachers	71
Exposure	72
Other options	73
Change in plans	73
Preparation	73
Mentorships	74
Chapter 5	75
Significance of the Study	75
Overview of this Chapter	77
Comparison to Literature	77
Statistics	78
Barriers to Success	78
Lack of Resources	79
Campus Climate	80
Peak Experiences	80
Discussion of Findings	81
Research Question 1	81
<i>Support</i>	81
<i>Barriers</i>	82
<i>Schools</i>	83
<i>Improvements Needed</i>	84
Research Question 2	85
Barriers	87
Research Question 3	88
Support	89
Overall Significance of Findings	89
Significance 1	89
Significance 2	90
Recommendations	91

Recommendation for Practice	91
<i>High Schools</i>	92
<i>Colleges and Universities</i>	93
Recommendations for Research	94
<i>College Professors</i>	94
Doctoral College Professors	94
Recommendations for Policy	95
Summary and Conclusion	97
Lack of confidence	97
Schools Matter	97
Parental support is crucial	98
Perseverance is imperative for the Black female, first-generation doctoral student	98
References	100
Appendix A: Interview Protocol	119
IRB Approval	120

## **List of Abbreviations**

FGS: First-Generation Students

HBCU: Historically, Black Colleges and Universities

PWI: Predominantly White Institutions

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

In 2018, doctoral degrees were awarded in the United States to 55,195 individuals (National Science Foundation, 2018). Of those 55,195 individuals who received their doctorate, approximately 3,058 were awarded to individuals of African American descent (National Science Foundation, 2018). The National Science Foundation (2017) indicates that over 51 percent of recipients were white. African American females awarded a doctorate accounted for only 1,730 of the total doctorates 55,195 awarded and 56 percent of all African Americans who received a doctorate. Approximately 43 percent of individuals receiving doctorates were from homes where at least one parent had earned an advanced degree. For individuals where neither parent had received an advanced degree, that percentage decreases to less than 20 percent (National Science Foundation, 2016). From these statistics, we can see that African Americans and first-generation college students are underrepresented in obtaining their doctorate.

The Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (2017) suggests that first-generation students (FGS) are students whose parent(s)/legal guardian(s) have not gone to college. There are critical demographic differences between first-generation students and students whose parents attended college. According to Cataldi, Bennett, Chen & RTI International, 2018, approximately 5 percent of these first-generation graduates had enrolled in a doctoral or professional program compared to 10 percent of those whose parents had earned a Bachelor's degree. These statistics indicate that first-generation Master's students are 50 percent less likely than those who are non-first-generation graduates to enroll in doctoral or professional programs (NCES, 2018). These statistics

create a sense of urgency in understanding how first-generation students persist to a doctorate.

In terms of socioeconomic status, first-generation students typically come from households with fewer resources (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Lee, Kim & Hagedorn, 2004; McCarron & Inkeles, 2006; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Warburton, Bugarin & Nunez, 2001). First-generation students do not have anyone in the immediate family who has extended their educational level beyond high school. They are often challenged with difficulty adjusting to college because they cannot be adequately prepared for college by their parents. Personal expectations of college are unknown, which is different from students who have one or both parents who have attended and graduated from college. (Collier & Morgan, 2007). These students typically rank below traditional students when comparing grade point averages (Lee et al., 2004), completion of academically rigorous courses (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996; Warburton et al., 2001,) and scores on standardized examinations (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Warburton et al., 2001).

A rigorous high school curriculum helps mitigate the disadvantage of first-generation status (NCES, 2001). Among first-year students entering a 4-year institution in 1995-96, the high school curriculum did not cover New Basics. As a result, the first-generation student had a lower grade point average in their first year than those whose parents attended college. The difference was 2.4 for FGS and 2.7 for non-FGS (NCES,2001). Those students whose high school curriculum was Beyond Core New Basics II earned a GPA on average of 3.1, regardless of parents' education (NCES, 2001). According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2018), first-generation

students: a) are predominantly older and are likely to have dependents, b) Minority students comprise the more significant percentage of first-generation students. Of Hispanic students in graduate school, 48 percent were first-generation students, and 42 percent of African American students were first-generation students. Of all white students, only 28 percent were first-generation students. c) For 20 percent of first-generation students, English is not their language of choice. More First-generation students had dependents than non-first-generation students.

Green (2010) postulates, "every student who enters kindergarten must have at least six peak experiences to graduate from high school" (p. 213). Suppose first-generation students can matriculate through an undergraduate degree and a Master's Degree. In that case, there must be some high-order peak experiences in their lives that motivate and influence their persistence to reach the terminal degree. This research examines peak experiences, motivational factors, and resources that first-generation students possess that allowed them to complete their doctoral degrees.

Maslow (1964) "described peak experiences as sudden feelings of intense happiness and well-being, with an awareness of ultimate truth and the unity of all things." Those having peak experiences tell of a sense of control over the body and emotions, a greater understanding of awareness and a feeling of awe and wonder at the oneness with the world". Peak experiences equip a student with the skills and ability to cope with interactions that occur in schools (Green, 2010).

**Statistics on FGS.** The First-Generation students began entering college after World War II when the GI Bill was implemented (Davis, 2010). The GI Bill development meant college presidents and administrators had to prepare to include members of society

formally excluded (Davis, 2010). This shift also came after *Brown vs. Board of Education* (History, 2018) and during the Vietnam War. In the sixties, first-generation students were primarily white, working-class baby-boomers whose parents were often first and second-generation European immigrants (Merritt, 2008). Since that time, demographics have changed in race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic levels, changing the first-generation student's face (Merritt, 2008). First-generation Scholars Programs are currently located in Universities across the United States (Green, personal communication, April 2018).

The National Science Foundation (2014) report indicates that the number of first-generation college students who later received a doctorate peaked at 19,060 in 1973. Doctorates awarded to this group declined at an average rate of nearly 2 percent per year from 1973 to 1987. Despite short periods of growth and decline, there has been no discernible trend since 1987. Of the first-generation college graduates who received a doctorate in 2017, only 13.3 percent of graduates' parents had some college (National Science Foundation, 2018). Hispanic or Latino graduates outpaced African American doctoral graduates by 20 percent. In that same year, the total number of doctorates awarded to first-generation scholars was approximately 15,000, compared to 46,000 second-generation or continuing-generation college graduates.

From 1994 to 2014, the share of first-generation college students with a doctorate remained between 7 and 11 percentage points greater among temporary visa holders than among U.S. citizens and permanent residents. The proportion of first-generation college students with a doctorate declined steadily over those 20 years in both citizenship categories (National Science Foundation, 2014). The reports state that in 1994,



approximately 30 percent of doctoral recipients were first-generation students, and that number steadily declined to approximately 18 percent in 2014 (National Science Foundation, 2014). The citizenship trends differ for men and females, however. Male doctorate recipients are more likely than their female counterparts to be first-generation college students among temporary visa holders. The reverse is true among the U.S. citizen and permanent resident categories. Also, while the share of first-generation graduates among female temporary visa holders has remained nearly stable since 2002, the shares of first-generation graduates among the other three citizenship-sex groups continued to decline from 2002 to 2014 (National Science Foundation, 2016).

**Challenges for FGS.** The first-generation graduate students (FGS) have compounded challenges when they pursue graduate education. Strayhorn (2006) and Collier and Morgan (2006) suggest that these questions are embedded into three stages (a) The period in which the student is considering graduate school. (b) The process of applying to a program; and (c) Preparing to address the program's requirements.

Educational researchers have found that FGS already have had significant challenges in undergraduate and Master's education (Strayhorn, 2006; Collier and Morgan, 2008; Orbe, 2008; Merritt, 2008). These challenges are likely compounded when they pursue doctoral education. Therefore, peak experiences and motivational factors will help to meet the challenges of achieving a terminal degree.

There is more to acquiring a terminal degree than being able to do the coursework. According to Tinto (2012), students are more likely to succeed in classrooms that assess their performance and provide frequent feedback about their performance. The

more students are engaged socially with academic staff and peers, particularly in classroom activities, the more likely they are to succeed (Tinto, 2012). As students progress through the education system with varying degrees of capital, they accumulate knowledge and contacts that facilitate or inhibit their success (Clark & Corcoran, 1986). According to Bourdieu (1986), students develop economic, cultural, and social capital in ways impacted by financial resources, communities, and academic qualifications.

It seems reasonable to assume that students are likely to need several peak and motivating experiences to encourage them to persist to completion to succeed.

**Factors for FGS Success.** First-generation students desire a college degree, hoping for a bright future; unfortunately, only about 50 percent complete a bachelor's degree (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Academic challenges, social difficulties, and family pressures often compromise first-generation students' ability to complete their degree and often lead to ending their higher education earlier than planned (Quinn, Cornelius-White, MacGregor, & Ximena, 2015). First-generation students were less likely to have attended a research-intensive institution as undergraduates and had lower scores on reasoning than their counterparts (Roksa, Feldon & Maher, (2017). There are questions about what allows a small fraction of first-generation scholars to persevere to obtain that terminal degree with these identified factors. Therefore, a study focusing on identifying causes appears to be warranted.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem is that little is known about African American female doctoral graduates who are first-generation students. Minorities are underrepresented in doctoral programs and as doctoral graduates (National Science Foundation, 2015). There has been

an increase of 71 percent in Hispanics obtaining doctorates but only a 31 percent increase of African Americans who receive doctorates. (National Science Foundation, 2015). Of the 12,798 doctoral graduates who had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree in 2017, only 488 were African American Whites accounted for 3,711, and Asians accounted for 3967. Of the total doctorates earned in 2018 by United States citizens and permanent residents whose parents had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree, whites accounted for 70 percent. Blacks or African Americans accounted for 7 percent, Asians accounted for nine percent, Hispanics or Latino accounted for seven percent. Three percent identified as belonging to more than one race (National Science Foundation, 2018).

There is a lack of information in the research informing the public about what causes these -first-generation students to seek and sustain their educational quest by completing a doctorate. "We know virtually nothing about first-generation students' experiences and outcomes in doctoral programs (Gardner, 2013)". The literature speaks to the barriers they must overcome to persist to a Bachelor's Degree graduation. Still, little is known about what keeps this smaller percentage of students continuing to doctorate level (Collins, 2006). Barriers listed include: a) FGS have fewer resources to pay for college; b) nature of and time allotted to work differs from that of second-generation students; c) perceive faculty as "distant" or unconcerned with them as individuals; d)parents lack "college knowledge" related to navigating the college environment; e) report lower educational aspirations and f) more likely to enter college academically underprepared (Collins, 2006). At this point, we are not aware of the motivational factors that encourage first-generation students to seek a doctorate despite

the lack of resources and the lack of family history. An examination of motivational factors could assist other students in their persistence to a doctorate.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify factors that influence first-generation African American females to pursue a doctorate. I seek to investigate how they could persist and sustain the motivation to complete their doctorate. The researcher is interested in which factors, if any, impact their persistence. These factors are a) school experience, b) support system, and c) other life experiences. Under school experience, these factors could be considered: a) school they attend, b) sports participation, c) fraternity/sorority participation, and d) academic achievement. By school experience, I mean the First-Generation Students' experience in their educational journey, such as the school they attended. Whether the school they attend, whether public or private or urban or rural, impacts their desire to persist to the doctoral level. Under the support system, two factors could be considered: a) high school and college teachers' influence on their lives, and b) faculty support and engagement. By support system, I mean whether any particular support received during their educational career propelled them forward to achieve a doctorate. Under other life experiences, two variables could be considered: a) family stability and b) different self-identified experiences. By other life experiences, I mean what, if any, other experiences in their home life were a motivating factor in securing their doctorate. Specifically, this study seeks to determine what peak experiences and resources were present in African American Females First-Generation Students' lives that kept them on track for graduation.

## **Research Questions**

The following three research questions will guide this study:

- How does their previous trajectory impact first-generation doctoral graduates?
- Does the type of institution, whether historically Black colleges or predominantly white institutions, impact first-generation students?
- What peak experiences do first-generation doctoral graduates share in the educational journey?

## **Expected Outcomes**

I expect that these graduates will have similar experiences. I believe that peak experiences must occur in one's life to help one reach specific goals, and I believe there will be evidence of self-efficacy on the part of doctoral graduates. I think there will be similar stories from the participants in the project. I believe whatever the age of the participants, similarities will exist. I expect some differences and want to include them in the study, but I hope to see more similarities than differences. I wish to develop a profile of the First-Generation African American female doctoral student. This profile will help colleges and universities seek students who fit this profile and encourage or offer experiences deemed necessary for success. This study will provide support for first-generation students who are contemplating a doctorate.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study will be Womanism/Black Feminism. Alice Walker first coined the term Womanism in a list of stories called *Coming Apart* in 1979. The term was taken from historically relevant statements about young Black females:

they act like a woman; they are interested in doing grown-up things. It has also been said that being womanish is to be responsible or in charge, serious, and not childish (Walker, 1983). Womanism supports the idea that the woman's culture, which in this case is the focal point of intersection as opposed to class or some other characteristics, is not the element of femininity but rather the lens through which femininity exists (Gillman, 2006). My working definition of Womanism is a theory based on Black females' lived experiences, working to reduce the negative images of Black females and restoring a balance to the community through a lens of spirituality.

Walker gives two meanings for "womanism" in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1983). She sees Womanism as rooted in Black females' history of gender and racial oppression. Walker suggests that Black females' history fosters a womanist view of the world primarily by being a Black woman. The term womanism comes from the Black nationalist movement based on the belief that Blacks and white cannot function as equals while in the same territory or participating in the same social institutions (Pinkney, 1976; Van Deburg, 1992). Walker's Womanism is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, males, and females." Womanism differs from feminism, which embraces the notion of equality for females only and not working toward a solution to end both sexism and racism (Hill, 1996). Walker (1983) describes Womanism in four different ways: a) a womanist was a Black feminist or feminist of color; b) a woman who loves other females, sexually or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers females' culture, females' emotional flexibility and females' strength, sometimes loves individual men, sexually, and/or non-sexually; c) womanism loves music, loves dance, loves the moon, loves the Spirit, loves love and food, roundness, loves struggle, loves the folk, loves

herself. *Regardless*: and d) "Womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender." Her view is that feminism falls under Womanism's umbrella, which is more comprehensive than feminism (Walker, 1983). Shirley Williams takes the view when she notes in contrast to feminism, "womanist inquiry...assumes that it can talk effectively and productively about men (1990, p.70)."

The main link between Black Feminism and Womanism is that Black women subscribe to them both. Black Feminism grew out of the Feminist movement of the 1970s, so its emphasis is the need for equality of Black women with White women, secondarily with men. Black Feminism is based on five tenets. Those tenets, as identified by Richie (2012), are:

- Interlocking Oppressions: identifying the negative images of Black women's sexuality.
- Standpoint Epistemology: is understanding that those who have lived the experience are best suited to evaluate it.
- Everyday knowledge: is understanding that wisdom can be matriculated from shared experiences.
- Dialectical Images in the United States: identifying the conflict between Black women and White men; and
- Social Justice Praxis: challenging the powers to conduct research that includes the Black woman's experience.

Similarly, Womanism has six components, as identified by Walker (1983):

- A Black feminist or a feminist of color: like standpoint epistemology. Only a woman of color can understand other women of color's struggles and are best suited to evaluate.
- A woman who loves other women: support other women similarly as Black feminism.
- Appreciates women's culture and strength identifies the strength of Black women.
- Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and females, believes that Black women and Black men together can succeed.
- Not a separatist, except for health reasons, believes in inclusivity with women and men, and
- They love music, love dance, love the Spirit, and love herself: those who identify as womanists love themselves and their heritage.

The four points of connection and similarity are that a) both believe in supporting Black women, b) both believe in recognizing and loving who they are as Black women; c) endorses other Black women; and d) believe that lived experiences develop wisdom. Omalade (1994) indicated that Black feminism is sometimes referred to as Womanism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by Black women who are themselves part of the Black community's efforts to achieve equity and liberty.

I believe the best way to research the experiences of Black females is through Womanist epistemology. Womanist epistemology centers on the everyday experiences of African females as a prerequisite to addressing philosophical problems related to the concepts of knowledge and truth (Taylor, 1998; Berman, Ford, & Campbell, 1991). Collins notes that from an "African American woman's standpoint, individuals who lived through the



experiences are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences (p. 209).” The importance of experience as a vehicle for developing and testing knowledge is emphasized by womanists (Collins, 1990). Luttrell (1989) found the class and racial differences with the valuing of experiential learning. Black females received support from Black communities and institutions for experiential knowledge, whereas white communities and institutions did not support experiential knowledge. While White working-class females felt they had experiential knowledge, they did not view it as natural intelligence; however, Black females did. The analysis of knowledge from a womanist epistemological framework also involves evaluating the individual making a claim. This includes personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy. Tied together, they comprise an ethic of caring.

### **Overview and Context of Methods**

I used a Phenomenology research design for this qualitative study. I developed a questionnaire instrument to have questions to allow participants to answer in their own words and tell their stories about their doctoral journey. A sample of eight to twelve participants who self-identify as African American and females from birth will be participants for this study. Participants will possess doctorates that span across all earned doctorates. Participants will be interviewed in person or virtually, so a better connection can be made to develop a relationship with the participants. Answers from the interviews will be audio-recorded and handwritten and transcribed for review.

With a phenomenological design, Moustakas (1994) indicates that the researcher must be present with the participants and must set aside all preconceived notions and beliefs. However, since I am a Black female who identifies as a womanist, I cannot set aside my

own lived experiences when interviewing my participants. I will not be totally unbiased in this effort, as I will have experienced some of the same life events as my participants. Understanding my role as a guide for the interview will help me obtain straightforward information from all participants. This method could allow for the most knowledge and the most essential information to be shared. According to the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics for 2018, African American females are the population for the study because more African American females graduate with doctorate degrees than African American males. In particular, African American females who are first-generation doctorates will be the sample for my study. These Participants will span across all doctorate levels.

A qualitative approach will be used to get first-hand answers and information from the participants. They will answer questions, not choose solutions from a prepared questionnaire. This method should allow participants to respond freely and give answers they perceive answers the questions. A questionnaire with open-ended questions will enable participants to think for themselves about what has impacted their ability to reach a doctorate level of education. All participants will be asked to sign a consent form before participating and will be offered a copy of the project's IRB approval. Participants will be notified that there is no monetary value for participation in the project and will be informed that they may exit the project at any time.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is critical to get to the essence of a first-generation African American woman who achieved a doctorate. This study will provide information directly from the participants' mouths about how they were affected by the school where they received

their doctorate, the peak experiences they had that encouraged them to succeed, and how their background affected their desire and ability to persist to a doctorate. Gardner (2013) indicated that "researchers know virtually nothing about the experiences and outcomes in a doctoral program." In addition, while numerous undergraduate studies have examined how parental education relates to college access and success, first-generation students have received remarkably limited attention at the doctoral level (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Grodsky & Jackson, 2009).

Statistics are utilized to inform the reader of how many African American females actually receive their doctorate, but little research has been done to determine why they receive their doctorate. This study will include the use of a questionnaire of open-ended questions that participants will be asked. This study will answer questions that general statistics and percentages will not answer. It will be a qualitative study where eight to twelve Black females will be able to give answers that can be examined for similarities to determine if there is a Black female, first-generation doctorate profile.

Talking with FGS about their motivation, resources, and peak experiences of how they persisted in completing their doctorate is highly important to any college or university. Doctoral education develops human resources critical to a nation's progress – scientists, engineers, researchers, and scholars who create and share new knowledge and new ways of thinking that lead, directly and indirectly, to innovative products, services, and works of art. In doing so, doctorate recipients contribute to a nation's economic growth, cultural development, and a rising standard of living. (National Science Foundation, 2018, p.1).

## **Background of the Researcher**

This researcher identifies as a First-Generation Student, where she and her siblings have often wondered why they could be so motivated to do so much with their lives. Comparing their lives to that of their cousins' lives, four of the six children of the researcher's parents received at least a Bachelor's degree. Two have obtained a Master's degree. One received an electrician license, and the oldest decided at age 60 to become a Certified Nursing Assistant. I grew up in a two-parent home with the father working outside the house and a stay-at-home, disabled mother. The researcher's father completed the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and the mother indicated that she dropped out in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. When the researcher's mother was in her forties, she studied for and passed the General Equivalency Degree (GED).

Excelling in school was always expected of the children, and homework was completed each night with the parent's involvement. The third child was the first child to become involved in school activities at an early age. That child chose to start playing the flute in grade 4; she participated in school plays and had speaking parts. That child read four to five books weekly when school was in recess. That child also played on the basketball team and participated in any activity that was extracurricular and appropriate. While in high school, that same child participated in the marching and concert band. She became the first chair of the flutist section. This third child played basketball and was also co-captain of the varsity cheerleading squad. All those things meant nothing more than having fun as a child, but now the researcher has learned that those were peak experiences. Peak experiences motivated that third child to go on to college and obtain a Bachelor's Degree. Following the third child's footsteps, the other three siblings

experienced peak experiences in their lives and received their Bachelor's Degree after high school.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction that provides the general context and purpose of first-generation African American female students who graduate with a doctoral degree, a theoretical framework for presenting why African American females persist to the doctoral degree. Chapter two provides a review of related literature on first-generation scholars, peak experiences, barriers for success, one-parent homes, and the Black woman. Chapter 3 describes the methodology employed in this study, the population, sample, and data elements used in the study. Chapters four and five provide significant findings, discussions, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

This study provides a critical exploration of first-generation Black females who have succeeded in obtaining their doctorate. The investigation of first-generation Black females who have received their doctorate is needed because little information is known about how this minority has become the most educated group in America. This literature review examines the essential concepts, agents, and complexities surrounding the discussion of first-generation Black females who reached the pinnacle degree. Topics of motivation, resources, and support will be explored, along with barriers they had to overcome.

The key theme of this student is first-generation Black females who received a doctorate. The research literature on first-generation Black females who have received a doctorate is comprised of four components: (a) historical perspective of the Black woman in America, (b) first-generation students, (c) how peak experiences affect educational attainment, and (d) previous studies on this particular group. The Black woman's historical perspective looks at how Black females were treated in America, even before there was an America. Numerous barriers have and could deter first-generation students from striving for their doctorate. This review will look at those barriers. Resources are always needed to complete higher education, so discussing what resources are available to first-generation Black students is included. Peak experiences occur in everyone's life at different times and in different ways. An exploration of peak experiences and their importance to educational success will be a part of the literature review. The guiding question for this

literature review asks, "What are the factors that impact first-generation Black females getting their doctorate?"

### **Black Females**

This section is divided into three parts; one is a historical perspective of Black females from the 1400s. The second section is a review of strides made for females over the initial years, and thirdly, today's Black females. The Black woman's history tells many tales of defiance, protection, and security of Black females who have fought for their own lives and the lives of their families (Berry & Gross, 2020). Black females have protested in many ways to be accepted as equal females in the 1700's to 1970's woman's liberation movement to today's female entrepreneurs and leaders in every facet of society (Berry & Gross, 2020).

**Historical Perspective.** This section is about Black females and a perspective from when Black females entered what is now known as the United States and their treatment and strength. This section will help us understand how Black females have persevered and why it is crucial to study the factors that impact first-generation students' Black female doctorates. A woman of African descent, Isabel de Olvera, petitioned the May of Mexico for self-protection on an upcoming journey in January 1600. (Berry & Gross, 2020). She embarked on a journey with Juan de Onate on his expedition to New Spain (Berry & Gross, 2020). The trip was also to travel to present-day Arizona, Florida, and New Mexico.

Isabel pleaded with the Mayor stating, "I am going on the expedition and have reason to fear that I may be annoyed by some individual since I am mulatto (Hammond, 2008, p.31-32)." She ended her petition with a declaration: "I demand justice (Hammond,

2008, pp. 31-32)." Females of African descent have lived in this country long before slavery. Many of the females were free and able to travel in different explorations of the land we now know as America. Little is recorded in history about the Black woman during this time, as more focus was on researching new worlds. "Black females are sprinkled in small notations of the United States' history before 1619 (Berry & Gross, 2020, p.11)." What is recorded is mainly from Spanish archival records. Explorations of southwest America included conflicts with indigenous people. These conflicts were often seen as opportunities for the Black females on the exploration. Many Black females left the ships and lived with the indigenous people (Berry & Gross, 2020).

After the beginning of African enslavement, "African females arrived on the continent of North America in 1627 and were only a group of three (Berry & Gross, 2020, p. 31)." However, by 1630, there were over 60 enslaved Black people and 300 white settlers. By mid-century, enslaved African people accounted for "25 percent of the community (Moore, 2005 pp. 37-38)". Black females and men were responsible for building the infrastructure that is now known as New York (Berry & Gross, 2020). As early as 1643, the Virginia Assembly allowed for the taxation of African females' work, but a similar tax was not imposed on white females. Black females were expected to work in the fields, while white females were not. Some African females defied their enslavement and filed petitions for freedom. One woman, Elizabeth Keye, the daughter of a white man and an enslaved Black woman, filed a petition for her liberty and the liberty of her child (Berry & Gross, 2020). She won her suit and was one of the first Black females to obtain freedom through the legislative process (Berry & Gross, 2020). Some Black females defied their enslavement by running away. Their slavers would put out advertisements



offering rewards for their return. There are indications that some females chose death over enslavement (Berry & Gross, 2020). Females who white slavers had raped became pregnant and possibly could not separate the violence against them from the child they were carrying, so they would kill the child at birth. Other Black females who did not want to subject their children to a life of slavery would choose to kill the child at birth (Berry & Gross, 2020).

**Strides made by females.** Throughout the history known of Black people, Black females have been resilient, resourceful, and ready to take on the times' challenge. Educating females have been seen as a way to "uplift the entire race" (Thomas & Jackson, 2004, p. 360). During slavery of the 1700s and 1800s, Harriet Tubman utilized the Underground Railroad, which helped slaves move from south to north to enjoy freedom. Sojourner Truth, an escaped slave, became an abolitionist and activist for Black people's freedom and females' rights (Smithsonian, 2014). In 1872, Ida Gray became the first Black female to graduate from the University of Michigan Dental School (JBHE, 2015). In the early 1900s, Madam C. J. Walker was the first Black woman to become a millionaire by starting her own hair product company for Black females (Guinness, 2020).

Georgina Simpson received the first Ph.D. in German in 1921 (JBHE, 2015). During the same year, Simpson, Sadie Alexander, and Evan Dykes also received their Ph.Ds. In 1931, Jane Matilda Bolin graduated from Yale Law School and became the first Black female judge in 1939 (JBHE, 2015). In 1956, Lila Fenwick was the first Black woman to graduate from Harvard Law School. Then in the 1950s, we had Rosa Parks, a working woman who became a civil rights leader and civil rights advocate and worked side by side with Martin Luther King, Jr. (Branch, 1988). Because she refused to give up

her seat to a white man in December 1955, which sparked the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, Rosa became known as "the first lady of civil rights" (Pub. L, 1999). In the 1960s, Maya Angelou worked with Martin Luther King, Jr. as an activist who also was an artist, poet, singer, and writer whose lines are known by most modern-day females (Braxton, 1999). She then became Oprah Winfrey's close friend during the 1980s and was the first Black woman to read a poem at the United States' inauguration. Oprah Winfrey, an abused child, a college dropout, became one of the world's wealthiest females (Nsehe, 2015). She developed her talk show and her own television network. She became so well known that her last name is seldom used; she is simply known as Oprah. In 1972, Kellie Parker became the first full-time professor at Columbia Law School. Eileen Southern became the first Black woman to be tenured at Harvard University in 1975. Significantly, Black women like Johnette Betsch Cole, who became the first Black woman president of Spelman College in 1987, have given credence to the fact that Black females seek and succeed in higher education despite obstacles. Even young Black women, such as Brittney Exline, age 15, was the youngest Black female to enroll at an Ivy League University in 2007, show the importance of education at any age (JBHE, 2015).

Since that time, we have had the first Black First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, a first-generation college student who became well educated, articulate, and outspoken (Obama, 2018). After serving as First-Lady, Mrs. Obama wrote her story about her heritage and what it took to come into her own. The book *Becoming* sold over 10 million copies. Mrs. Obama has been recognized as the most admired woman globally for the last two years (GMA, 2019). Other Black women of note are Venus-Evan Winters, who wrote *Teaching Black Girls: Residing in urban classrooms* in 2005;

Kimberly Wilkins Crenshaw, who developed the theory of Intersectionality in 2017; and Kali Groom and Dana Berry, both Ph. Ds wrote the book *A Black Women's History Of The United States in 2020*. All these females faced adversity and overcame obstacles to achieve success in their own rights.

**Today's Black Females.** This subtheme of where females are today compares to how Black females were initially treated and how Black females have been strong throughout history. Great strides have been made since the time of slavery. Black people are the most influential people of modern-day culture (Whiting, Campbell, & Pearson-McNeil, 2013). "Fifty-four percent of the Black population in the United States are females, and 52 percent of Blacks who are employed are females (Whiting, Campbell, & Pearson-McNeil, 2013, p. 6)". According to Helm, 2016, "Black females are now the most educated group in the United States" (p.1). According to Pearson-McNeil and Campbell (2014), 62 percent of Black females believe in supporting their ethnic culture, and embracing it is crucial. Almost 60 percent of Black females believe in supporting minority-owned businesses and believe in religious services (Pearson-McNeil & Ebanks, 2014). Thirty-one percent of Black females pray daily (Pearson-McNeil & Ebanks, 2014). Although not always valued by society, the Black woman has become the nucleus of the Black family.

Black females serve many roles in the Black community. Black females are heads of households, entrepreneurs, legislators, primary breadwinners, business leaders, and the Black community (Pearson-McNeil & Ebanks, 2014). Eighty-seven percent of Black females believe their heritage and culture are essential to whom they are, compared to 59 percent of non-Blacks (Pearson-McNeil & Ebanks, 2014). The church is an integral part

of the Black woman's heritage. Black females look to the church for activism in the community, support, and trusted leadership (Pearson-McNeil & Ebanks, 2014). Because of the struggles and changes that have occurred for the Black woman, it is essential to study what factors impact first-generation Black females achieving their doctorate.

### **First-Generation Students**

This section will explore and identify the traits of first-generation students. These traits include backgrounds, ethnicity, family income structure. It is important to understand who a first-generation student is to understand the need to study the females who have persevered to obtain a doctorate despite being first-generation in their family to attend college. In this section, we will discuss items that have been identified in research as obstacles for first-generation students. Those obstacles covered will be lack of preparation, lack of resources, and campus climate. Historically, postsecondary education access has been limited for certain racial and ethnic groups and groups of low socioeconomic statuses (Falcon, 2015). The Post-secondary National Policy Institute PNPI (2016) identifies first-generation undergraduate students as "predominantly non-white and from a low-income background, face a myriad of financial, academic, and social barriers to entering and completing college as the first in their families to navigate college admissions, financial aid, and postsecondary coursework." (p.1) More commonly, first-generation students are defined as students with parents who did not complete a Bachelor's degree or had not attended a four-year university or college at all. (Cataldi, Bennett, Chen & RTI, 2018; Chen & Carroll, 2005). First-generation students usually do not have the same support as second-generation students have (Naumann, Bandolos, & Gutkin, 2003).

## Statistics

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), in the 2011-2012 academic school year, first-generation students comprised approximately 34 percent of the student composition. Additionally, there was an additional percent (28) whose parents had some college experience. Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2016) indicated the following regarding enrollment/degree attainment for first-generation students:

1. First-generation students were more likely to attend community colleges than their peers.
2. For-profit schools were more enticing to first-generation students than to non-FGCS: non-FGCS made up 8 percent of enrollees, while 19 percent of first-generation college students enrolled in for-profit schools.
3. First-generation students were more likely to attend college part-time than their peers, and
4. First-generation students were more inclined to enroll in online courses than their peers (p.1)

According to NCES (2016), it will take six years of college to obtain a Bachelor's degree for about 24 percent of low-income, first-generation students. On the other hand, 55 percent of students who are not considered low-income will complete their degrees within six years (NCES, 2016).

**Barriers to Success.** This subsection is designed to focus on barriers and obstacles for first-generation students to complete a college degree. To explain why a study is needed for what factors impact Black female, first-generation students seeking a

doctorate, we must look at the obstacles they must overcome to obtain a Bachelor's degree. Barriers include lack of resources, the impact of one-parent homes, campus climate, and lack of pre-college preparation. Obstacles faced by first-generation students can vary and could affect their ability to complete college in five years or at all. Noted challenges have been identified as students who were more often non-English speaking, came from homes with one parent (Bui, 2002), and have been less prepared academically in high school (Jehangir, 2009). Jehangir (2009) noted that there are unique barriers that first-generation students face while obtaining their postsecondary education. Some first-generation students are challenged with being the go-between of their two new lives. College life and family life can conflict for some first-generation students. Frequently, students do not feel like they fit with either one (Oldfield, 2007; Rendon, 1992).

Factors affecting graduation and persistence for first-generation students are varied but relatively easy to understand. Tate et al. (2014) found that "the perceived ability to conduct graduate-level research was a significant predictor of actively pursuing graduate school in low-socioeconomic status groups and first-generation students from underrepresented groups" (pp. 427-441). According to Ziol-Guest, Duncan, and Kalil (2015), "one of the most alarming social trends in the past 40 years is the increasing educational disadvantage of children raised in low-income families." (p. 37). The vast differences between reading and math achievement from low-income children and high-income children are more substantial now than years before. One important reason for this difference is the difference in income itself, which has changed during the same period (Ziol-Guest, Duncan, & Kalil, 2015).

Research finds differences between first-generation students and non-first-generation students in financial access, enrollment, and persistence (PNPI, 2016). Smolarek (2019) indicated that first-generation graduate students "not only continue to struggle with the same issue they grappled with during their undergraduate year, but struggles are amplified in a graduate setting." (p.1). In a graduate school setting, social connections, study habits, academically appropriate language, and presentation become critical to their success (Smolarek 2019). Based on the barriers to success and the lack of resources for first-generation students, it is understandable why a study to determine the factors that impact first-generation students who seek a doctorate is warranted.

**Lack of Resources.** This subtheme looks at the lack of resources that many first-generation students face trying to obtain a college degree. Resources can be financial technology, transportation, etc. This sub-theme will explore how a lack of necessary resources impacts first-generation Black females who sought a doctorate.

According to Engle and Tinto (2008), low-income, first-generation students left college more often than second-generation students than students who did not suffer financially. Their report in 2008 indicated that low-income first-generation college students were less likely to receive any monetary support from their families. Students may have to work and may have obligations that limit their success in achieving a college degree. First-generation students are more likely to have to live off-campus, and many cannot take a whole load of classes. Finances are a barrier for first-generation college students, but not the only obstacle. There are other barriers, such as having a sense of belonging, emotional support during school, mentors, or academic supports. Pell Grants to low-income, first-generation students are seen to provide the opportunity for a college

degree. However, only 49 percent of first-generation students who receive Pell grants earn a bachelor's degree at the institution where they started (Whistle & Hiler, 2018). In the academic year of 2015-16, nearly 50 percent of Pell recipients were independent, were 24 years old or older, were independent with children, and most likely people of color (NCES, 2015). The Education Trust and Seton Hall professor Robert Kelchen compared outcomes for Pell and non-Pell students. Their analysis found that overall, Pell students graduate at a lower rate than non-Pell students, a percentage rate of 18 percent lower (Nichols, 2015).

For years, there has been research related to outcomes of children living in poverty. More research is being conducted to include stress and adverse childhood experiences (Duncan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2018). Becker (1991) looked at poverty in childhood through a different lens. His perspective was based on resources and investment and found that children living in poverty lag behind their more advantaged peers. Becker (1991) believes that parents who have less time and less money to invest in their children led to their children accomplishing less. His perspective was as follows: "Economic adversity leads to less parental investment in children, which leads to worse cognitive and noncognitive outcomes, which leads to less schooling, and eventually leads to lower wage rates, (p.85)." Becker believed that one thing leads to another, and the result was lower wages earned, which the families' ability to thrive.

Financially disadvantaged families seem to experience more stress in their everyday lives than more financially advantaged families. According to the U.S. Census (2019), Black families earn a median income of \$41,361 compared to White families' median income of \$70,642. Families at the lower end of the income spectrum find their



income has remained relatively stagnant from 1966 to 2014. In 1996, families in the bottom 20 percentile had an average income of \$15,000, and in 2014, that average income rose to \$16,100. (Chaudry, Wimer, McCartney, Frohlich, Campbell, Swenson, Ollerick & Hauan, 2016). Low-income families struggle to pay bills and cannot always afford needed goods and services. That coupled with outside stressors, i.e., job(s), car, insurance, church obligations, and healthy food, create higher levels of stress in the home and lead to pressure on the children as they internalize the feelings of the parents (Kessler and Cleary, 1980; McLeod & Kessler, 1999). Frequently, stress spills over into relationship conflict and distress, which can and is linked to harsh parenting practices, less nurturing, less stimulating, and less responsive reactions to their children's needs (Duncan, Kalil & Ziol-Guest, 2018). The Centers for Disease Control (2020) identify these experiences as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which are more prevalent in low-income homes. ACEs can cause abuse, neglect, mental illness, substance abuse, and childhood witness of crime and violence (Centers for Disease Control, 2020).

Engle and Tinto (2008) believe many of the resources needed by first-generation students lie at the institutions' feet. They suggest ways to increase resources through more work-study opportunities, increased grant aid, and scholarships, including a movement away from merit-only scholarships. They also suggest financial literacy programs before students enter college to prepare them and their parents for the resources that will be needed and how to access possible resources available (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

While in college, first-generation students often do not have the financial resources they need to purchase items necessary for success. In today's colleges, having access to a computer is paramount. Many students own their laptops, but first-generation students

may have to go to the library to use computers there, and this can cause them to be late with an assignment or make it easier to fall behind in studies. With so many first-generation students working off-campus, this is an additional hardship for students. First-generation college students often lack social support as parents do not know what to expect for their children and cannot adequately prepare or support them through college (Dortch, 2016). First-generation students often do not know how to approach their professors for clarification or cannot ask for help when needed (Dortch, 2016). First-generation students often wait until they are at risk before reaching out for help (Dortch, 2016). Although professors may be willing to help their students, they can only do so when asked.

**Campus Climate.** Campus climate is designated as a barrier for first-generation students and Black students to get fully involved in campus settings. Research reveals several reasons for the climate of a predominantly white institution. This sub-theme will discuss statistics on Black students attending predominantly white institutions and the challenges many face.

It has been over 60 years since *The Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, which allowed Black students to attend white schools (Harvey, Harvey, & King, 2004). Black students now have options to attend a Historically Black University of College (HBCU) or attend a predominantly white university in the twenty-first century. NCES (2019) indicated that there were 4,360 degree-granting institutions in the United States in 2016 of which, 107 were Historically Black Colleges and Universities that same year. The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) indicated that of the 19,841,000 students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in 2016, 2.7 million were Black students. NCES

(2017) also shows that there were 223,515 students enrolled in HBCUs. The majority of Black students seeking a degree do so on a predominantly white institution campus.

With Black students allowed on any predominantly white institutions, inclusion has been at the forefront of Black students' transition (Harvey, Harvey & King, 2004). As a small percentage of students, who are Black on PWI campuses, it is essential that students feel they are wanted and accepted on these campuses. Everything is new for first-generation college students. Learning how to maneuver a college campus can be difficult without guidance. Tinto (1987) indicated that students need a connection to their campus community to persist and graduate. Guidance or advice for first-generation Black students can come from different perspectives: older students, faculty, staff, and mentors. Research has indicated that there are issues for Black students on a predominantly white campus that can hamper their success and cause them to drop out (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). Blacks may experience negative race-related problems and high levels of stress (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). Although this is the twenty-first century, hundreds of years beyond slavery, racism is still alive on college campuses (Anderson, 2017). Confederate flags posters with cotton stalks have been pinned to schools' bulletin boards (Anderson, 2017). As recently as 2017, white supremacists and Neo-Nazis have marched on one college campus, followed up by a rally for white supremacists the next day.

First-generation students noted that challenges on campus include a lack of role models or mentors, a disconnection between cultures, an absence of mentors or role models, and a lack of knowledge about higher education (Ortiz & Heavy-Runner, 2003). First-generation Black students must learn to cope with their feelings about their negative experiences (Green & Chwalisz, 2007). With Black professors' absence, students often

feel discouraged and isolated from their college campus life (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, & Han, 2009).

**Lack of preparation.** Lack of college preparation is framed in the research literature as an obstacle or barrier for first-generation students (Choy, 2001; Cushman, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996; & Warburton et al., (2001). We must explore why there is a lack of preparation among first-generation students that do not appear in non-first-generation students. According to Choy, 2001; Cushman, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996; & Warburton et al. (2001), first-generation students leave high school having completed a less than rigorous course of study. Standardized test scores are consistently lower among first-generation students when compared to non-first-generation students (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; & Warburton et al., 2001). According to Cushman (2007) and Robinson (1996), first-generation students appear to be less confident than non-first-generation students. In a study conducted by Atherton (2014), students were asked to rank themselves pertaining to specific criteria for college. Of the first-generation students who participated in the study, students who had parents who attended college ranked themselves higher than those who were first-generation students (Atherton, 2014). Non-first-generation students who sat for the SAT verbal test were projected to score much higher than first-generation students. Those students who had two parents that graduated college had a 48 percent chance of achieving higher than average; those with one parent as a college graduate had a 32 percent chance of scoring higher than average (Atherton, 2014). When it came to mathematical skills, the probability of achieving above-average was 38 percent and 20 percent higher for those who had two parents who graduated from college, and one parent who graduated from college, respectively (Atherton, 2014).

Interestingly, however, there was only a small difference between high school grade point averages for all first-generation and non-first-generation students.

According to Pascarella (2004), first-generation students appear to be disadvantaged concerning high school academic preparation. Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001) indicated that first-generation students were not likely to take advanced placement courses in high school as non-first-generation students. First-generation students are less likely to enroll in a rigorous curriculum leading up to college, so many students need remedial work when entering college. These same students tend to be less sure of themselves and their abilities. (Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Zanosik, 2009). Because of their lack of confidence, first-generation students were less likely to ask for help from professors.

Atherton (2014) reports that first-generation students reported incidents of certain obstacles. These included job responsibilities, poor math skills, poor English skills, unorthodox study habits, family pressures, and feelings of depression or anxiety. Any two of the influences combined can cause a lack of persistence in obtaining their degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Under lack of preparation, it has also been noted that there is a growing number of first-generation students who are immigrants and, thereby, speak limited English (Gildersleeve, 2010; Stebleton, Huesman & Kuzhabekova, 2010). A lack of command of the English language is an additional obstacle for first-generation students, making it harder for FGS to persist and graduate with a college degree.

### **Peak Experiences**

This section will discuss peak experiences. According to Green (2010), "every student who enters kindergarten must have at least six peak experiences to graduate high school"

(p. 213). If this is true, one can assume it will take many more peak experiences for a student to graduate with a doctorate. This section is divided into two subthemes: the definition and impact of peak experiences. Understanding peak experiences and how they impact a student will help us understand what factors affect first-generation Black females who obtained their doctorate.

**Definition.** Maslow (1964) described peak experiences as "feelings of gratitude, fortune, feeling lucky, and graced" (p. 73). The concept of peak experiences comes from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which he developed in the 1950s (Scott & Evans, 2010). Maslow called these episodes peak experience because, in his studies, he discovered that people reached their highest levels of perfection. (Maslow, 1962). Maslow described peak experiences as an essential goal in life (Maslow, 1962). Ebersole (1972) also described peak experiences as the "best moments of one's life" (p. 631). Before Maslow's studies created the term peak experiences, there was another description of the same type of experiences, but they were related to religious experiences. The same feelings were identified and were documented as spiritual, mystical experiences. One such occasion was when Pope Benedict indicated that during a mystical episode, God inspired him to retire (Kingston, 2013). Mystical episodes were viewed as absolute proof of God's existence and encouraged others to experience Him as well. One mystical episode recorded by the hermit Wulfric of Hasselbury indicated that his soul was taken to heaven during this episode. He was able to envision all the glory of God. After this episode, he continued to remember those wonderful, blissful feelings (Watson, 2011).

Peak experiences can occur in anyone's life. Still, most occur during specific events such as religious and nature experiences, artistic activities, athletic events, or

intimate times with a member of one's family or with a friend (Polyson, 1985). Peak experiences may occur during scientific research discoveries, in finding the answer that one was searching for appears, a type of eureka moment (Charlton, 1998). Other examples of peak experiences occur when performing what may seem dangerous activities to many of us, such as sky diving, car racing, climbing a mountain, or motorcycle racing. Whaley (2008) indicated that peak experiences could occur while playing music, either alone or with a choir when one gets lost in the music. The enjoyment is beyond the average musical experience.

Self-efficacy can have help with reaching peak experiences. Self-efficacy is described as the strength of one's belief in their ability to achieve their goals (Whitner, 2017). A lack of self-efficacy can lead to a pattern of hidden, normalizing behaviors that lead to an abandonment of the pursuit of desired goals (Whitner, 2017). Self-esteem is frequently confused with self-efficacy, but the two are not the same. One could have high self-esteem, believing that they could do something if they wanted to do it. That same person can suffer from low self-efficacy where one considers that I probably don't want it bad enough to finish it. High self-efficacy is the optimistic strength of your belief in your ability to complete specific tasks that lead to your desired outcomes, like achieving a doctorate. High self-esteem may be a factor in achieving peak experiences.

**Impact of Peak Experiences.** The effects of peak experiences vary from person to person, but the experiences are of a positive nature. With peak experiences, there are five possible aftereffects, according to Maslow (1962). They include: (a) a changed view of oneself and increase in knowledge (b) a changed view of one's relationship with others, (c) a changed view of the world, a broader view of philosophy and nature, (d)

increased feeling of creativity and expressiveness, and (e) increased ability to make decisions (Maslow, 1962). In education, the teacher is the catalyst for peak experiences (Haberlin, 2017). There are two vital measures of peak experiences in the school: the student's participation and the sense of belonging (Wilms, 2003). When peak experiences occur in the classroom, students are more involved in the subject matter, the projects assigned, and the learning experience (Gilmore, 2014). Teachers must build environments that allow for peak experiences by understanding that each student needs positive feedback and praise for even the smallest accomplishment. Students who are praised and included in class projects experience peak experiences. A study conducted by Haberlin (2017) indicated that students experienced peak experiences when being awarded the student of the week jersey, when moving their conduct clip up a level, and when being challenged with topics that encouraged them to think. Students experience peak experiences when making a great play in a ball game, whether football, basketball, soccer, or baseball. Students included in a group have more peak experiences than those who do not participate in group activities (Gilmore, 2014).

Maslow indicated that peak experiences occur unexpectedly and that when one experiences a peak experience, "they become more accepting and more loving, which makes them more honest, innocent and spontaneous (Maslow, 1964, p.73)". Peak experiences make one feel alive and that life is worth living (Maslow, 1964). Maslow (1964) identified 14 *Being Values* that one can gain from having a peak experience. The list includes truth, goodness, beauty, wholeness, dichotomy-transcendence, aliveness, uniqueness, perfection and necessity, completion, justice and order, simplicity, richness, effortlessness, playfulness, and self-sufficiency. All positive attributes can only enhance



one's life. Because of these effects on students, it is imperative to determine what factors impacted first-generation Black doctorate students to succeed.

### **Relevant Studies**

This section reviews previous studies conducted on first-generation students, Black females and a comparison of Black and White college students. The following is just a sampling of studies that have been completed and shows there is a need for a different type of study. These studies will provide insight into what has already been researched and show a lack of research on the Black female first-generation doctorate and the impact of peak experiences in their lives.

**Resilience & Emotional Intelligence.** The first study was conducted with 100 participants, 26 males, and 74 females, at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The research aimed to determine if there is a difference between first and non-first-generation students regarding their emotional intelligence and resilience. The First-Generation Foundation indicates that 89 percent of low-income first-generation students exit college without completing a degree within six years (Alvarado, Spatariu, & Woodbury, 2017). The University of North Carolina Office of Undergraduate Retention (2014) indicated that obstacles to completion might include cultural conflict, limited resources, lack of financial support, inadequate academic preparation, and limited knowledge of college. As research has previously stated, first-generation students might need tools to support them with the stress and complications of their inadequacies (Alvarado, Spatariu, & Woodbury, 2017).

Non-first-generation students have parents who know what to expect in college and have fewer obstacles to overcome. The two variables studied in this research were emotional intelligence and resilience. Both psychological variables could be used as tools to overcome difficulties. Alvarado, Spatariu, and Woodbury (2017) indicated that people with higher emotional intelligence were less likely to report stressful events. Resilient people can use positive emotion in cases of stressful situations and usually produce better outcomes (Alvarado, Spatariu, & Woodbury, 2017). The study hypothesized based on previous reviews regarding first-generation students; the researchers believed that lack of resilience was a factor for first-generation students leaving college before completing a degree (Alvarado, Spatariu, & Woodbury, 2017).

However, the study results showed that first-generation students had a higher resilience level than non-first-generation students. The researchers thought this was possibly due to having to handle stress before entering college. The emotional intelligence was lower in first-generation students. The researchers indicated that it is important to improve students' emotional intelligence related to learning strategies, processing new information, and adapting to learning environments. This study suggests that since GPA was not affected by emotional intelligence in this study, resilience or emotional intelligence may not correlate with student success.

**The Strength from Within.** Another recent study conducted by Deniece Dortch in 2016 examined two Black females in doctoral students attending a predominantly white institution. Both students had developed and maintained peer relationships, which helped them persist to the doctorate. Both females were a part of an African American writing group. Both believed this writing group contributed to their success. One student

indicated that she used them for academic, mental, and social support because the writing group was comprised of African American students. Both females indicated that there were supportive faculty and staff, which helped them through their journey. Both females reported that being one of only a few Black females at predominantly white institutions influenced their ability to ask for help when difficulty arose. One participant stated that she felt the need to complete her coursework alone and did not understand that asking others for help was expected. One participant indicated that she experienced a high degree of anxiety when she did not understand the assignment. When deciding the most significant barrier for their success, both indicated "they" were the most significant barrier. One noted that if she had asked for help, she would have finished earlier. Both females saw their obtaining their degree to cement their future success and life outcomes (Dortch, 2016).

Both participants indicated that vicarious experiences of others and verbal persuasion from others who preceded them was the most influential factor in their success in completing their degree. The conclusion from this study supports the literature that self-efficacy, color, and postsecondary study meet and intersect to affect Black female scholars' lives in various ways (Dortch, 2016). Given this information, a study of Black females, who are first-generation students, obtained their doctorate is essential.

**Cognitive Effects of College.** Flowers and Pascarella (2003) conducted a longitudinal study to determine if there were differences between Black students and White students in college for over three years. Participants were from eighteen 4-year colleges or universities that were spread across the United States in 15 different states. The sample for this study participated in the "first, second, and third follow-ups of the

National Study of Student Learning, p. 23." Data reviewed included a pre-college survey of students' demographics background, students' orientation regarding learning, and college expectations. The study's results were presented in two compartments (a) effects of being Black vs. White at yearend of first, second, and third-year cognitive outcomes; and (b) possible effects of race on study cognition.

At the end of year one, Black students' effect of pre-college thinking on critical yearend thinking was only moderate, but it was more profound for White students. At the end of the third year, being White female students significantly influenced critical thinking, but the impact was negative for Black females. The study resulted in two significant findings: (a) White students make higher cognitive increases in college than Black students during the first three years of college (b) the effects of race was only conditional. It was believed that the difference in cognitive learning might be due to (a) differences in early childhood education, (b) that Blacks may not respond well to standardized testing and testing may not be a predictor of cognition, or (c) that Black students view the college climate to be hostile or unwelcoming.

## **Conclusion**

This study's literature review centered on Black females, first-generation students, peak experiences, and previous relevant studies. Noted barriers for success were discussed in detail that could hinder a Black woman from pursuing a doctorate and a discussion on the climate of predominantly white universities. Also explained was the Black woman, her drive, and persistence. Previous studies and the outcomes from those studies indicate that more research needs to be conducted on Black female first-generation doctorates. There seems to be a shortage of research on first-generation Black

females who sought doctorates. The proposed research will address how peak experiences in life influenced their ability to obtain their doctorates.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

**Overview of the study.** The purpose of this study is to identify factors that influence first-generation Black females to pursue a doctorate. The researcher investigated how female Black first-generation college students could persist and sustain the motivation to complete their doctoral degrees. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to determine what peak experiences and resources this population had in life that kept them on track for graduation. The literature indicates that 30 percent of first-generation students have entered college and obtained a Bachelor's Degree, and of that 30 percent, 29 percent went on to earn a Master's Degree (NCES, 2012). However, only four percent persist in obtaining a doctorate or other professional degree (NCES, 2012). The researcher seeks to explore how first-generation scholars could remain motivated, focused, and invested in such a rigorous process of obtaining their Ph.D.

A qualitative study was conducted to answer three research questions. First, how did their previous trajectory impact their ability to obtain a doctoral education as a first-generation college student? Secondly, did the type of degree-granting institution affect them as first-generation students? Lastly, what peak experiences did these first-generation doctoral students share in their educational journey?

**Overview of Design.** The researcher used Phenomenology for qualitative design. Phenomenology is one of five approaches to qualitative research that concentrates on the similarities of experiences within a particular group. This approach aims to describe the nature of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Usually, an interview process is used within the identified group of subjects who know a particular experience or situation. The

interviews strive to answer two questions (Moustakas, 1994): (a) What have you experienced about the phenomenon? and (b) What experiences have influenced your experience of the phenomenon? (Creswell, 2013) Data collected may be notes, artistic drawings, and observation.

The data was read and reviewed to glean similar phrases and thoughts grouped to form clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2013). This process allowed the researcher to understand and capture the essence of the shared phenomenon. Phenomenology attempts to obtain the purest data from the group that experienced the phenomenon. In this study, I wanted to know how different peak experiences, previous life experiences, and university settings affect a sample of Black females, first-generation college students, to persist to the ultimate degree of doctorate.

**Overview of the Chapter.** This chapter begins with an overview of Phenomenology Research as a design. An overview of the population and sample for the study is discussed to provide an accurate description and rationale for selecting the participants. A detailed description of research tools will be provided in this chapter to allow the reader to review the Probability of Black females, first-generation college students, to be able to complete their education up to and the level of doctorate for rigor and appropriateness. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the data collection and analysis procedures and protocols and a discussion of the rigor of the research instrument.

**Population and sample.** According to the U.S. Census (2017), 43.9 million people in the United States were Black alone. This number represents 13.4 percent of the total population of the United States, which is 328,000,000. Black females account for 58 percent of the Black population. Black people have become the second-largest minority

group, following after Hispanics/Latinos. There are over 167,000,000 million females in the United States, and Black females account for just over 22 million. In 2017, 21.4 percent of Blacks had earned a bachelor's degree, with females as a higher proportion than men (USHHS, 2017). Comparing Black females to Black men in education, it appears that Black females achieve a bachelor's degree at a rate of 23.8 percent, and Black men achieve the same degree at a rate of 18.5 percent. When we look at terminal degrees, NCES (2019) indicates that Black females receive more doctoral degrees than Black men. In 2017, the number of doctorate degrees for Black females was recorded as 9,276, but only 4,791 for Black men (NCES, 2019). Black females continue to earn less than their White counterparts. Only about 33.6 percent of Black females work in professional or managerial occupations (DuMonthier, A., Childers, C., and Milli, J., 2017). Black females register to vote at a higher rate and are involved in the political process more so than Black men, but are still underrepresented in elected offices, from the U.S. Congress to State legislators (DuMonthier, A., Childers, C., and Milli, J., 2017). Black females vote more than any other demographic group of females (Dittman, 2015). Black females are the most educated and upwardly mobile groups in the United States (Helm, 2016).

Because Black females obtain more doctorates than Black men and make up a more significant percentage of first-generation students, this population for this study will be Black females. The sample was based on the following criteria: (a) identify as a Black woman from birth, (b) have or are earning a doctoral degree of any kind or currently studying for, and (c) have been or are first-generation doctoral students. These females have or are currently working towards their doctoral degrees. For this study, a snowball



sample of eight to twelve. The initial request will be asked of a woman I know who has her doctorate or is currently working on her doctorate. After getting the first participant to agree, I will ask that participant to help identify other females who have completed or are working on completing their doctorate. From there, other females will be contacted to ask for their participation, thereby snowballing into a sample of eight-twelve females. Black females who have completed or are completing their doctorate will be the sample.

### **Setting**

The setting is a university campus that provides post-bachelor's education, up to and including a doctorate. The NCES Condition of Education (2019) indicates that there are 16.7 million students enrolled in undergraduate studies. However, the number drops significantly when we look at post-bachelor's education. That enrollment number is 2.97 million, with 1.2 million attending college part-time. That number is even lower for first-generation students. Cataldi, Bennett, Chen, & RTI (2018) indicate that only four percent of first-generation students pursue a doctorate, compared to 10 percent for students whose parents had earned at least a bachelor's degree. Students of color make up a more significant percentage of first-generation students. According to NCES (2019), 9,720,000 white students were enrolled in a four-year college or university, and 1,728,000 Blacks were enrolled in a four-year college or university.

### **Data Collection**

**Introduction.** Data were collected through personal interviews. The interviews were held either in person or through digital video technology. The interview consisted of a series of open-ended questions that allowed the graduate to answer in any way she felt

comfortable freely. During the interviews, I initially tried to develop some rapport with each participant to put her at ease and make the conversation flow more manageable. The meeting location for the interview was wherever the participant was comfortable and felt safe to talk. The interview concentrated on past experiences, family life, school attended (HBCU vs. PWI), the campus environment's impact, feelings of engagement, acceptance, and self-empowerment. The purpose of the interviews was to extract any similarities among the group of participants. With this information, a profile could be established to identify factors relative to successful Black females who were first-generation college students and obtained their doctorate.

#### Instrumentation.

Instrumentation development for this study was finalized through a survey of peer-debriefed semi-structured interview questions. Using a peer-debriefing team of doctoral students and faculty, items for the interview questions were organized into a Google Form and distributed to the team. Thirty articles were used in the rating system. Raters were asked to rate each question item from 3, very good, to 0, not good. The average score of survey items was 2.32, with the top 10 items being between 2.23 and 2.92. Conditional formatting in Excel was used to derive ten interview questions.

#### **Womanist Methodology and Theory**

Womanism methodology was used in my qualitative research. Womanism dictates that when researching Black women, one must make a personal connection to the participant. To use Womanism as methodology, one must be prepared to listen. One must listen to the stories that Black women have experienced and acknowledge their struggles and

successes. One must make each participant feel comfortable enough to share their own stories (Thomas, 1999). No right or wrong answers are perceived when using Womanism. Each tale told belongs to that individual. It may be like other stories, but her story is her story. I believe only a womanist can conduct research utilizing Womanism as a methodology, as only Black women can identify with the Black women who participate in the study.

Womanist theology is an emergent voice of African American Christian women in the United States (Thomas, 1999). Vastine (2020) identifies Womanism as a "theoretical perspective that stems from many scholars and fields of study (238)." Hill-Collins (1996) indicates that Womanism is more complete than Black feminism, more comprehensive. It takes race into account when dealing with social justice, not just sex. Vastine indicates that Womanism is equally concerned with all identity categories used to oppress. In contrast, Black feminism is primarily focused on gender. Thomas (1999) further states that Womanism involves the importance of spirituality in lessening the division that classes can produce. She believes that without a spiritual base, as in Womanism, all social justice attempts are just surface with no depth. Black Feminism is viewed as a political and social movement, but Womanism emphasizes the spiritual way of life as a cornerstone for lasting change.

Allowing participants to pick the interview location is imperative, as it adds to their level of comfort. Collins (1990) concludes in her book that womanist thought does not seek to raise consciousness; instead, it aims to affirm and rearticulate a consciousness that already exists. Ensuring dialogue is open and free but totally centered on the participant. Adding music or dance to the conversation only enhances the opportunity for

connectedness and more openness (Hudson-Weems, 2001). Collins notes that from an African American woman's standpoint, "individuals who lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences (1990, p. 209)". During a conversation with a participant, the focus is on the individual woman. There should be no notetaking as this can distract the participant. Recordings of conversations are imperative, but the participant must be made aware that she is being recorded. Womanism allows the participant to drive the discussion with input from the researcher to ensure that research questions are answered.

### **Data Analysis**

After each interview, I wrote a memo to ensure I captured the essence of what the participant was describing. An audio recording was also made and reviewed after each interview. A second meeting via phone or virtual contact was conducted to share the memo written about their interview with the participant. This second conversation was to ensure the accuracy and correct intent of the interviewee. All information gleaned from participants is kept in individual files, along with their informed consent agreement, any sketches or drawings made by the participant, and any participant's corrections after reviewing the memos. Five steps were utilized to clarify the data. As explained in Hyener's (1999) explication process, the following actions were followed:

1. I bracketed and used phenomenological reduction.
2. I determined units of meaning.
3. I clustered units of meaning to form themes.
4. I summarized each interview, validating and modifying if necessary.

5. I extracted general and unique themes, allowing for a composite summary.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To conduct this study, the researcher completed the proper forms and received proper permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to research human subjects. With IRB approval for the study, I obtained informed consent from all participants involved in the study. The informed consent detailed the study's nature, expectations of the participants, potential benefits of the research, commitment to confidentiality, and plans for reciprocity. Moreover, participants were also assured of their rights to discontinue participation in the study at any time. Before signing for consent, participants were informed of the nature and use of audio recordings during the interviews. The audio-recording purpose was to provide added analysis to the discourse and relieve the researcher from taking memo notes, enabling a more informal interview setting. Participants were also assured that all raw data would be locked and secured for five years after publication under the University's Policy Statement.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter 3 is a review of how the research project was conducted. Initially, a series of questions was developed that utilized open-ended questions to ask first-generation Black doctorate females or females seeking their doctorate. Next, I examined the profile, experiences, and resources of First-Generation Black females who succeeded, against all the odds, to complete and receive their doctorate. A sample of eight to twelve Black females who were first-generation doctorates or seeking a doctorate were asked to participate in this research project. These females were then asked a series of questions

through in-person interviews that helped the researcher uncover what experiences, resources, determination, and peak experiences these females possessed to pursue their doctorate. Analysis of the data collected looked for repeated responses that helped develop a first-generation scholar profile determined to complete a doctorate. Chapter 4 will report the findings from the researcher's questions and interviews with the participants. I will develop a summary of results to identify any similarities that will allow the researcher to create a first-generation Black doctorate profile. Differences in answers will be compiled to show variance in responses as well. Chapter 5 will summarize the study, identify limitations, and suggest further studies in this area.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

#### **Introduction**

This study addressed the experiences of African American female doctoral graduates who are first-generation students. The purpose of the study was to identify the resources, motivational factors, and peak experiences that cause first-generation students to seek and sustain their educational quest by completing a doctorate. This study aims to determine (a) how previous educational experiences impact first-generation doctoral candidates? (b) whether degree-granting institutions impact first-generation students? And (c) What peak experiences do first-generation doctoral graduates share in the educational journey? I used a Phenomenology research design for this qualitative study. I used a qualitative approach to get first-hand answers and information from the participants. This study focused on Black female first-generation doctorates or Black female, first-generation doctoral students by studying a sample of 10 Black women. I collected data using personal interviews via Zoom. I employed Hyener's (1999) explication process to analyze interview data, broken down into a five-step process.

#### **Data Collection Instrument**

The data collection instrument was an eleven-question semi-structured interview. To construct the instrument, I used a peer debriefing team of doctoral students and faculty. Raters were asked to rate each of the 30 questions from 3, very good, to 0, not good. I utilized the top eleven items for the data collection instrument. Each interview question was connected to one of the following themes on First-Generation Students: (a) campus climate, (b) resources, (c) parental modeling, and (d) preparation. The interview questions

were also connected to one of the following themes on Black Womanism: (a) equal rights, (b) unique experiences, (c) Black men, (d) improvements in society, (e) human rights, and (f) Black heritage. Finally, each interview question was connected and supported to the research questions of the study.

I identified significant statements from each interview and input those statements into an excel spreadsheet. I labeled each significant statement with a term that identified what was most important about the statement. These became my elements. I looked for elements that could be grouped together and identified them as meaning units. From the meaning units, I further homed in on what the meaning units had in common. I finished with five themes under which all elements could relate somehow from grouping those meaning units together.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Applying thematic analysis, I used a three-step process involving significant statements, elements, meaning units, and themes. In step one, after identifying significant statements made by all participants, I attributed each statement to one of the elements of themes of first-generation students or Black womanism. I also took each statement's gist and used an element that best identified what each statement indicated. For example, when Angela stated that "money was a huge barrier," I used the Finances element to represent her statement best. All comments were given an element of identification. For step two, I took all the elements that were developed and grouped them by similarities. For example, when SheWill indicated that "I was an adult with adult bills," I grouped her statement, along with Angela's account and other similar reports, together and identified them as the meaning unit of Finances. The final step involved taking another look at the



meaning units and recognizing how different meaning units could be grouped because of their similarities. For example, when Bibi indicated that she "felt like she was suffering from imposter syndrome," I realized that both finances and imposter syndrome were barriers for these graduates, so my theme for this grouping became Barriers. Ultimately, I arrived at the following themes: (a) Support, (b) Representation, (c) Barriers, (d) Schools, and (e) Improvements Needed.

### **Themes**

There were five themes developed in this study: (a) Support, (b) Representation, (c) Barriers, (d) Schools, and (e) Improvements Needed. In *support*, I am identifying support that came from different areas of the participants' lives. Some support was family support, some was academic support, but support was significant in this doctorate achievement. *Representation* indicated that having faculty and students who looked like them was something they felt was necessary for feeling more comfortable in schools. *Representation* also means that these participants felt the ability to approach others who looked like them. *Barriers* were a theme that ran throughout the study and was essential to note because it meant that there were things in the participants' lives that discouraged or dissuaded them from achieving their doctorate. *Schools* were a way of identifying what type of school they attended from undergraduate to including the doctoral level. *Schools* and the things encountered at their schools sometimes were positive but frequently were negative. The last theme, *Improvement Needed*, indicates things that could have been done better in their academic journey. Improvements Needed could be that they would have chosen a different route to get to their doctorate or saw things that high schools or

undergraduate colleges could have done better to prepare them as first-generation students for college life.

## **Support**

Support is the first theme in my study. Support addresses the support from family, friends, other students, professors, or outside support. The following meaning units support this theme: (a) family support, (b) community support, (c) off-campus support, (d) extracurricular activities, and (e) professors.

## **Family support**

My findings suggest family support as a meaning unit. Family support suggests that some participants had help from their family members or were motivated by family members. Family members include parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. The following Elements support family support: a) family support, (b) off-campus support, (c) parental support, and (d) extracurricular activities.

Family Support. Family support is the first element in support of the meaning unit, Family Support. In Juanita's suggestion, family support is found that "my uncle encouraged me to go to Georgia State." Juanita indicated that she lived with her uncle for some time and worked in a retail shop. Her uncle, who had gotten his education later in life, and encouraged to go to college instead of working a menial job. In Sandra's assertion, family support is also found that "my cousin who is in education was always motivating." Sandra's immediate family had no college concept and were not as supportive as her cousin, who had a master's degree and was an educator. Teona added to family support in stating that "I got most of my support from my older sister." Since

Teona's parents had not gone to college, they were somewhat supportive of getting a bachelor's college degree, but they did not fully understand when she wanted advanced degrees. However, her older sister, who had gone to college and received her master's degree, saw the value in Teona obtaining higher degrees. Therefore, the *family support* element connects to the meaning unit family support because of the people they received support and their family members.

Off-campus support. Off-campus support is the second element in support of family support. Off-campus support is found in Angela's suggestion that when "I couldn't find refuge on campus, I went across the railroad tracks." Angela talked about the loneliness she felt on campus and the lack of diversity on campus. So, when she could not find friends on campus, she went to a neighboring community of Black residents who lived just across the railroad tracks from the school she attended. In Angela's assertion, off-campus support is also found that "I went there for spade games, fish fries, it was like being home." Istessa added off-campus support in stating that "my work supervisor encouraged me to go; it's free." Istessa worked in a TBR school and had the benefit of obtaining higher education without tuition costs. Therefore, off-campus support connects to the meaning unit family support as it shows that support is essential, even if it comes from unexpected avenues, like outside the family.

Parental Support. Parental support is the third element in support of Family support. Parental support is found in Boss Lady's statement that her mother made "they can take anything away from you, but your knowledge." Boss Lady was explaining how enthusiastic and supportive her mother was of her pursuing a doctorate. Parental support is also found in SheWill's statement that "they were elated." SheWill was expressing the

support and motivation her parents gave her. She indicated that even after finishing school, they were supportive of her work efforts and would keep her child when she had to travel. DJ added parental support in stating "she was elated" in speaking about her mom. DJ further indicated her mother expressed that she was supportive of her efforts if that is what she wanted to do. Therefore, positive expressions and motivations from parents are essential to the meaning unit of Family support.

Extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities are the fourth element in support of Family Support. Extracurricular activities are found in Teona's suggestion that "I had a few leadership roles." Teona indicated that in college, she became a part of an African American Association of Black educators. She went on to become president of the Association. In Sandra's assertion, extracurricular activities are also found that "you had to have a certain grade point average to participate in extracurricular activities. Sandra indicated the motivation she received by knowing that she would have to increase her grade point average if she wanted to participate in extracurricular activities. She further indicated that "it trains you that if you can't be a good scholar, you can't be a good athlete." Boss Lady added to Extracurricular activities by stating that "I joined a sorority, and that kept me on track." Boss Lady talked about the motivation she received from sorority life, as she was told there will always be another party, and she had to decide which was more important. Therefore, extracurricular activities played a part in the Family Support of these women.

### **Professors**

Professors are the second meaning unit in support of the theme Support. This meaning unit suggests that professors were helpful and supportive through the participants' college

experience. Professors are supported by the following Elements: a) professors invested, b) understood and accepted me, and c) hands-on professors.

Professors invested. Professors invested is the first element in support of Professors.

Professors invested is found in Ida's statement that "99 percent Black professors and cohort, while attending a predominantly white institution." Ida indicated that she found her professors in her doctoral program to be incredibly supportive, and she had a unique experience in that she attended a PWI. Still, her cohorts and professors were mainly Black. Professors invested is also found in SheWill's assertion that "in undergrad, I had many professors who were invested." SheWill explained that she attended an HBCU and had lots of professors who had a deep investment in students' personal and professional success. Angela added to professors in stating that "I had a Black female professor who was very caring." Angela explained that this professor respected the things she was going through, which were some traumatic personal traumatic events. Therefore, professors support the idea of the importance of caring professors for support in reaching the doctoral level.

Understood and accepted me is the second element in support of the meaning unit Professors. Understood and accepted me is found in Bibi's suggestion that "I had a professor who not only was a good teacher but understood and accepted me." Bibi further indicated that this professor was her master's chair and her master's advisor. She was her graduate assistant, and she never felt like an outsider with this professor. Understood and accepted me is also found in Istessa's suggestion that "she chipped through and showed me I was smarter than I thought." Istessa always thought she did not belong in college and that she was not as bright as her classmates. She had a statistics professor who kept

asking her questions that she was afraid to answer because she thought she would be wrong. However, she knew the answers, which helped her understand that she had more capability than she thought. Therefore, understood and accepted me is strongly connected to the meaning unit Professors. These professors helped these participants break barriers that they might now have on their own.

Hands-on professors. Hands-on professors are the third element in support of Professors. Hands-on professors are found in Ida's suggestion that "I could go to any of my three doctorate professors at any time." Ida explained that although she had Black professors in undergraduate and graduate school, her doctoral professors were more hands-on and concerned. A hands-on professor is also found in SheWill's assertion that she "still stayed in contact with my master's professor." SheWill explained that that professor mentored her and regularly contacted her until his passing two years ago. Now she is in contact with his widow. Angela added to hands-on professors in stating that "he would have me check in weekly." Angela was from an impoverished background, and while attending undergraduate school, she was asked to write a paper. She wrote an essay that her professor thought might be fiction because it was so graphic about things from her home life. He could not believe her life had been that difficult. That professor kept regular checks with her to ensure she was okay until graduation. Therefore, hands-on professors connect to the meaning unit Support in those professors showing genuine concern and going the extra mile made a lasting impact on these participants' lives.

### **Extracurricular activities**

My findings suggest Extracurricular as a meaning unit. Extracurricular activities suggest that activities outside of regular classroom experiences were beneficial to participants.

The following Elements support extracurricular activities: a) Extracurricular activities and (b) Sorority.

Extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities are the first element in support of the meaning unit Extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities are found in Sandra's suggestion that "I was in the band." Sandra indicated that activities such as band and flag line were an essential aspect of attending an HBCU. According to Sandra, "if you were in the band, you were in." Extracurricular activities are also found in Boss Lady's assertion that "I got a lot of fees paid." She indicated that she was in TRIO in college, and TRIO involved her in shadowing activities, meeting people that were already in her field of study, etc. Angela added to extracurricular activities by stating that "if I had not seen Black teachers teaching and having certain values, these were affirmations for me." Angela was involved in high school in Upward Bound program that she felt provided the needed outside influence that she was not getting at school or home. In the Upward Bound program, she was taught by Black teachers, and this affirmed for her that she could do this work.

A sorority. A sorority is the second element in support of extracurricular activities. A sorority is found in Teona's suggestion that "I wanted to join a sorority and initially didn't have the GPA for it." Teona explained that knowing she wanted to join a sorority helped her understand the importance of having a better grade point average. She worked to achieve that GPA and was able to join the sorority. A sorority is also found in Boss Lady's assertion that "I joined a sorority, and they helped me understand there would always be another party." Boss Lady was not putting forth her best effort in school. After joining the sorority, she realized there was more to college than just partying because her

sorors informed her she needed to do better than what she was doing in school.

Therefore, sorority connects directly to extracurricular and the impact it made on the participants' lives.

## **Representation**

Representation is the second theme in my study. Representation addresses the issue of having others in the campus environment that looks and acts like you, whether it is students, faculty, or administration. The following meaning units support this theme: (a) Professors and (b) Representation.

### **Professors**

My findings suggest Professors as a meaning unit. Professors suggest that having Black professors had an impact on the participants. The following elements support professors: (a) professors' encouragement and (b) supportive professors.

Professors' encouragement. Professors' encouragement is the first element in support of Professors. Professors' encouragement is found in Ida's suggestion that "one of my master's professors said I should consider obtaining a doctorate." Ida was trying to complete her master's degree, but her professor kept encouraging her to get a doctorate over the course of a couple of classes. Professors' encouragement is also found in DJ's assertion that "Dr. Newman and Reynolds pushed me to keep going." Although DJ was having some emotional moments when she felt she could not do the doctoral work, her professors encouraged her to stick with it. They would tell her to "step away, take a break and come back again and just refresh." Juanita added to the professors' encouragement by stating that "my Ph.D. professor was the most concerned because I



thought I was not going to finish." Juanita explained she was raising her children and working full time and felt at one point that she would not finish. She indicated that she was sending out "Hail Mary's" to her family for prayer. Her dissertation chair realized she was struggling and motivated her to finish.

Representation. Representation is the second element in support of representation.

Representation is found in Bibi's suggestion that "representation makes a difference."

Bibi indicated that with representation, you could see that you are accepted there, that you fit. In Bibi's assertion, representation is also found in that "all it needs is just one to say okay, it's possible. Bibi discussed she just needed to see one Black professor, and she would feel that she could do the work if that professor did the work. Bibi also added to representation in stating that a "Black woman of color, first-generation, would have been validation." Bibi strongly felt she felt more belonging in curriculum instruction classes because the specialization was urban education. Most of the people in that program were Black. She further indicated that if there was just one Black professor, it would have given her validation that she belonged there. All it takes for me is just one to represent. Therefore, representation is connected to the meaning unit representative as participants indicated seeing others like yourself helps with a feeling of belonging and acceptance.

### **Barriers**

Barriers are the next theme I identified in my study. Barriers are items identified by the participants as things that hindered them in reaching their doctorate status. The following meaning units support this theme: (a) imposter syndrome, (b) lack of family support, and (c) diversity, and (d) finances.

## **Imposter Syndrome**

My findings suggest that imposter syndrome is a meaning unit. Imposter syndrome indicates that the participants felt they were not supposed to be in the doctoral program for one reason or another. They thought that they would be outed as someone who did not belong. The following Elements support imposter Syndrome: (a) imposter syndrome and (b) not belonging.

Imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is the first element in support of the meaning unit Imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is found in DJ's question of "should I be here?" DJ was struggling with the idea that college would be too difficult for her, so she questioned whether she should stay. She indicated she had an internal drive that made her tough it out. Imposter syndrome is also found in Teona's assertion that "I had an internal issue, just belief in myself." She went on to say that imposter syndrome was "very real" in her doctoral studies. She had these feelings when she reached the doctoral level. Bibi added to imposter syndrome in stating that "you really don't believe you belong there, especially being a Black woman you don't belong there." Bibi explained that she thought maybe the school was accepting everyone that applied for their doctorate. She also indicated, "I didn't think I was doctoral-worthy." Therefore, imposter syndrome relates directly to the meaning unit Imposter Syndrome.

Not belonging. Not belonging is the second element in support of Imposter Syndrome. Not belonging is found in Istessa's assertion that "I never felt I was as smart as everyone else." Istessa struggled with her abilities from undergraduate school through her doctoral program. She always felt everyone else was more intelligent than she was and was often afraid to speak up in class. Not belonging is also found in Bibi's assertion that

"many things were stacked that made me not belong." Bibi was a non-traditional student when she sought out her master's and doctorate, so she did not feel she fit well with the other traditional students. Bibi added, not belonging in stating that "if I make it, it will be some type of fluke." Again, Bibi was dealing with her feelings of insecurity because she was a non-traditional student.

### **Lack of family support**

My finds suggest that lack of family support is a meaning unit. Lack of family support indicates that participants felt they did not have enough support from family members while achieving their doctorate. The following Elements support lack of family support: (a) lack of parental support and (b) family pressures.

Lack of parental support. Lack of parental support is the first element in support of lack of family support. In Sandra's statement, lack of parental support is found that "they actually preferred me to go to the Army." Sandra's family was not supportive of her going to college, but instead the military. Her father indicated the military "would fix my attitude." Sandra further stated that her family did not know how to support her in her educational endeavor. In Juanita's assertion, lack of parental support also reveals that "they really never supported me." Juanita's family was poor and had no education past high school. They did not understand the more education she had, the better job she would get and make more money for herself. Angela added to the lack of parental support in stating that she got into Yale, but her mom said, "that's a little far don't you think." So, she did not go to Yale. She went to a school closer to home and went home on weekends to help her mother raise the other children. Therefore, lack of parental support has an impact on student's abilities to reach their goal.

Family pressures. Family pressures are the second element in support of Lack of Family Support. Family pressures are found in Teona's suggestion that "my brother was murdered the summer I started my dissertation, and my grandmother died six months before that." Teona indicated that she considered not finishing the program because it was so much with which to handle. She had lost two family members in six months leading up to her dissertation. In Angela's assertion, family pressures are also found that "I was raising my siblings, and my niece got sick, and I needed to go pick her up." Angela explains that she was not married, nor did she have children while she was attending school, but she helped raise her niece and nephew. She indicated tremendous pressure on her to make sure they were taken care of and still meet her school obligations. Therefore, family pressures have a direct connection to a lack of family support.

## **Finances**

My finding suggests that finances as a meaning unit. Finances indicate the amount of funding or access to resources for school, home life, and other activities. The following Elements support finances: (a) finances and (b) lack of shared resources.

Finances. Finances are the first element in support of Finances. Finances are found in Angela's suggestion that "there aren't enough fellowships." Angela believes there is not enough scholarship or fellowship financial support for first-generation students. As she considers, first-generation students who want to pursue a doctorate are looking at the debt they will incur before anything else. Finances are also found in SheWill's assertion, "income was a barrier; I was an adult with adult bills with a kid." SheWill indicated that it was imperative to keep a job to provide for her child and herself. It was a significant

barrier in juggling a job, graduate assistantship, and taking care of her daughter. Juanita added to finances by stating that "the extreme poverty in which lived and that struggle." She indicated money was a barrier but knowing that she could stay in the impoverished lifestyle was also a motivator for her. Therefore, the impact of finances is causally related to the meaning unit Finances.

Lack of shared resources. Lack of shared resources is the second element in support of Finances. Lack of shared resources is found in Bibi's suggestion that "I didn't know as a graduate student; your department chair could nominate you for paid tuition and health insurance paid." Bibi went on to say that the resources are there, but not the right people are sharing those resources with first-generation students. Lack of shared resources is also found in Bibi's assertion that "I found out about this in doctoral and got all, but my first semester paid." She reiterated the need for better communication to first-generation students because they are totally unaware of what is available to them as a student.

SheWill's added to the lack of resources by stating that "encouraging first-generation students to have research opportunities, even externship opportunities would be helpful." SheWill indicated she did not get to experience all that other students did because she was not made aware of these options. Therefore, a lack of shared resources is connected to a lack of family support as the family could not help them navigate the college environment.

### **Diversity**

My findings suggest diversity is a meaning unit. Diversity suggests because these participants were Black and attended a primarily white institution, they felt left outside of

the college environment. The following Elements support diversity: (a) Racism and (b) lack of Black students.

**Racism.** Racism is the first element in support of diversity. Racism is found in Teona's suggestion that "it was not uncommon to walk through the free expression and the N-word would be plastered all over it." Teona indicated that she felt more racism away from the classroom than in the classroom. In Angela's assertion, racism is also found when she indicated, "I received microaggressions from Black students, white students, and professors. Angela came from a highly impoverished background and indicated that she felt alone on campus because of her background but felt the racism from others on campus, including some Black students. Teona added to racism by stating that "in my sophomore year, there was a noose hanging in the dorm." Teona said the racism was more on a community level, not individually, but it was present. Therefore, racism is connected to diversity; in the lack of diversity, racism may to be more prevalent.

**Lack of Black students.** Lack of Black students is the second element of diversity. Lack of Black students is found in Boss Lady's statement that "we tried to start a National Society of Black Engineers but didn't have the ten students of color needed." Boss Lady was very involved on campus and found that being in such a minority resulted in developing a society of science majors instead of the coveted National Society of Black Engineers. Lack of Black students is also found in Bibi's assertion that she "basically attended a primarily white institution, with white, middle-aged male professors and white, middle-aged female professors." Boss Lady added to the lack of Black students in stating that it was "my first time really experiencing white students making racially insensitive or racially charged comments." Boss Lady also attended a PWI and felt the

effects of being in such a minority that she would frequently be the only Black student in the class. When white students commented, if she said something to address it, she became the aggressor. So, the lack of Black students has a solid connection to diversity.

### **Schools**

Schools are the next theme of my study. Schools were researched from the standpoint of where participants went to school, the size of university, and college preparation by high schools. The following meaning units support this theme: (a) HBCU, (b) PWI, and (c) high school preparation.

My findings suggest Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are a meaning unit. HBCU indicates that some participants graduated from HBCUs and their unique experiences there. The following Elements support HBCUs: (a) HBCU and (b) small schools.

**HBCU.** HBCU is the first element in support of the meaning unit, HBCUs. HBCU is found in Istessa's suggestion that "people from everywhere were at Grayling." Istessa indicated that the school was small, but it was full of people. People from different states and countries made up the composition of her HBCU. HBCU is also found in Ida's assertion that "just the environment of the HBCU was a motivating factor. Ida indicated that being in an environment with all Black students and Black professors was motivational because she had not experienced that before. SheWill added to HBCU by stating that "I attended an HBCU, so I never felt any isolation, aloneness or a feeling of not belonging." In our discussions, she felt that would be different on most PWIs.

Therefore, HBCU connects directly to schools because it speaks to the climate of the historically Black college and universities.

Small school. Small school is the second element in support of HBCU. Small school is found in SheWill's suggestion that she attended an HBCU "with a population of about 6000 people." She compared her school to other schools in the area that had double the student population. Small school is also found in Sandra's assertion that "coming from a being a country girl, I had never been around so many, but comparing it to other schools, it was small. Ida added to a small school in stating that "there was a fence around the whole school." She went to indicate that the fence was there for their protection. She felt welcomed into this small community, but the fence kept those out that needed to be kept out. Therefore, small schools relate to HBCU in the experiences and the unique descriptions given by the participants.

## **PWI**

My findings suggest that PWI is a meaning unit. PWI describes the school attended by many participants. These schools are predominantly white institutions, where Black students are in the minority. The following Elements support this meaning unit: (a) large institutions and (b) minimally diverse.

Large institutions. Large institutions are the first element in support of PWI. Large institutions are found in Teona's suggestion that "around 30,000 students, large state research institution." Teona indicated that the university is located in the capital city of her state. Large institutions are also found in DJ's assertion that "it was a large school." DJ indicated that her school was located in the city's central hub, and it was a big state



university. Teona added to large institutions in stating that her school was "massive spatially." Teona indicated that you would have to take the bus to class. If you wanted to walk, you would have to leave extremely early because of the campus's size. Therefore, large institutions connect with PWI, as most predominantly white institutions are more significant than the typical HBCU.

***Minimally diverse.*** Minimally diverse is the second element in support of PWI.

Minimally diverse is found in DJ's suggestion that "many Black students played football or basketball." DJ indicated that there were few Black students on her campus. Most were there for the athletic department. Minimally diverse is also found in Teona's statement that "they'd be hard-pressed to have 10 percent African American students." Out of the 30,000 students attending this large university, less than ten percent were minority students. Teona added to minimally diverse in stating that "we did experience isolation in the classroom because we were few and far between." Teona indicated that outside of the safe spaces on campus, like the multicultural center, she felt isolated on campus. Therefore, minimally diverse is a good representation of the predominantly white institutions.

### **High School Preparation**

My finds suggest that high school preparation is a meaning unit. High school preparation discusses what type of preparation participants received and felt they did not receive. The following Elements support high school preparation: (a) lack of high school preparation and (b) self-determination.

Lack of high school preparation. Lack of high school preparation is the first element in support of high school preparation. Lack of high school preparation is found in Angela's suggestion that "basically you graduated high school and went to work in the mill." Angela came from a milling town, and she indicated that milling was the primary source of income for most families. So, students were not prepared for further education but instead expected to go to work in the mills. Lack of high school preparation is also found in Sandra's assertion of "did it?" Sandra explained that she became more prepared after high school by being involved in a JAG class. JAG helped her to prepare a resume and be more prepared for further education. DJ added to lack of high school preparation in stating that "the school counselor there didn't really prepare me for college. DJ explained that she had exposure from the family resource worker who would take the Black students on college tours. But she felt she was not prepared, just exposed to college campuses. Therefore, lack of high school preparation is directly connected to high school preparation as these statements verify what the participants experienced.

Self-determination. Self-determination is the next element in support of high school preparation. Self-determination is found in Sandra's suggestion that "seeing others fail was my motivation." Sandra went further and explained that she had a drive not to fail. She wanted to do more than what she saw around her, so their failure was a motivator for her to succeed. Self-determination is also found in Ida's assertion that "I was a self-starter." Ida indicated that she could balance having a job and going to school in her last two years of high school. She credits outside influences for her preparation instead of high school. DJ added to self-determination by stating that "I always had this drive about myself." DJ says that she always had the mindset of "I'm going to do what I want and

how I want to do it." She further iterates that her mother tells the story of when she was four, and she decided she was not going to wear what her mother picked out to wear for daycare, and her mother acquiesced to her demands. Therefore, self-determination directly connects with high school preparation. Some participants desired to attend college, even though they did not receive any support from the high school they attended.

### **Improvements Needed.**

Improvements Needed is the fifth theme in my study. Improvements needed to address the things the participants felt they would do to improve their educational journey or what their schools could do to enhance the educational journey of Black women who are first-generation students. The following meaning units support this theme: (a) improvements needed, (b) other options, and (c) mentorships.

### ***Improvements needed.***

My study suggests that Improvements Needed is a meaning unit. Improvements needed to delve into the things participants identified as needing to be changed within the secondary educational system. The elements that support improvements needs are: (a) culturally responsive teachers, (b) exposure, and (c) other options.

Culturally responsive teachers. Culturally responsive teachers are the first element in support of Improvements Needed. Culturally responsive teachers are found in Sandra's suggestion that "I'd make all teachers more culturally responsive in relating to our students." Sandra indicated she felt more teachers needed to be aware of the cultural differences that exist with Black students. If they were more aware, they could reach more children and help them see their potential. Culturally responsive is also found in

SheWill's assertion that "I did not know the cultural norms of European males and did not know what was expected from me." SheWill attended an HBCU for undergraduate school and attended PWI for her Master's and Ed.D. The transition from HBCU to a PWI was a shock for SheWill, as she was the only person of color in her classes. She felt the white professors expected something from her with which she was unfamiliar. A Black professor had to sit down with her to explain what was expected and make adjustments. Juanita added to culturally responsive teachers by stating that "there were a lot of isms trickling down." Juanita expressed that she witnessed certain students given opportunities they would not give to people like her. Therefore, culturally responsive teachers are indeed a vital component of improvements needed in the educational system.

**Exposure.** Exposure is the second element in support of the meaning unit Improvements needed. In Boss Lady's assertion, exposure is found that a Black professor said, "let me exposure to more than you're used to." That professor put her clubs that didn't necessarily tie to race because I was very comfortable in an environment with people who look like me. This professor put her in situations where she was around professionals. In Juanita's suggestion, exposure is also found that colleges should "include all students in outside learning experiences." Juanita felt she was not given the opportunity to experiences things like her white cohorts. SheWill added to exposure in stating that "having first-generation students experience internships and having them research and write more." SheWill felt that when you're Black and not used to the predominantly white institution world, you suffer as a student, especially a first-generation student. She thought first-generation students should be encouraged to research more and write more to be better prepared for the world of PWI. Ida added to exposure by stating that "just making sure

students have support and a sense of community. Ida expressed that hiring more faculty of color would give students more exposure to the college world and expand their minds.

### **Other options**

My findings suggest Other options as a meaning unit. Other options discuss changes that participants felt they would make if given a chance to restart their educational journey.

The following meaning units support this theme: (a) change in plans, (b) preparation, and (c) mentorships.

**Change in plans.** Change in plans is the first element in support of the meaning unit other options. A change in plans is found in In Boss Lady's suggestion, "I would have gone to an HBCU." Boss Lady further explained that she was accepted to one of the best HBCUs, but the PWIs offered a more significant financial package, so she had to go to a PWI. Her mother could not afford to send her to the HBCU. Change in plans is also found in Angela's assertion that "I would have listened more to the people who saw the potential in me." Angela indicated that she would have doubted herself less and not listen to the voices that said she should just settle. Juanita added to change in plans by stating that "I would have gone to Harvard." Juanita was accepted to Harvard for their doctoral program but chose not to go because she had children and couldn't afford it.

**Preparation.** *Preparation* is the second element in support of the meaning unit improvements needed. Preparation is found in Bibi's suggestion that "I would have done more research and preparation." Bibi explains that she knew little about how to access financial resources available to first-generation or minority students. She indicated that she would have access to those resources immediately if she had researched the

possibilities. Preparation is also found in SheWill's assertion that "I would have changed my preparation from undergrad to master's level." SheWill indicated that she would have researched more about white, middle-class cultural norms and expectations. She graduated undergraduate from an HBCU and went to a PWI for graduate school. Therefore, preparation has a connection to other options because if given a chance, some participants would have made different decisions along the way.

**Mentorships.** Mentorships are the third element in support of the meaning unit, other options. Mentorship is found in Istessa's suggestion that "I think mentoring with someone who had battled the demons and say, 'You can do this.'" Istessa recognized that other first-generation Black students like her had been told all their lives that they were not good enough, and that spilled over into higher education. She felt that having first-generation and Black mentors would have made a big difference in her ability to push through to finish her doctorate. In DJ's assertion, mentorships are also found that "I would hire staff to represent the population." DJ expressed that there were not many Black professors on campus who could mentor and represent the Black population in school. She felt this was a significant component of her educational journey that needed changing. She was not sure if the demographics had changed since she graduated. Therefore, mentorships are directly related to some participants' ideas of a better college experience. With mentorships, these participants would not have felt isolated or alone on campus.

## Chapter 5

### Significance of the Study

#### Overview of the Study

This study examines the motivating factors for Black female, first-generation doctoral students. In Chapter 1, I established the critical problem and purpose of the study. I find that little is known of how Black female doctoral students can persevere to completing their doctoral degrees. Therefore, my study sought to identify factors that influence first-generation Black women to pursue a doctorate. I approached this study through the theoretical lens of Womanism. Womanism frames Black women's lived experiences, works to change the negative images of Black women, and restores a balance to the community through a lens of spirituality. In chapter 2, I identified the critical literature on the topics of (a) historical perspective of the Black woman in America, (b) first-generation students, (c) how peak experiences affect educational attainment, and (d) previous studies on this group. A historical perspective reviews the history of Black women, their trauma, and their ability to be resilient. The historical perspective also identifies excellent strides made by Black women up to the present.

The topic of first-generation students identified the traits and statistics of the first-generation student. This section also identified barriers, lack of resources, campus climate, and lack of preparation. Peak experiences reviewed how peak experiences have a positive impact on students in general. Green (2010) indicated that "every student who enters kindergarten must have at least six peak experiences to graduate high school" (p. 213). Understanding the impression of peak experiences on higher educational attainment

is discussed. Other studies were reviewed to see what type of information was already gathered about first-generation Black female students. These studies were between Black and white women, two first-generation Black students, and testing the resilience of non-first-generation students to first-generation students' strength. Chapter 3 detailed my approach to conducting the study. I collected data using a semi-structured, eleven-question interview protocol. My population was Black females, and my sample was eleven Black females who were first-generation and had completed or were completing their doctoral. I analyzed my data using Hyener's explication process. Using this process, I was able to develop five themes of my study. In chapter 4, I detail my findings. My findings were reduced to five themes: (a) Support, (b) Representation, (c) Barriers, (d) Schools, and (e) Improvements Needed. In the theme *support*, participants discussed the types of support they received while seeking their doctorate. The following meaning units were distinguished: (a) family support, (b) community support, (c) off-campus support, (d) extracurricular activities, and (e) professors. The *representation* theme discussed the lack of people of color as professors, staff, and other students. This theme had the following meaning units: (a) professors and (b) supportive professors. The third theme, *barriers*, looked at the different types of barriers experienced by first-generation Black women seeking their doctorate. There were several barriers listed, and those meaning units were identified as (a) imposter syndrome, (b) lack of family support, (c) finances, and (d) diversity. In developing the *school's* theme, information about the schools attended and what they felt was positive and negative at their respective schools was discussed. Meaning units for schools are (a) HBCUs, (b) PWI, and (c) high school preparation. The last theme, *improvements needed*, addresses how specific changes would



have been made if these women could go back and make different decisions. It also addresses things they identified as needing changed in the educational system. The meaning units for improvements needed are (a) improvements needed and (b) other options.

### **Overview of this Chapter**

This chapter provides the significance of the study of Black female doctoral students. This chapter begins with an overview of the study. After this overview of the chapter, I provide a comparison to the literature. Next, I will provide a brief discussion of the findings by research questions. I follow this section with an overall significance of the results. Finally, I will provide a set of recommendations for practice, research, and policy related to Black female doctoral students.

### **Comparison to Literature**

The findings of this study, when compared to the literature, provide affirmation and differentiation on the topic of *Black women first-generation doctoral students*. The women in my research were all diverse in their careers, schools, and interests but were all Black women. The participants told of their various backgrounds, family structure, income levels, and high school participation. Their skin tones ranged from a lighter skin tone Black females to a darker skin-toned Black females. Pearson-McNeil & Evans (2014) indicated that 60 percent of Black females believe in supporting minority-owned businesses; the same proved true in my study. Participants interjected the issue of being a Black woman and wanting to see Black culture recognized and supported in different ways.

## **Statistics**

I found differences from Falcon's (2015) statement about limited access for specific racial and ethnic groups and groups of low socioeconomic status. The study participants indicated they were readily accepted into college, sometimes prestigious schools. Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2016) suggested that first-generation students were more likely to attend community college, for-profit schools, online schools, and attend part-time. This study did not bear this out. The majority of participants attended four-year universities. Less than half of the participants attended an HBCU.

## **Barriers to Success**

Barriers identified by this study were in sync with the literature regarding lack of resources, campus climate, and lack of pre-college preparation. Oldfield (2007) and Rendon (1992) indicated that family life could conflict for some first-generation students. Indeed, this was found to be true in certain circumstances when parents did not want their children to move far from home and wanted them to come home every week or quite frequently. This study bore out Tate et al. (2014) suggestion that "perceived ability to conduct graduate-level research was a significant predictor of actively pursuing graduate school in lower socioeconomic status groups and first-generation study from underrepresented groups " (pp. 427-441). All students indicated that they were unsure if they could do doctoral work. They also stated that they felt a doctoral degree was beyond their abilities.

Lack of college preparation is also framed as an obstacle for the Black females who participated in this study, which agrees with statements made by Choy (2001), Cushman

(2007), Terenzini (1996), and Warburton et al. (2001). Only one participant indicated that she attended a college preparatory school. The other participants felt their high schools did not prepare them for college. They did not know they were underprepared until they entered college and had to take remedial courses. The participants felt they were not challenged in high school and could efficiently work while attending high school and still making passing grades. As they did not have parents who knew about preparing for or attending college, their courses were chosen to complete high school and get a diploma rather than college preparatory classes. Participation in outside programs like the TRIO programs and Jobs for American Graduates provided them with life skills preparation, but not with academic preparation.

### **Lack of Resources**

The literature addressed the lack of resources as a contributing factor for low-income, first-generation students who left college (Tinto, 2008). The participants did not leave school but struggled with the lack of resources available to them. Becker (1991) believed that children living in poverty have a great chance of failure with college. Becker (1991) suggests that first-generation, low-income students lag behind their peers. Participants who attended HBCU for undergraduate education struggled with school and needed assistance from professors, study groups, etc., when they transitioned to a PWI for graduate school. According to Duncan, Kalil, and Ziol-Guest (2018), parents in low-income families have less money to pay their regular bills and have less to spend on additional expenses of college life.

## **Campus Climate**

This study indicates that attending an HBCU is much more affirming, culturally diverse, and accepting. Participants indicated more welcoming and supportive professors as students, while participants attending predominantly white institutions felt left out, alone, and threatened. Although according to Harvey, Harvey, and King (2004), inclusion has been at the forefront of Black students' transition in predominantly white institutions, that inclusion is not always felt by the Black women who attend these universities. Green and Chwalisz (2007) indicated that Blacks might experience negative race-related problems and high-stress levels. This was true in this study as, one after another; the participants noted their personal treatment or lack of recognition in PWIs.

## **Peak Experiences**

In the literature, Green (2010) indicated that "every student who enters kindergarten must have at least six peak experiences to graduate high school" (p. 213). However, this was not a relevant issue in this study. Peak experiences were identified but not on a significant level. Peak experiences included being in the HBCU band, being a cheerleader, participating in student government organizations, and becoming a sorority. These results do match up with Green's (2010) postulate.

My study did not indicate a significant finding of peak experiences. However, it appears that peak experiences may be too limited to purely academic peak experiences. There are peak experiences that are not attached to pure academia. Personal peak experiences include items such as going across the railroad tracks to meet with other Black people was a peak experience for one participant. That participant indicated that she would not

have continued her education at that school if not for that community across the tracks. She developed close friendships and ties to the people in this community, which lasts to this day. Other types of peak experiences are sorority involvement, which gave the participants a feeling of belonging. This belonging helps them to have someone to identify with and developed lifelong friendships. These friendships were developed from that peak experience of becoming sorority sisters.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of my study answer the following research questions: (a) How does previous trajectory impact first-generation Black women doctoral graduates, (b) Does the type of institution, whether historically Black colleges or predominantly white institutions, impact first-generation Black women doctoral students, and (c) What peak experiences do first-generation Black women doctoral students share in their educational journey? This section connects the themes, meaning units, and elements from the study to the research questions.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asks how does their previous trajectory impact first-generation Black female doctoral students? This question is to decide if there were factors in participants' lives that helped them or hindered them in pursuing a doctorate? The following themes address this question: (a) Support, (b) Barriers, (c) Schools, and (d) Improvements Needed.

### ***Support***

The theme *support* relates to the students' previous trajectory in several ways. Under *support*, participants addressed their family support while attending graduate school as one of the meaning units. Several participants indicated that their parents did not always understand why they would want to continue their educational journey. Because their parents had not attended college, they could not understand the challenges of college courses. They understood high school because they attended that but could not help navigating the college system or assist in keeping the student motivated to complete their education. Although some participants had support outside of the immediate family, parental support was often lacking. Uncles, grandparents, sisters, and cousins were often the most supportive in the participants' lives. One participant indicated that "I got the most of my support from my older sister." This support helped them continue their journey and encouraged them not to give up when things became difficult. Therefore, I find that Support addresses the question about participants' previous trajectories.

### ***Barriers***

Barriers is another theme that addresses the participants' previous trajectory in research question one. The previous trajectory refers to the participants' lived experiences, whether in their personal or academic journeys. Barriers connect to research question one in that it discusses items participants identified as obstacles in obtaining their doctorate. One barrier mentioned by participants was the lack of parental support. One participant's lack of parental support was found in one participant's statement that "they never really supported me." This participant came from a background that she described as "extreme poverty." She further indicated that she did not want to end up where she started.

Another meaning unit under barriers was *family pressures*. One participant indicated she had to raise her niece and nephew because of their family dysfunction. She grew up in a home where she was expected to help take care of the other children. Her mother dissuaded her from going to the college of her choice because it was too far from home. She would not be more available to help her mother with the other children. She decided to attend a college closer to home and go home every weekend to help the kids. Another example of family pressure was when one participant's brother was murdered while in her doctoral program. This death directly impacted her ability to continue with school, and she came close to just dropping out. Therefore, I find that barriers directly connect to the first research question about students' previous trajectories.

### ***Schools***

The theme *Schools* relate to the previous trajectory in that schools discuss the type of school they attended throughout their high school educational journey through the doctoral program. One meaning unit identified under schools is *high school preparation*. When questioned about her high school preparation, one participant asked the question, "Did it?" She further indicated that she attended a Jobs After Graduation program (JAG) that helped prepare her more than her high school did. Another participant stated that her high school counselor did not reach out to help her prepare for college. She indicated that the family resource worker would take Black students on college tours. This exposure was not enough in her viewpoint, as she still knew nothing about college except where the schools were located and how the buildings looked. Therefore, I find that schools address research question one concerning participants' previous trajectory and its impact.

## ***Improvements Needed***

*Improvements needed* is a theme that addresses the participants' previous trajectory as well. Under improvements needed, participants discussed the meaning unit of *other options*. These other options were thoughts they had in looking back over their educational career. *Change in plans* was an element under other options that participants discussed. One participant who attended a PWI indicated, "I would have gone to an HBCU" if she could relive her educational journey. This participant came from a single-parent home, where her mother could not afford to send her to an HBCU. Another participant indicated that she wished she had listened to the people who saw her potential and not doubt herself. Another participant was accepted to an Ivy League college but could not afford to go. She indicated that she would attend that college if she could have a do-over, no matter what.

*Preparation* was another element under improvements needed. In preparation, one participant indicated, "I would have done more research and preparation." Another participant stated that she would have researched white, middle-class cultural norms and expectations because she graduated from an HBCU and attended a PWI for her doctoral program. *Culturally responsive teachers* were another meaning unit under the theme improvements needed. Culturally responsive teachers address the fact that most teachers in several participants growing up years were white and not responsive to the needs of the Black children. For example, one participant indicated that one teacher would separate the Black children in her classroom. There were four Black children in one class, and each Black student was put in the four corners of the room. This participant indicated this action caused her to want to be "invisible." Therefore, I find that Improvements Needed



addresses research question one concerning the impact of participants' previous trajectory on their doctoral studies.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question asks if the type of institution, whether historically Black colleges and universities or predominantly white institutions, impact first-generation students? This, simply put, is to identify if participants felt their schools influenced their ability to pursue their doctorate. The following themes address this question: (a) *Schools* and (b) *Barriers*.

### *Schools*

The theme of schools relates to this research question in that the type of school appeared to be important to the graduates. Under schools, participants discussed feelings of isolation and loneliness they felt in the predominantly white institution. They discussed how difficult it was to be the only student in a classroom and be the sole representation for the Black community when talking about race became a topic. Students were also exposed to racial comments or microaggressions, and if they responded, they became angry Black women. One participant discussed having to see the N-word written in her campus's safe expression zone. One meaning unit under schools was the HBCU. This discussion of the historically Black college or universities was how participants felt accepted and supported like never. One participant indicated that the "environment of the HBCU was a motivating factor." When asked about isolation, those that attended HBCUs said that they never had any feelings of isolation. They instead indicated that the HBCUs accepted everyone. Everyone was welcomed and treated as if they were special.

*Small school* is an element under HBCU. The participants indicated their schools ranged from 1,500 students to up to 8,000 students. One student noted that it felt large because she came from a rural area, but it was a small school in reality. She indicated that she had never seen so many people. She further suggested that the school was small enough that there was a fence around the whole school. She felt the fence was for students' protection and made everyone feel safe.

Another meaning unit was *PWI*. More participants attended predominantly white institutions than HBCUs. They described these institutions as large and minimally diverse. Participants indicated their schools were significant in the number of students and extensive spatially. One participant said she had to take a bus from the college dorm to get to class. Some universities they attended were up to 30,000 students, with less than ten percent Black students.

*Minimally diverse* was another element under *PWI*. One participant indicated that there was only a small percentage of Black students on her college campus. She noted that if you saw Black students, they were usually playing a sport there. Another participant indicated that her school would "be hard pressed have 10 percent African American students." A participant stated she experienced isolation in the classroom because they were "few and far between." Participants also indicated that their professors were mainly "white, middle-aged men or white, middle-aged women." Participants told that outside of the same campus spaces, like the multicultural center, they felt isolated. One participant suggested that she stayed in her dorm room alone for a whole semester because she did not know anyone on campus. Therefore, I find that Schools address research question two concerning the impact the type of school has on first-generation doctoral students.

## Barriers

Barriers' theme relates to research question two based on the participants' obstacles in their educational journey. Barriers include meaning units such as *Imposter Syndrome*, and *Imposter Syndrome* was also an identified element. Participants repeatedly expressed their feelings of imposter syndrome while in predominantly white institutions. One participant questioned whether she should even be in school as she examined her ability to perform doctoral-level work. Another participant indicated that she felt "you really don't believe you belong there, especially being a Black woman, you don't belong there." Another participant said she thought that the school was just taking everyone that applied for the doctoral program because she did not believe she was smart enough for the doctoral program. *Not belonging* was another meaning unit identified by participants as feeling they were not smart as everyone else in the program. Another participant explained that she was afraid to speak up in class as she was sure she would say something wrong or stupid. One participant exclaimed that she felt like she was in the "projects of the doctoral school."

*Diversity* was a meaning unit regarding Barriers. Some participants listed *racism* as an element of *Diversity*. One participant indicated that it was not uncommon to see the N-word plastered on campus's expression-free zone. This participant felt unsafe on this campus outside of the safe spaces she identified. One participant expressed the microaggressions she faced and her remaining quiet on some efforts made toward her. However, when she spoke up about things said, they labeled her as the aggressor. Another participant indicated that a noose hanging her in one of the dorms made her feel isolated and unsafe.

Another meaning unit identified under Barriers was the *lack of Black students*. One participant declared that there were so few Black students on campus and in Engineering that she could not develop a National Society of Black Engineers. The school only needed ten students for this endeavor, but there were not ten Black students enrolled in Engineering in this large, predominantly white institution. This participant also indicated that many times she was the only Black student present in her classes. She felt isolated, alone, and extremely uncomfortable in this setting.

*Lack of shared resources* was another meaning unit supporting Barriers. One participant expressed that "there aren't enough fellowships." Participants indicated the need for additional funding and found that they were not notified of available financial resources. Another participant relayed that there are resources available, but the "right people" are not sharing those resources with first-generation students or minority students. Another participant said that having first-generation students participate in research opportunities, even externships, would be helpful. She further indicated that professors did not afford the same opportunities that she saw other students receive. Those other students were usually white students and not first-generation students. Therefore, I find that Barriers addresses the impact the type of school has on Black female, first-generation students.

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question asks what peak experiences do first-generation Black female students share in their educational journey? Simply put, were their similarities in the peak experiences participants identified. The following themes address this question: *Support*.

## **Support**

The theme Support connects to the question of peak experiences. Much of the support participants received allowed them to have peak experiences. These experiences were varied, but some similarities were exposed as well.

*Extracurricular activities* were a meaning unit as well under the theme of Support. Several of the students participated in cheerleading, the band, sororities, and other leadership roles. One participant revealed that she became a part of an African American Association of Black Educators and then served as President of this organization. Another participant indicated that joining a sorority kept her on track as far as keeping her grades elevated. She noted that basically, before joining the sorority, she was skating by with her grades, not putting in much effort. Programs like the TRIO and Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) provided support, exposure, and highlights for several participants in their educational journey. The Jobs for America's Graduates program helped one participant put together a portfolio, making her feel more empowered and prepared to go forward with her life. Therefore, I find that Support connects with research question three related to peak experiences. However, I did not identify peak experiences as a significant factor in the participants' success.

## **Overall Significance of Findings**

### **Significance 1**

This study led me to understand the pressures faced by Black females, first-generation doctoral students, and graduates more thoroughly. One significant finding was the lack of confidence many participants expressed during our conversation. This lack of confidence

led to their delaying their entering a doctoral program and receiving their degrees. Lack of trust also affected their learning experience while in the program. Participants expressed this as *Imposter Syndrome*, where they felt they were not accepted, heard, or expected to attain such a degree. Their lack of confidence was expressed in many ways throughout the conversations. Some felt invisible in their doctoral program because they were in such a minority. Others described the inability to approach professors and ask questions, participate in classroom discussions, and their ability to write effectively.

Lack of confidence stemmed from the fact that they were Black females and that they were first-generation students who did not know what to expect at any level during their collegiate careers. The participants felt that the other cohort members were more experienced just by having parents who had attained degrees and could help guide their children on how to maneuver in the college environment. There was talk of the legacy students whose parents had attended the same university or college, and those students seemed to have some ownership that the participants did not feel. Their lack of knowledge of asking for and receiving needed resources while in school stemmed from the belief that anyone would help them. One participant indicated that when she asked one professor for assistance, he expressed that this was college, and she should figure it out for herself. This rejection only served to insulate this participant with more feelings of insufficiency and inability.

## **Significance 2**

Another significant finding was the ability of these women to persevere, even against all odds. Several of the participants came from extreme poverty and were not sure they

would be accepted into a doctoral program. However, when they thought back to their earlier life circumstances, they became more motivated to succeed. None of the participants wanted to relive their childhood experiences of poverty. They knew that more education was the avenue to having a better career and making an increased income. One participant indicated that she was a self-starter. She discussed her ability to work a full-time job and balance her high school curriculum simultaneously.

Participants discussed the determination it took for them to finish their degree, often citing incidents when they became emotionally drained and wanted to quit. The Support they received from professors and family helped them remain in school, but they felt they had to convince themselves they could do the work. Yet, even in the face of isolation and rejection, these women persevered. One participant indicated that she had always had a personal drive about herself, that if she made up her mind to do something, she could do it. So, no matter what she faced, she would overcome the obstacles and finish her degree. I am amazed at the strength it took individually and collectively for this group of women to complete their degrees and prosper in their chosen careers.

### **Recommendations**

My study on Black female, first-generation doctoral students call stakeholders in practice, research, and policy to action. Thus, this study has profound implications for practice, research, and policy.

#### **Recommendation for Practice**

This study has three recommendations for practice. First, the following stakeholders are called to action for practice: (a) High Schools and (b) Colleges and Universities.

## ***High Schools***

High schools need to address the issue of Black women and higher education. More emphasis needs to be placed on encouraging young Black women to enter the STEM field. All but one of the participants I interviewed were in the field of education. We need more Black women realizing their fullest potential by a better introduction to STEM. High schools also need to be culturally diverse to assist Black females in recognizing their potential for higher education. High schools are preparatory for college, and high school counselors should seek out all individuals to see if they have considered higher education, no matter what field.

High schools should also prepare them with research and information to assist Black women's efforts to enter their chosen field. The faculty of the high schools should mirror the racial makeup of the community. Students should not feel isolated or put under a microscope while in a learning environment. High schools should be supportive of all students succeeding, not just those that look like them. High school staff and faculty need to participate in diversity, equity, and inclusion training. Educational leadership must ensure that each school is culturally diverse and culturally sensitive to all students' needs. High schools need to reach out to first-generation students' parents early in high school to discuss their children's future. This discussion would be an ongoing conversation each year that would help prepare the parents for the possibility of college life. Materials, videos, informational sessions could be held to update the parents on what to expect for their child if they choose a college. Parents could also be included in college tours. Since first-generation parents have not attended college, it would be beneficial for high schools to work with universities and colleges. This would allow first-generation parents to



understand better what is expected in college, college costs, the resources available to their children, and help them navigate their children's journey.

### *Colleges and Universities*

Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) need to address the issue of representation in their staff and faculty. Having Black professors was essential to the women I interviewed. I think most people feel more comfortable around people who are like them. White staff and faculty should receive diversity, equity, and inclusion training. In addition to the training, the university or college must ensure that the campus is culturally sensitive to all students' needs, no matter what race. There is also a need for inclusiveness in mentorships and research projects for Black women.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities must find a way to increase their scholarships available to potential students. Although some of the participants attended an HBCU, others wished they had attended one. The ones that attended an HBCU felt welcomed and included. The ones who did not, chose a PWI because of the financial resources offered there and the fact that PWIs were less expensive than an HBCU. There must be a bridge for any Black woman who wants to experience a Historically Black College and University to do so without fear of extensive debt after graduation or to have parents go into debt for their education. More HBCUs also need to increase their ability to offer graduate programs. The women who attended HBCUs for undergraduate work would have continued in that vein for their doctorate if it were available to them.

## **Recommendations for Research**

This study has two recommendations for research. For research, the following stakeholders are called to action: (a) College professors and (b) Doctoral college professors.

### ***College Professors***

Undergraduate professors, especially in predominantly white institutions, need to research first-generation Black females. There is a need to understand first-generation Black female students' backgrounds, feelings of isolation, and the fear that first-generation Black female students feel in predominantly white institutions. Research is needed to help these college professors find a way to address the issues faced by Black female first-generation students. Undergraduate professors are essential to Black female first-generation students seeking higher education. The impact of undergraduate professors' demeanor, respect, and support affects the ability of Black female first-generation students. With undergraduate professors becoming more understanding, more Black female, first-generation students would seek a higher level of education.

### **Doctoral College Professors**

Doctoral College Professors need to research more about the lack of confidence Black female first-generation students have when entering a doctoral program. Doctoral College Professors receive students who apply for the doctoral program and must meet the first-generation Black students who are enrolled where they are. Doctoral College Professors need to research how to alleviate the discomforts felt by Black female first-generation students. Doctoral College Professors need to study what they can do to help

Black female, first-generation students accept the fact that they are truly capable of completing this level of academic work. A study to better understand Black female, first-generation students' needs to make them feel more confident in a doctoral program.

A study to better understand the perseverance of Black female first-generation students is needed. It was remarkable how the participants all had the endurance to overcome all the barriers they faced and either remain in the doctoral program or completed the program. Black women have historically been placed in positions of overcoming racism, discrimination, and sexism. Still, they have persevered to overcome those obstacles, provide a home, provide income, and provide support for their family. A more extensive study to understand why Black women are stronger in pushing through obstacles is needed. Black women have proven to be resilient and appear to have an innate inner strength that other populations have not always shown.

### **Recommendations for Policy**

This study has six recommendations for policy. For policy, the following stakeholders are called to action: (a) High Schools and (b) Colleges and Universities.

#### ***High Schools***

High schools need to institute a policy on annual or bi-annual diversity, equity, and inclusion training. Training on these issues must be followed up with a team of professionals tasked with engaging the students to get feedback about their classroom experiences. In addition, high schools need to institute a policy to encourage Black female first-generation students to get involved in the science field. Most of the

participants of my study were Education majors. Education is a field often chosen by Black students and is undoubtedly a worthwhile field. However, first-generation Black females who do not have parents who have completed college are predisposed to seeking less than their potential. First-generation parents often influence their children to accept the status quo instead of reaching outside or upward to engage in more challenging fields.

High schools must institute a policy to engage parents of first-generation Black female students. This engagement should include meeting with FGS parents, starting in ninth grade and continuing each year. This engagement would help FGS parents better understand options for their children's future education. In addition, this engagement would include tours of colleges for FGS parents, exposure to college graduates and students to understand better college life, and the commitment needed to complete a degree.

### ***Colleges and Universities***

Colleges and Universities need to institute policies that allow for more scholarships and fellowships for Black female first-generation students. As expressed in my study by many, finances were an issue that prevented them from going to the college of their choice and hindered them from choosing a doctoral program. Colleges and Universities need to institute a policy to ensure mentorships and research opportunities are equitably shared among all students. Participants expressed feelings of being excluded from these experiences because they did not know how to access these options. Colleges and Universities need to institute a policy for required training on diversity, equity, and inclusion for all employees annually. Understanding the inclusion issues is necessary for

professors to educate the first-generation Black female students appropriately. Professors understanding their own biases would better prepare them for students who are not like them. A policy banning hostile racist, discriminatory language by students or professors is needed to ensure Black women feel comfortable on their PWI campuses.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Based upon the findings of the study and its relation to the literature, it is concluded that:

- **Lack of confidence.** Black first-generation females enter doctoral programs with a strong sense of insecurity. Throughout the study, participant after participant indicated their lack of confidence in approaching a doctoral program. This lack of confidence was based on their perception of not being worthy of the title *Doctor*. Lack of confidence also came from the participants' experiences as the first-generation student. Because they had no parent that could guide them through their educational journey and help them prepare for college life, they felt underprepared. The participants expressed little or no high school preparation for college, which only added their feelings of not being college material.
- **Schools Matter.** First-generation Black female students have experienced racism differently, from being put on display in the four corners of a classroom to facing microaggressions from other students in their undergraduate classrooms. Participants who attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities indicated higher satisfaction with their undergraduate college experience. Participants were excited about their surroundings of Black students with whom they could connect and relate. They expressed their feelings of inclusion, whereas participants who

attended Predominantly White Institutions indicated their feelings of isolation, not belonging, or wanted. There were expressions of needing other Black students and professors around to help them feel more comfortable and included on the PWI campus. Representation of Black professors made the participants feel cared for and motivated to complete their degrees.

- **Parental support is crucial.** The need for parental and familial support was critical to the success of first-generation Black students. The participants expressed support from parents was limited as their parents had not attended college and could not understand the students' issues. Parents of first-generation students need to be involved in their children's educational journey. Parents can be involved to help prepare their children for college. Suppose high schools take the recommendation for engagement. In that case, parents of first-generation students will be included in discussions about their children's education and what they need to learn to support their children when they reach college. Parents of first-generation students need to understand the need for their continued support after high school. Since FGS parents did not attend college, exposure to college life is necessary. Parents have to be open to helping their children post-high school. With the discussion starting in ninth grade and continuing through twelfth grade, parents will know their role as support agents. Showing up to high school events and being involved in parent-teacher organizations in high school will prepare them for their role in college.
- **Perseverance is imperative for the Black female, first-generation doctoral student.** The need to persevere is discussed with every participant in this study.

Each one had to persist even though they often thought they would not make it. Their inner strength to persevere was drawn from several places in their previous life. One was knowing that what they left behind was not what they wanted to repeat: a cycle of poverty. Several participants indicated that knowing what poverty looked like and felt like gave them the drive to continue to reach their goals. Some participants indicated that professors pushed them to continue, but even though there was doubt, eventually, there was the will to want to finish. The determination to have the title doctor before their name was their goal, and giving up would not allow them to reach that goal, so they persevered. They persevered through family deaths, sick children, resources unavailable to them, and doubtful family and friends. They persevered. They achieved. They thrived.

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### Appendix A: Interview Protocol

#	RQ	FGS	BW	Question
5	2	CC	ER	Was there ever a time when you felt isolated or excluded on your college campus? Explain what that looked and felt like.
8	2	CC	ER	Can you name and explain the relationship with your most involved and concerned professor while in college?
11	1	Prep	UE	Can you explain how your high school prepared you for college?
12	3	CC	PBH/ER	Were there activities or experiences in college that kept you motivated to succeed? Please explain those activities or experiences.
13	1	PM	FAM	How involved were your parents with your educational journey?
14	2	CC	HR	Please explain the type of college or university you attended for undergraduate work? (location, type, size, demographics)
21	3	Prep	HR	At what point in your educational journey did you realize that it was possible for you to achieve a doctorate?
22	1	R	UE	As a first-generation student, what would you describe as the biggest barrier to you in completing your doctorate?
23	2	CC	FAM/IS	What changes would you make to your school to be more inviting to first-generation students and minority students?
29	1	R/PM/Prep	FAM	How did your family respond when you decided to pursue a doctorate?
30	1/2/3	PM/Prep	IS/PBH	If you could change anything about your educational journey, what would it be and why? (school, timing, major, preparation, etc.)

## IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board  
Division of Research and Innovation  
Office of Research Compliance  
University of Memphis  
315 Admin Bldg.  
Memphis, TN 38152-3370

February 12, 2021

PI Name: Margaret Murry  
Co-Investigators:  
Advisor and/or Co-PI: Derrick Robinson  
Submission Type: Initial  
Title: An Examination of Peak Experiences, Motivational Factors, And Resources of African American Females First-Generation Doctoral Students  
IRB ID: #PRO-FY2021-260

Expedited Approval: February 11, 2021

The University of Memphis Institutional Review Board, FWA00006815, has reviewed your submission in accordance with all applicable statuses and regulations as well as ethical principles.

Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:

1. When the project is finished, a completion submission is required.
2. Any changes to the approved protocol requires board approval prior to implementation.
3. When necessary, submit an incident/adverse events for board review
4. Human subjects training is required every 2 years and is to be kept current at [citiprogram.org](http://citiprogram.org).

For additional questions or concerns please contact us at [irb@memphis.edu](mailto:irb@memphis.edu) or 901.6783.2705

Thank you,  
James P. Whelan, Ph.D.  
Institutional Review Board Chair  
The University of Memphis.

### Settings

#### Institutional Review Board

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