

URBAN PROGRAMS THAT PROMOTE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND COLLEGE  
ENTRY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students when they participated in college transition programs in Virginia and how such programs, in addition to the family, school, and community supports and partnerships, prepared them for college. This study explored student perspectives regarding their journeys through high school graduation, the college application process, and college attendance. The participants shed light on their successes despite challenges they may have faced, especially when support from stakeholders such as their families, schools, and communities has been afforded them. The methods for this study were qualitative, utilizing a transcendental phenomenological design. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to include students who were part of college transition programs. The students' high school experiences and permanent residences were from within one urban public school district in Richland, Virginia (pseudonym utilized), which is also the general setting. Because students were attending college, the data collection occurred virtually. Data collection included individual interviews, a single focus group, and a qualitative questionnaire. Significant statements were highlighted, coded, and analyzed to discover emerging themes from the data obtained. Several themes emerged which included student perceptions on how their families provided financial and emotional supports, acted as role models, and offered guidance. Additionally, the themes of rigor and advising, as well as programs and organizations and peers and culture emerged also.

*Keywords:* community, family, parent, partnerships, school, supports, urban

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## Dedication

I thank God for His divine provision, love, and favor. Without Him, I am nothing. His guidance throughout this process has been vital. Beyond my Heavenly Father, I would like to dedicate this work to my loving and devoted husband. You have been so patient with me throughout this process and have accommodated me in ways that I did not know I needed. Your strong work ethic inspired me when I was extremely frustrated, and for that, I am grateful.

I also dedicate this work to my beautiful God-given gifts, my two children. I have watched you grow over these last few years as I was at my desk, typing away. When I was supposed to be encouraging you, I found that I relied on you. You both have empowered me to run on in this journey, as you have been nothing but blessings to me.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my late parents. Both of you have always believed in me and did everything in your power to see to it that I was successful. I will be eternally grateful for the sacrifices you made for me, as you ensured that my needs were met and that I was loved throughout my developmental years and beyond.

Next, I dedicate this to my late, supportive sister. You were everyone's biggest cheerleader but especially mine! Your consistent check-ins did not go unnoticed, but in many ways, they were welcome. Thank you for all the support and encouragement you always so selflessly gave. I also want to send love to my late nephew, who grew up like my little brother; the shock of losing you while finishing this work was almost unbearable.

Finally, to my extended family, friends, sorority sisters, church families, and work colleagues, I would like to say thank you for your undying support and encouragement throughout this process. I am appreciative of all the love you've given me!

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### **List of Abbreviations**

American College Testing (ACT)

Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA)

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

Historically Black College or University (HBCU)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Socio-economic status (SES)

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

This transcendental phenomenological study was an investigative probe into the lived experiences of urban high school graduates. They participated in programs that fostered a successful transition from high school to college in Virginia. Programs such as Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), Partnership for the Future, and Upward Bound assist students from challenging backgrounds and urban settings. They serve as means to promote strong academic functioning to ensure graduation, guidance in applying and paying for college, and further mentorship once students are attending college (GEAR UP, 2020; Partnership for the Future, 2019; & Upward Bound, 2020). By compiling data obtained from the participants' experiences, this study is a body of work that provides an in-depth look into what factors contributed to their success from their perspectives, resulting in high school graduation and college attendance.

In Chapter One, a background of relevant literature highlighting the historical context of some of the challenges urban high school students face is presented. Additionally, the social context in which these challenges may impact students in the urban setting is discussed. Furthermore, the theoretical underpinnings upon which this study is framed concerning the problem is provided. Additionally, the central research question and sub-questions are outlined, and definitions of terms are provided. Personal philosophical assumptions and paradigms regarding this topic are discussed, followed by a summary of this chapter.

### **Background**

Dating as far back as the early 1800s when Horace Mann became known as the leader of the common school movement, the educational system's goal has been to educate students to be

positive contributors to society. That goal persists currently (Guttek, 2011). Research suggests that high school graduation and further college entry and completion impact potential employability as youth attempt to enter the world of work (Morgan et al., 2015). America's urban settings are in a crisis concerning graduation rates compared to those of the general population (Cooper, 2018).

### **Historical Context**

From a historical context, dating back to the late 1800s to the early 1900s, Rodriguez-Pose and von Berlepsch (2019) reported that when there is population diversity in locales, there is stronger economic development across time. Rodriguez-Pose and von Berlepsch (2019) used census data from the late 1800s and beyond to determine that when populated areas are more polarized, there is less wealth, generally for that area of individuals from diverse backgrounds. To understand the demographic composition of the typical urban environment, the Pew Research Center (2018) indicated that since the year 2000, Caucasians have become a minority (44%) in most urban environments but have remained in the majority (90%) of suburban and small metro counties. Furthermore, the Hispanic population comprises 27% of the urban population, the Black population is 17%, and the remaining 12% is composed of Asian and other ethnicities (Pew Research Center, 2018). Additionally, only 71% of Black and 75% of Latino students graduated, as opposed to 81% of the general population in 2013 (Cooper, 2018).

According to Robison, Jagers, Rhodes, Blackmon, and Church (2017), students' and schools' success in the urban environment has been particularly problematic as these settings tend to perform poorly on various indicators. Reportedly, over the past 15 years, representatives from school districts across the nation have attempted to address the lagging graduation rates in urban settings by holding summits and symposia (Cooper, 2018). Such attempts to remedy the



situation have included creating smaller schools, instituting dropout recovery programs, and hiring graduation coaches (Cooper, 2018). According to Robison et al. (2017), schools' practices impact the path children may take in the future, and families' economic situations typically hold students to one path or the other. Furthermore, research indicated that underprivileged students are far less likely to stay in school than other upper and middle classes (Robison et al., 2017).

### **Social Context**

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] (2018), urban children are more than two times more likely to be living in poverty. Similarly, urban students are more likely to attend schools with a higher population of other students in low-income situations (NCES, 2018). According to Durham et al. (2015), social inequalities to access resources in the educational and capitalist systems also exist, and educational researchers have attempted to find solutions to these disparities.

In addition to the role schools play in ensuring that students are successful and graduate, parental involvement is also a strong predictor of student achievement (Hurley, Lambert, January, & D'Angelo, 2016). Likewise, reports indicated that students who typically have less involved parents tend to have lower self-esteem than those who tend to have more involved parents, which could have long-lasting effects on children academically and behaviorally (Singh, 2017). According to Li and Fischer (2017), parents are typically less likely to engage in school activities for students attending schools in disadvantaged environments. Additionally, these researchers also noted that when there are strong parental networks, they are more likely to be strongly engaged in school activities (Li & Fischer, 2017).

While schools and parents play critical roles in student achievement and graduation, community engagement also plays an important role (Epstein, 2018). According to Valli,

Stefanski, and Jacobson (2016), the re-emergence of school and community partnerships has recently become the focus of school reforms. In distressed urban areas, the incorporation of health and other social services to support students and families has expanded the traditional educational drive (Valli et al., 2016). Additionally, Morgan et al. (2015) also confirmed that creating programs devoted to assisting students from disadvantaged, urban communities will promote student success and that this effort requires numerous stakeholders.

### **Theoretical Context**

Newland, Mourlam, Strousse, DeCino, and Hanson (2019) noted that there is a need for qualitative research to be reported on involving the subjective well-being of youth, including the essences of their experiences and the contexts of those experiences. When there is a community of support, which involves collaboration and clear communication lines, at-risk students can become more academically successful (Morton, 2016). Additionally, Valli et al. (2018) indicated that collaborative partnerships' goal is to support students and possibly family and neighborhood development. In a phenomenological study, Morton (2016) described how at-risk foster youth were given a voice to discuss how foster parents, teachers, and community members aligned their supports and equipped children with the tools necessary for development and achievement. As with the current study, Morton (2016) highlighted that the three entities of the family, school, and community aiding in students' success provide a comprehensive support mechanism, like Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence (1987).

It has been reported that graduation rates in urban settings are lower than in non-urban settings (Cooper, 2018). Furthermore, many students encounter additional challenges who do graduate yet do not assess certain aspects of the higher education enterprise (Strayhorn, 2017). Strayhorn (2017) indicated that acceptance into higher education institutions is reserved for a

select few and that the financial obligations are often unaffordable. Strayhorn (2017) further noted that close connections with communities were necessary for Black males (specific group upon whom his study was based) attending public urban universities. Additionally, he noted that the students' sustainability was partly due to the relationships and bonds forged with faculty, staff, and peers as support systems. Strong support networks are important for student success (Strayhorn, 2017).

Because adolescence is challenging for students as they transition throughout their academic careers, the need to improve their potential educational outcomes is critical as the world is becoming increasingly reliant on technology (Morgan et al., 2015). The necessity for stronger educational outcomes is highly evident for those who are from low-income, urban environments where limited opportunities persist (Morgan et al., 2015). Cooper (2018) argued that when decisions are being made for urban students, it is imperative to include data relevant to students' affective experiences. Furthermore, Epstein (2018) explained that there had been an increase in topic coverage of family, school, and community partnerships. However, she conveyed that significantly more should be done to equip school personnel to effectively incorporate family and community engagement practices in their professional work (Epstein, 2018); hence, the need for the current study.

The current research study provides insight into the lived experiences of urban students. They have demonstrated success by graduating from high school and attending college in college transition programs. Their accounts of the challenges they faced, the family, school, and community support they received, and their perspectives on the most productive resources have been obtained. This information will add unique, qualitative data, informing stakeholders in their quests to provide optimal supports.

### **Situation to Self**

I was motivated to conduct this study because I currently serve as a school psychologist in an urban setting. Still, I live in a suburban setting, which is where my children have matriculated through school. I was able to see the differences between the opportunities of those in urban versus suburban environments. While there are varying degrees of parental involvement, school supports, and community involvement in both settings, I am also aware of the differences in the residential communities and some of the difficulties students face. Because these differences are evident, students' experiences in these situations vary as well.

Moustakas (1994) explained that the essence of individuals' experiences is necessary for phenomenological studies, rather than analyzing participants' experiences. Moustakas (1994) further informed that those who participate have variable realities in phenomenological studies, meaning that what may be a reality for one individual is not necessarily the same for another. Therefore, I approached this study with an ontological philosophical assumption, noting that even though experiences may differ, common themes may emerge as clusters of meaning developed, providing insight into the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). With the ontological philosophical assumption, the nature of reality is what is sought, and reality is explored by soliciting experiential data from several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, I used the epistemological assumption as I sought subjective evidence from the participants to gain a deep understanding of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Furthermore, I believe this study was necessary as it provided personal descriptive accounts of successful students' journeys and how those supports could potentially become implemented on a larger scale. The social constructivist paradigm guided this study as data collected from the individuals were personal accounts; those accounts are based on the

participants' culture and their interactions with others (Creswell & Poth). The goal was to interpret the participants' experiences' meanings as they are described and their histories and settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Problem Statement**

School performance in urban school settings is generally worse relative to that of non-urban school settings when measured by quantitative student outcomes (Chambers & Michelson, 2020). Graduation rates are generally lower within urban environments than in suburban environments, and decision-makers in pursuit of educational solutions need more timely and localized information, as large urban districts are in crisis (Cooper, 2018). There are some districts in which the high schools are deemed dropout factories, with only a 60% graduation rate (Cooper, 2018). The graduation rates for Black and Latino males, specifically, are estimated to be between 48-51%, nationally (Huerta, McDonough, & Allen, 2018). Due to socioeconomic difficulties and cultural constraints, those students attempting to pursue college tend to have limited educational choices, including academic and financial limitations (Cilesiz & Drotos, 2016). Additionally, their families tend to be hindered in their ability to transition from high school to college. They are less likely to assist them academically or will tend not to know how to navigate the college application process (Cilesiz & Drotos, 2016).

According to Morgan et al. (2015), current trends have indicated that educators, researchers, and advocates have collaborated to highlight the necessity for more family and community involvement in school affairs. Like the current study, Morgan et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study investigating partnerships that increased urban high school graduation rates and college enrollment. In addition to interviews and focus groups, Morgan et al. (2015) also utilized questionnaires soliciting students' and parents' information. However, Morgan et al.

(2015) noted that a limitation was that they attempted to use an entire graduating class of individuals from 36 high schools, to include those who were and were not a part of a community program promoting student success. Another limitation involved the difficulty in tracking and measuring outcome results, in addition to a significant number of participants dropping out of the study (Morgan et al., 2015).

The current study has furthered the research and has helped fill the literature gap by collecting qualitative data, including the lived experiences of a smaller, more localized participant pool (12). The participant pool was comprised of only current college students, who have benefited from family, school, and community supports through college transition programs. The information obtained from the descriptions of the participants' first-hand experiences provided current, relevant, and localized information, helping to guide educational decision-makers and family and community stakeholders as to the most appropriate support for younger students with similar experiences. There continue to be factors that hinder many urban learners from being able to prepare them for college. Therefore, the problem associated with the current study that it is not known is what types of support urban learners who participated in college transitions programs have received to prepare them for college, given several factors that impede them from transitioning to college.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia and how the family, school, and community supports and partnerships, prepared them for college. At this stage in the research, college transition programs will generally be defined as organizations that assist students from challenging backgrounds and

urban settings. They serve as means to promote strong academic functioning to ensure graduation, guidance in applying and paying for college, and further mentorship once students are attending college (GEAR UP, 2020; Partnership for the Future, 2019; & Upward Bound, 2020). Furthermore, a partnership is defined as educators, families, and community members cooperatively engaging and sharing information to guide students, solve problems, and celebrate successes while recognizing student development's shared responsibilities (Epstein, 2001). The theoretical framework guiding this study was Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence. It indicates that students experience higher success rates when entities such as the home, the school, and the community intersect, promoting student learning and development. This study aligns with the overlapping spheres of influence theory in that the information provided by the participants explained the influences of their external support partnerships. Themes from this study ultimately inform current stakeholders of the vitality of the supports experienced and how these efforts might be applied to individuals on a larger scale.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study's findings could inform families, schools, and community supporters with how to partner effectively and strategically to promote student graduation rates and success beyond high school. By giving students a voice, stakeholders become informed on how to accommodate students based on their perceived needs more readily. Newland et al. (2019) confirmed a need for more qualitative data regarding children's experiences related to their well-being, noting a necessity for this type of study. Therefore, the theoretical, empirical, and practical significance of this study are outlined.

### **Theoretical Significance**

This study contributes to education by contextualizing Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence. Epstein (2001) noted that instituting a social, organizational perspective was necessary, highlighting that the most effective supports had overlapping and shared goals wherein collaborative work resulted in more student success. Epstein (2018) further acknowledged that there had been more awareness of students' support partnerships. Yet, she expressed that more must be done to prepare educators to incorporate more family and community engagement, as it is essential to promoting student success at this time (Epstein, 2018). As Strayhorn (2017) noted in a study of urban, male college students, more information is needed regarding the experiences of minorities in urban settings. This study provided important data to contribute to the field; the current study participants were from an urban setting and offered their unique insights regarding the supportive and collaborative networks.

### **Empirical Significance**

This study's empirical significance is that it provides vivid descriptions of a small group of individuals, of no fewer than ten, who have successfully overcome challenges with their supporters' assistance. Although similar, a study conducted by Cilesiz and Drotos (2016) garnered data from 76 high-poverty urban students who were not part of a partnership program promoting success. They investigated those students' views and perspectives related to higher education. Cilesiz and Drotos (2016) found that students viewed college as rewarding but involving risks, and risk-minimizing strategies were devised to help facilitate their higher education pursuits (Cilesiz & Drotos, 2016). Also, Morgan et al. (2015) conducted a similar study of urban students in New York in a program using a large sample's mixed-methods approach. It was difficult to track and measure their data and were a great number of participants



dropped out. Those researchers provided procedures and strategies for key stakeholders to partner in that area (Morgan et al., 2015).

### **Practical Significance**

By conducting this study, the qualitative data garnered from an intimate sample provided specified evidence of the support systems that urban students in Virginia found to be most helpful. This study helps key stakeholders determine how to best partner and accommodate students who have experienced similar challenges. By soliciting descriptions of the lived experiences from students who have been a part of college transition programs and the recipients of home, school, and community supports, the subjective data provided a unique lens for those supports' effectiveness. Details about the effectiveness of the aids afforded individuals, given their perceived obstacles, helped to enlighten key constituents as current and future programs and services are developed. Like the study conducted by Morgan et al. (2015), this study provided usable data to educators and policymakers in the most effective supports provided to students who are likely to have endured challenges within the urban environment. However, the study included student accounts of their lived experiences.

### **Research Questions**

This transcendental phenomenological study of urban college students' perspectives of their supports was guided by one central research question and three sub-questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Supportive literature as to the rationale for the proposed questions is provided. The following are the proposed questions which guided this study:

#### **Central Question**

What are the meanings of the perceptions and lived experiences of urban college students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how the family, school, and community support prepared them for college?

The central question was the general theme upon which participants elaborated. It has been noted that external support partnerships and collaboration are critical in impacting the success of youth (Smith, Ralston, Naegele, & Waggoner, 2019). Parents nor educators fully understand what students believe about family and school partnerships. Many believe students typically want to minimize their family's involvement in their lives' academic aspects (Epstein, 2001). However, Epstein (2001) stated that students want their families to be involved. Still, Epstein stressed the importance of obtaining students' views regarding common interests toward student success held between families and schools.

### **Sub-Questions**

**SQ1.** What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the family prepared them for college?

For families living in disadvantaged settings, such challenges as unemployment, food insecurity, violence, and other traumas may be realities (Durham et al., 2015). However, there is an extensive amount of literature documenting the significant importance of school and family connections, strengthening school success, and improving school programs (Epstein, 2001). After using a nationally representative sample, Hurley, Lambert, January, and D'Angelo (2016) found that a vast majority of parents are highly likely to have conversations with their secondary children about college, and most also believe that their children could obtain a bachelor's degree. Similarly, Hill et al. (2017) found that when parental relationships are centered on supporting education, it is typically associated with students envisioning a meaningful future, ultimately

leading to stronger academic engagement. Furthermore, when parents' beliefs and practices are school-centered, adolescent students are more likely to perceive school as a priority, leading to them prioritizing academic achievement themselves (Day & Dotterer, 2018). While literature confirms that positive school achievement is obtained when parents are involved, it is also necessary for parents to foster autonomy and independence rather than exercising too much control over students' educational journeys (Núñez et al., 2017). Therefore, with sub-question one, students perceived familial involvement experiences offered insight into the phenomenon.

**SQ2.** What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the school prepared them for college?

The transition from 12<sup>th</sup> grade to college can be overwhelming, especially for disadvantaged youth due to limited resources (Oreopoulos & Ford, 2019). It is apparent that in high-poverty urban schools where students can bring uncertainty to classrooms, it is imperative to have effective teachers, administrators, and organizations (Kraft et al., 2015). Advocates for student development have noted that educational improvements can be made when schools attend to the many needs some students present (Valli et al., 2016). Duncheon and Relles (2019) reported that high schools play an important role in orchestrating students' futures as brokers of college access opportunities. In addition to academically preparing students for life beyond high school graduation, it is crucial to proactively prepare students to transition to postsecondary life by teaching awareness and advocacy strategies (Durham et al., 2015). Hence, the phenomenon of urban college students' perceptions of their experience with school supports were explored with this sub-question.

**SQ3.** What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the community prepared them for college?

Numerous stakeholders can help urban students complete high school and transition to college (Morgan et al., 2015). To help fill some of the voids present in schools, partnerships with outside agencies help students (Miranda, Radliff, & Della Flora, 2017). Community supports are one of the essential components of every school (Epstein, 2018). Epstein (2018) reported that community supports offer potentially rich resources that are often untapped, even in high-poverty environments. School-community partnerships have been identified as supportive of student learning, improving schools, and assisting families, and many of the accommodations include health and social service supports (Valli et al., 2018). Sub-question three served as guidance in addressing the phenomenon of urban students' perceptions and experiences with community supports as they have pursued college attendance.

### **Definitions**

1. *College Transition Programs* – organizations that assist students from challenging backgrounds to promote strong academic functioning, ensure graduation, guidance in applying and paying for college, and further mentorship upon attending college (GEAR UP, 2020; Partnership for the Future, 2019; & Upward Bound, 2020).
2. *Overlapping Spheres of Influence* – the social, organizational perspective that the overlapping and shared goals of home, school, and community stakeholders foster student success when collaborated (Epstein, 2001).

3. *Parental Involvement* – the participation of significant caregivers in activities promotes their children’s education and academic and social well-being (Parsons, Walsemann, Jones, Knopf, & Blake, 2018).
4. *Partnerships* – “...educators, families, and community members work[ing] together to share information, guide students, solve problems, and celebrate success” (Epstein, 2001, p. 4).
5. *Stakeholders* – Organizations and groups of individuals [who] possess several common characteristics...with shared obligations (Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008).
6. *Urban* - densely developed territory designated for residential, commercial, and other non-residential urban land uses (US Census Bureau, 2020).

### **Summary**

Research has shown that more diverse areas typically are wealthier than those who are more polarized in their composition (Rodrigues-Pose & von Berlepsch, 2019). More recent research has shown that graduation rates are generally lower within urban environments than in suburban environments. In pursuit of educational solutions, decision-makers need more timely and localized information, as large urban districts are in crisis (Cooper, 2018). The current study provides evidence of urban students’ perceptions and lived experiences who have demonstrated success by graduating high school and attending college and have also been a part of a college transition program. Their accounts of the challenges they faced, the family, school, and community support they received, and their perspectives on the most effective resources adds unique, qualitative data to the field, informing stakeholders in their quests to provide optimal

supports. This study also contributes to education by contextualizing Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

This literature review provides an understanding of urban student success related to family, school, and community involvement. The literature review provides further detailed insight into the importance of these three entities engaging in students' learning processes, especially those in the urban setting. Covered in the chapter is the theoretical framework derived from Epstein's (1987) theory related to overlapping spheres of influence, including family, school, and community partnerships operating as support mechanisms for students.

Epstein (2018) recently reported that more work in the educational field needs to be done to highlight the necessity of shared supports for students. Likewise, as Cooper (2018) noted, more localized data should be obtained on the topic to inform schools and districts about the partnership needs and availability of resources, which speak to the literature gap and need for the current study. This chapter also focuses on the related literature regarding the state of urban student education, including social and cultural implications, and student support and partnerships. Finally, a summary is provided, highlighting the key features of the chapter.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The current study explores the personal accounts of urban college students' experiences as they transitioned through graduation and college. The theoretical framework upon which the current study is built is Epstein's (1987) overlapping spheres of influence. The premise behind Epstein's (1987) theory is that in the school entity's quest to educate children, the incorporation of a parent or home support as well as the supports that can be provided by community agencies or entities are vital to the comprehensive care students need to be successful (Epstein, 2001).

### **History and Theory Development**

Epstein (2001) and colleagues began their work in 1981 with elementary schools and parental involvement and began a further exploration into the field by adding research with secondary school students. The later exploration involved incorporating community agents into their research, which eventually led to establishing several networks and centers to guide educational agencies in partnership building (Epstein, 2001). While much of the research has been in Baltimore, Maryland, Epstein's research has played a vital role in educational reforms throughout the United States and beyond. Epstein (2001) has noted that families and educators have provided needed insight into the extreme importance of partnering to educate students.

Epstein's (2001) theory of overlapping spheres of influence was operationalized from a social, organizational perspective. It specified that schools and families were most effective when they shared goals for children and collaborated support. More specifically, six major types of involvement are represented in the overlapping spheres of influence model: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2001). Each of the six types presents various challenges and potential outcomes that impact the courses of students' success, and Epstein (2001) encouraged those practicing these types to investigate further, what supports were deemed successful, when and how they were effective, and why. Epstein's (2018) more recent research has focused on providing educators with the necessary tools and skills to garner more involvement from families and communities to collaborate supports for student achievement.

### **Theory Informed Literature**

The overlapping spheres of influence theory, originated by Epstein (1987), has served as the framework upon which other researchers have based their work. In their work, Morgan et al. (2015) utilized these precepts as a foundational springboard to their research on a program that



served 294 students over four years. They investigated whether parents and students believed they were helped by the program, incorporating family, school, and community supports (Morgan et al., 2015). Similarly, this theory was used as an overlay, in conjunction with another theory, in a qualitative study conducted by Robinson (2017). Here, a case study was conducted that explored educators' and parents' perspectives regarding parental involvement and student achievement, which found that policies are in place at the district level. Still, parents remain uncertain as to how to engage (Robinson, 2017) effectively. Finally, the research conducted by DeMatthews and Brown (2019) referred to the theoretical precepts of home, school, and community partnerships for support when students experience violence and loss in their communities. They noted that these partnerships positively affect student achievement and well-being (DeMatthews & Brown, 2019).

### **Relevance of Current Study to Theory**

The current study includes the perspectives of urban college students who have progressed through college transition programs such as GEAR UP, Partnership for the Future, Upward Bound or others. By providing their lived experiences, the students offered insight into the various supports they have received from family, school, and community stakeholders and their effectiveness. This study aligns with Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence. The students provided qualitative data regarding details of the supports they received from each of the partners represented in each of the spheres in theory.

This research will extend the research field by offering insight from the students' perspectives, rather than the educators, parents, and community partners, as to the impacts each of those entities may have had on students' journeys to success. It has been noted that very few in-depth studies exist regarding the experiences of students [and teachers] in high poverty

schools (Kraft et al., 2015). Cooper (2018) argued that decision-making in urban high schools must be data-driven and relevant to students' affective experiences. Cooper (2018) further noted that educational decision-makers need timely, localized data to inform their decisions. Therefore, the data collected for this study offered the students' unique perspectives, which help educators determine the most effective manners in which to engage parents and community partners at the local level and beyond. Epstein (2018) noted that providing educators with tools and strategies to effectively partner with parents and community representatives as a thrust for needed research.

### **Related Literature**

The overlapping spheres of influence theory of Epstein (1987) informs that stakeholders involved in student success outcomes are typically comprised of supports from the home, school, and community. In promoting student success, it is necessary to examine the social and cultural factors that may impact student retention and later college pursuits (Hebert, 2018). Reportedly, a strong predictor of student achievement over time has been noted as parental involvement (Hurley et al., 2016). The research revealed that although parental engagement in students' educational tracks typically decline as students develop, it continues to be a vital support mechanism for high school students' educational success (Day & Dotterer, 2018). According to information obtained from the National Education Surveys Program of 2016, 27% of parents from homes below the poverty line (low socioeconomic status – SES) volunteered or served on a school committee, as opposed to those above the poverty line, noted to be 47% (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Likewise, those parents attending a class or school event were 62% for low-income families and 83% for non-poor families, generally (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Percentages of parental attendance were higher for poor and non-poor families

for lower grades than middle and high school grades (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Researchers have found that students with uninvolved parents tend to report lower self-esteem than those with involved parents, which may have potential long-lasting effects on students' academic performance and behavior (Ling, Chen, & Chiu, 2019; Singh, 2017). As schools forge relationships with families and community agents, social capital is built, which Duncheon and Relles (2019) described as the resources embedded in networks and relationships. Valli et al. (2018) further noted that social capital is needed to support students, families, and neighborhoods.

### **Social and Cultural Factors for Urban Students**

Across the United States, schools have been a socializing mechanism that teaches cultural norms, values, and roles representing society. Rust (2019) asserted that non-European students attempt to understand and espouse these social norms. However, there is a disparity between their sub-cultural context and the larger cultural context, leading to a bi-cultural ambivalence. This ambivalence comes with students who do not see their own cultures represented in the super-culture and lack a sense of connectedness (Rust, 2019). Teachers' beliefs play a vital role in their students' expectations and decisions regarding many students who may present differently from their ideal. Nevertheless, while the assumption is that--a child can be anything they want to be as long as they work hard--has been the American mantra for years, many times, that is simply not true for disadvantaged students. The latter largely comprise the urban school population (French, 2017).

Mordechay and Orfield (2017) noted an increase in Black and Latina/o populations and a decrease in the White population within the urban environment. They noted that even as far back

as the Civil Rights Movement, it was reported that the United States was dividing into separate and unequal communities. That trend continues to be evident today (Mordechay & Orfield, 2017). Anderson (2017) reported high schools in the inner city have transitioned from being places of progress and social betterment to institutions that are challenged by structural poverty and racial inequity to a significant degree.

Contributing to the accelerated decline of urban school systems during the early 1960s was deindustrialization, a debilitating socioeconomic force (Peck & Reitzug, 2018). During this time, in the Southern portion of the United States, Black students were not afforded universal secondary schooling until the latter part of that decade. The disparities in education are deeply etched in American society, resulting in an educational debt (Gbolo & Grier-Reed, 2019).

There are rising levels of school segregation, and this separation is a reflection of existing social inequalities and is part of the reason social differences are maintained (Boterman, Musterd, Pacchi, & Ranci, 2019). According to Rust (2019), although the academic achievement gap has decreased over the past 30 years, Black students have consistently performed less well than their White counterparts in grades, test scores, educational attainment, and higher drop-out rates. Such issues as poverty, inadequate funding for schools, the inability to attract and retain strong teachers, and the composition of the mainly minority student body are factors that can be considered realities for the typical urban, minority population (Rust, 2019).

According to Allen and White-Smith (2018), parents of young Black boys have noticed highly uneven school outcomes for their children at the school level. These students are regularly placed into lower ability and remedial courses. Additionally, many may be over-identified with a special education disability (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). Ladson-Billings (2017) reported that another difficulty, which can be easily overlooked, is that many urban students' health issues and

access to healthcare can inhibit student success. Segregated and substandard housing situations, such as those that include lead-based paint or toxic water supplies, can also have serious impacts on students' functioning (Ladson-Billings, 2017).

In addition to economic disenfranchisement, Black students from impoverished neighborhoods witness more violence than their White counterparts, and many of them may be victimized themselves (Bentley-Edwards, Smith, Robbin, Adams-Bass, 2019). Black children and adolescents are often faced with decreased safety levels, where their mobility is often restricted by either law enforcement or by their parents as a protective measure (Bentley-Edwards et al., 2019). As a society, recent events have highlighted critical racial tensions, including police killings and unequal treatment between races and cultures. Such events have sparked intense national discussions regarding race and opportunity in the United States (Mordechay & Orfield, 2017). Youth, typically Black and Latina/o, who attend public schools in an urban environment, encounter less access to higher education experiences; this remains true despite the call for increased accountability measures for school communities to develop college-ready students (Knight-Manuel et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, with all the efforts aimed at improving educational opportunities for learners considered marginalized, technical solutions and testing practices have resulted in a widening of the gap that policymakers were attempting to eradicate (Tefera, 2019). The standardized test gap between Black and White urban students has long been a concern for educational researchers (Wasserberg, 2017). While the goal in education has been to include all students through standardization and testing, much of what resulted have been practices such as teaching to the tests, teaching how to fill in multiple-choice responses, and teaching other test-taking strategies (Wasserberg, 2017). Therefore, some educators have further widened the

learning gap rather than simply teaching content (Wasserberg, 2017). When compounded by students having disabilities, this phenomenon can be even more challenging (Tefera, 2019).

According to Munter and Haines (2019), to make matters worse, high stakes standardized testing does not only carry serious consequences for the educational institution, such as non-accreditation and federal funding. High stakes testing can also affect teachers' reviews and evaluations due to their students' performances, impacting their salaries or employment. What might be the most unfortunate consequence is that poor results can carry life-altering consequences for students, including them not being able to graduate high school or not being admitted to college (Munter & Haines, 2019).

When considering these stressors, what is also worth considering in urban environments are some of the structural inequalities that may exist, such as social, political, and economic power differences between cultures, which also serve as barriers to Black youth (Rust, 2019). Poverty has been considered a social condition based on the decisions that those in power have made. Such structural inequalities involve decisions of the powerful to include housing, accessibility to schools and funding, policing, political and legal representation, and employment and are not, therefore, features of culture as much as they are of the impoverished condition (Ladson-Billings, 2017).

**Urban students as first-generation college attendees.** To combat the impacts of environmental stressors, obtaining a college degree has become a necessary ingredient for upward mobility in the United States (Asmitia, Sumabat-Estrada, Cheong, & Covarrubias, 2018). However, the idea of higher education carries with it a social class bias, which implies that upward mobility is a notion which signifies that one's current status is somehow less than that of others (Elkins & Hanke, 2019). Nevertheless, first-generation college students are those whose

parents or guardians did not begin a postsecondary degree or did not obtain a degree after enrollment, according to Hebert (2018). These students have been recently highlighted as they are viewed as a group that may present with promise for impacting the American society and economy with its ultimate earning potential (Havlik, Malott, Davila, Stanislaus, & Stiglianese, 2020).

Kryza-Lacombe, Tanzini, and O'Neill (2019) noted that the National Center for Education Statistics reported that when considering all students (not specifically first-generation) the following is true: 46.9% of Black and 48.9% of Hispanic students considered as full-time obtain a degree within six years, as opposed to 68.9% and 72.8% of their White and Asian counterparts, respectively. Furthermore, 49.5% of students who fall within the lowest income category when enrolled achieve their degree within six years, as opposed to 76.8% of those who fall within the highest income category (Kryza-Lacombe et al., 2019). Students considered to be first-generation college attendees comprise approximately half of those who attend college, and for those attending four-year institutions, that amount falls to approximately one third. Many of those students are disproportionately students of color, are from low socio-economic backgrounds, or both (Hebert, 2018).

Schwartz et al. (2018) reported that given the odds of making it to college, once there, students from these backgrounds are more than twice as likely to leave without having obtained their degrees and are usually left with debt. Additionally, differences such as lower grade point averages and feelings of exclusion tend to emerge near the conclusion of their first year of attendance (Schwartz et al., 2018). Portnoi and Kwong (2019) indicated that among the challenges many urban, first-generation students encounter, many of these students attend public school districts that under-prepared them academically. Furthermore, many students from these

settings may have a limited understanding of the college intake process and the typical challenges that accompany the college preparation and application journey as they seek college acceptance (Portnoi, & Kwong, 2019). When considering the challenges a typical urban student may face as they pursue college entry, an important factor that cannot be overlooked is that of the student's family (Carey, 2018).

Carey (2018) reported that as schools attempt to provide comprehensive support for their college aspiring students, it is important to consider their mindsets. While there is an all-important drive to thrust students into college, which will ultimately help the family financially through later employment opportunities, there is often reluctance on behalf of the student and the family as that individual leaves the family structure. This reluctance can be attributed to the student's family-based commitments established before the student pursues college. Some of these commitments may include financial contributions and child-care help (Carey, 2018).

According to Portnoi and Kwong (2019), school counselors play a vital role in the college-navigation process for most students at the school level. They further suggested that counselors can be considered gatekeepers for those students who may not have had any family examples of how the college acceptance process works. Additionally, if they have low expectations or feel that a student does not possess college potential, counselors can constrict the accessibility of necessary tools to navigate the college application process. Conversely, they may also significantly and positively influence the process if they know the unique needs of many aspiring, first-generation college applicants (Portnoi & Kwong, 2019).

Once in college, students have revealed the subtle ways social class differences affect campus social life, which brings an added burden, especially when students consider the financial limitations many have (Gray, Johnson, Kish-Gephart, & Tilton, 2018). Additionally,



with the many challenges first-generation youth experience, school counselors are beginning to recognize the need to provide group counseling supports and other interventions to these students (Havlik et al., 2020). It has been reported that this type of intervention to aid students with remaining in school is absent (Havlik et al., 2020). Furthermore, when the urban high school's culture is such that college attendance is the expectation and a celebrated idea, this also provides a significant source of support for those aspiring to further their education beyond high school (Portnoi & Kwong, 2019).

**Social capital.** Elliott, Brenneman, Carney, and Robbins (2018) explained that social capital includes resources available through social relationships and structures that can be accessed when necessary to ensure success is met with an attempted action. As students approach high school graduation and hope to extend their education to college, many lack an understanding and accessibility to college information and processes. Social networks, both formal and informal, provide students with needed supports through this process. (Elliott et al., 2018).

Connections made with others before and after enrolling in college can provide a wealth of support for students throughout their transition (Schwartz et al., 2018). During the transition to college, social capital can diminish because some strong connections within the community and high school begin to weaken (Schwartz et al., 2018). Fenzel and Richardson (2019) conducted a study that included urban Mexican and Black boys from disadvantaged backgrounds. It was noted that confidence and resilience were key factors in overcoming challenging obstacles. Through a program that fostered knowledge and leadership building, what developed were stronger senses of self-efficacy, academic and social capital, as well as leadership and peer support (Fenzel & Richardson, 2019).

According to Oja, Clopton, and Hazzaa (2019), students with strong social networks have experienced great benefits such as affective commitment, greater college adjustment, and generally more meaningful student experiences. There is a likely need to enhance and strengthen these relationships to improve students' retention rates who may be struggling in new environments, away from their pre-existing support systems (Oja et al., 2018). Because social capital includes contacts, relationships, and networks that provide students with resources and available opportunities, it is pertinent to promote parents, peers, and school/community individuals as viable and necessary partners in this process (Elliott et al., 2018). Not only does social capital provide positive outcomes for the individual, but these connections can ultimately result as a means to progress these social units as a whole (Oja et al., 2018).

Through enriched social capital, students tend to experience stronger grade point averages and generally stronger satisfaction with their school experiences (Schwartz et al., 2018). French (2017) reported that some students are left without the resources and necessary supports to propel them toward their educational goals without the connections afforded through social capital. Because they may be in disadvantaged situations, the idea of social reproduction is likely to occur or be perpetuated. Social reproduction is a concept in which the embedded social inequalities within a community or other social structure are transmitted to the following generation (French, 2017). To prevent this from occurring, school personnel, namely counselors, are urged to make valiant efforts to understand students' sociocultural constructs in the urban environment. Additionally, it is incumbent upon school staff to be aware of this and provide interventions to assist students who may experience difficult situations (Rust, 2019).

**Student resilience.** College life entails the need to have the drive to succeed for most students. When students exude a sense of excitement about their aspirations and their virtues,

they tend to have an advantage regarding their emotional resilience (Kryza-Lacombe et al., 2019). Despite the expectations, millions of students are overcoming difficult and tragic circumstances and are excelling academically. It has been estimated that 3.4 million students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grades achieving within the top quartile come from homes that earn less than the median income (Hebert, 2018).

Additionally, urban youth can thrive, even in the midst of difficult and trying situations when they are provided with individualized support, which is effective and context driven. When there is a coordinated effort on behalf of the school and community, the unit can provide a sense of cohesion as they take a common route toward a stronger future for students (Peck & Reitzug, 2018). There must be an investment to work together to provide all students with the necessary tools to succeed, even if their needs require flexibility in decisions regarding race, culture, ethnicity, language, and special needs. All differences must be considered (Gbolo & Grier-Reed, 2019). It is important to build bridges to aid students with the necessary resources and skills. It is also pertinent to use these same bridges to inform those providing support to educate them on their essential needs (Emdin, 2017).

Bentley et al. (2019) noted that many students from urban, impoverished environments have also shown higher correlation rates of exposure to violence and victimization, which tend to peak at age 20, the age of typical college students. Despite vulnerabilities, most Black college students have experienced academic success despite experiences of violence exposure [and victimization], which serves as evidence that this group may serve as a beacon for resilience (Bentley et al., 2019). Furthermore, upon recognizing all the challenges stacked against urban students, what emerges is the idea that these students are not only resilient, but they have grit and a great deal of emotional intelligence (Emdin, 2017). Noted in a study by Portnoi and Kwong

(2019), first-generation female college students of color utilized resistance and resilience considering the many challenges they may have endured previously. The researchers reported that these students used their challenges to motivate them; they carried the notion of proving wrong the pre-judgments others had about them and using resistance through achievement (Portnoi & Kwong, 2019).

A key characteristic of resilient students is that they feel good about themselves, which can be enhanced through positive relationships with caring adults, such as their teachers (Wasserberg, 2017). Such tools as social-belonging interventions also improve academic outcomes (Kryza-Lacombe et al., 2019). Resilient students continue to be successful despite living in impoverished settings or who live through family disruptions. Additionally, those who educate students with these histories must also be resilient in finding creative ways to educate and promote engagement despite the difficulties these students may have. Therefore, their students and their colleagues' relationships are vital in propelling both students and teachers toward resilience (Henderson et al., 2018).

While it may be believed that parents in urban environments, namely Black parents, do not value education, many make observations of their students' achievements and the influences of the teachers and other adults within the school setting (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). Ladson-Billings (2017) conducted research involving parents' perceptions of their children's most effective teachers. It was reported that the parents noticed their children's increased enthusiasm while acknowledging that they were aware of the teachers' recognition of parents' knowledge of their children. Furthermore, parents observed that the teachers were holding the students to a high-standard while teaching children to have pride in their communities functioning within the dominant culture (Ladson-Billings, 2017). When educators and students have opportunities to be

successful, the idea of resilience is often realized. Additionally, when both educators and students are valued and validated, a sense of connection ensues, often encouraging continued engagement (Henderson et al., 2018).

**Code-switching.** For some students to be successful in environments that may not be similar to what they have been used to throughout their development, they must learn how to navigate using different social rules or codes. This behavior involves more than the previous linguistic understanding of what code-switching originated as, to now infer a cultural connotation (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). According to Apugo (2019), the process of code-switching is an identity-shifting tool used to hide, change, or soften one's authentic racial and ethnic identity to accommodate or satisfy a particular environment's culture. Similarly, Gray et al. (2018) referred to code-switching as "the masks the oppressed learn to wear for different occasions" (p. 1244). They emphasize that effective code-switching is not merely changing into the dominant culture's ways of doing things and speaking (Gray et al., 2018). Moreover, it involves thoroughly knowing both (or more) cultures and effectively functioning within them without abandoning one's original culture (Gray et al., 2018).

Students from working- and lower- class backgrounds have been devalued by those in the majority who make the rules, and the way to achieve merit, recognition, and a form of acceptance by the middle class is through hard work, by way of higher education (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). While on campus, code-switching is typically used in public social contexts such as in the classroom or when speaking with professors, to minimize one's cultural language and behavior, which might be perceived as a lowering of status to members of the dominant group (Gray et al., 2018). According to Williams-Farrier (2017), the use of African American language and other nonstandard languages is typically only appropriate at home or in more intimate social

contexts, typically comprised of more homogenous individuals. When used outside of these contexts, it has shown to be detrimental to students' perceptions of their languages and identities and limiting the improvement of the students' writing abilities (Williams-Farrier, 2017).

To negotiate social and academic discourses of opportunity and equity, minority students develop a hybrid sense of themselves. Students with lower socioeconomic status and students of color continue to be marginalized based on race, class, and gender, even when diverse educational environments are deliberate in their attempts to address these concerns, in that their focus remains on mainstream achievement (Caraballo, 2019). A class-based microaggression system is recognized by the marginalized group that often goes unnoticed by the dominant culture's group. It affects the identity development of the individuals who comprise the lower status group. It tends to place defining elements onto them sustained in other social contexts and interactions (Gray et al., 2018). Some of these individuals achieve model minority status, which is usually attached to oppressed people who are thought to have ascended beyond their political, social, educational, and economic circumstances to White-approved success. For those who may not have achieved model minority status, the implication is that it is their fault (Apugo, 2019).

Code-switching includes conforming to appear as valid by the larger group (Apugo, 2019). Apugo (2019) conducted a study involving Black women attending predominately White institutions (PWI). They were interviewed regarding their experiences during their educational tracks. The study's findings revealed many negative labels and stereotypes placed on the participants, which produced anguish and required other means of coping in difficult situations. One stereotype in particular on campuses and in the larger society is that Black women possess a significant amount of strength and are devoid of emotions and feelings. Black women are

provided with very few resources to help their psychological and emotional well-beings, ultimately supporting them through their academic aspirations (Apugo, 2019).

Educators and those in the caring professions, especially those from the dominant culture, should not profess to care about all students if there are underlying notions of superiority (Emdin, 2017). Additionally, there is a need for platforms in schools and universities to facilitate dialogue on matters of social and political importance to students who may not be from the dominant culture, to highlight the fact that the necessity to conform to the mainstream culture is a means of academic survival (Apugo, 2019). In addition to supporting students at the systems level, it is necessary to support students individually, which is important for student affairs personnel to recognize. Therefore, there should be an awareness at the university level of the switching of codes students have found themselves having to explore, based on the lack of acceptance and tolerance exemplified by the dominant group culture (Elkins & Hanke, 2018).

To emphasize this notion, Jackson and Knight-Manuel (2019) conducted a study that included educators of color's attempts at increasing Black and Latino students' college readiness. The results indicated that while traditional teaching methods are valuable in teaching core content material to support academic readiness, more is needed to aid students' social and emotional readiness. The educators of color helped to operationalize culturally relevant education to benefit Black and Latino students. This socio-politically conscious approach was noted to be grounded in the lived experiences of instructors of color, which added an explicit focus on addressing issues that typically marginalize people of color (Jackson & Knight-Manuel, 2019).

## **Challenges and Associations Linked to Parental Involvement**

Research indicates that parent and family engagement in students' academic lives yield positive student success (Beycioglu, 2016). Overwhelming parental support indicators is paramount to student achievement (Parsons, Walsemann, Jones, Knopf, & Blake, 2018). Parsons et al. (2018) reported that research has shown that significant growth is apparent in students' social well-being and academic success, including stronger reading and math performance, higher grade point averages, and higher test scores. Furthermore, Rattenborg, MacPhee, Walker, and Miller-Heyl (2019) reported that early school success is typically correlated with parental engagement and is associated with stronger academic motivation.

Conversely, when the research was conducted at the secondary level, it was noted that home-based involvement was not associated with students' intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Rather, it was reported that associations were made between academic socialization and a decrease in intrinsic motivation and between academic socialization and an increase in extrinsic motivation (Wehrspann, Dotterer, & Lowe, 2016). Wehrspann et al. (2016) noted that these findings differed from previous research in the field, which has shown associations between home-based involvement and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Research has shown a wide variety of parental involvement types that result in positive student outcomes (Hurley et al., 2016). Rattenborg et al. (2019) further support Epstein's (2001) six types of involvement by highlighting three domains of parental involvement: family-school communication, participation in school-based activities, and home-based support for learning. Rattenborg et al. (2019) noted that communication is highly valuable as the two entities partner in supporting students. Rattenborg et al. (2019) also noted that even though teachers valued parental involvement in the classroom, they found parental involvement to be of more value in



the home as they teach their children social skills. Hurley et al. (2016) further confirmed that engaging in homework help tends to be lower than other forms of support and involvement. Furthermore, further research is necessary to determine which aspects of parental involvement reveal the most predictive information regarding student outcomes (Hurley et al., 2016).

Although parental involvement is important, some difficulties might impede this involvement. Some of the difficulties between parents and students include parents' desire to engage and students' reluctance to include their parents. Likewise, parent and teacher tensions also include parents' desire to receive more feedback versus teachers' perceived reluctance to communicate (Deslandes & Barma, 2016). Reportedly, schools remain so steadfast in their traditional policies and procedures that they impede families and schools (Parsons et al., 2018). It has been suggested that parents should begin to be integrated into the decision-making processes to ensure more thorough collaboration occurs (Parsons et al., 2018).

There are additional challenges involved with parents becoming involved in their sons' and daughters' education, and some of those challenges include various family commitments, conflicts with scheduling, or language barriers (Goss, 2019). Li and Fischer (2017) suggested that parents are less likely to engage in school activities for students attending schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods and further reported the various hardships many parents in these environments may encounter. As previously noted by Rattenborg et al. (2019), communication plays a vital role in parents' engagement at the school level; Goss (2019) further informed that schools could deter parents from becoming involved by failing to communicate about events on time.

Other limitations potentially involve the manners in which school information is disseminated, such as through the internet, if parents do not have access to this form of

technology (Goss, 2019). Additionally, schools can be viewed as a surveillance agency in that they keep formal records, have connections with other public institutions, and have increased security (Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017). Haskins and Jacobsen (2017) further noted that in addition to family structure, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status presenting as barriers to parental involvement, paternal incarceration could also strongly impact whether parents become engaged in their children's schooling.

**Parental engagement and socioeconomic status.** As previously noted, when investigating parental involvement and engagement, it is important to understand the many factors which may be associated with whether parents become involved (Parsons et al., 2018). Benner, Boyle, and Sadler (2016) confirmed the idea that parents need to be involved in school activities to effect change for disadvantaged students and those struggling academically. It has been noted that poverty has long-lasting effects on academic achievement, especially for students who live in extreme circumstances and students who experience poverty in early childhood (Robison et al., 2017).

Additionally, Robinson (2017) indicated that parents can benefit from relationships established with educational leaders and that parents should have a voice regarding their participation and involvement with their children's education. Furthermore, Benner et al. (2016) noted that previous research confirmed the relationship between parent involvement and student success at both the primary and secondary school levels. They also reported that for those who are of higher SES, parents should not only acknowledge and convey their educational expectations to school officials but to their children as well (Benner et al., 2016).

Duan, Guan, and Bu (2018) reported that low SES families receive many benefits from parents being involved in school activities. Parents' faith and expectations regarding their child's

education (academic socialization) tend to be associated with academic success. In addition to these connections, Li and Fischer (2017) further confirmed that substantial decreases in parental school involvement are found when positive social networks are made with other parents. More specifically, the size of parents' social networks amongst other adults predicts home parental involvement. Similarly, the parent-based school network's size predicts parents' school involvement (Ucus et al., 2019).

Furthermore, home-based involvement is more strongly related to school behaviors and low SES homes (Duan et al., 2018). However, due to the many unfortunate hindrances encountered by disadvantaged families, stable, social connections amongst parents and teachers may not be established or maintained (Li & Fischer, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to improve upon an educational policy to enhance education quality and reduce the distance between students of varying socioeconomic levels (Gubbins & Otero, 2016). Gubbins and Otero (2016) suggest that this can be accomplished by designing plans and programs that strengthen the best parental involvement practices.

**Cross-cultural parental engagement.** Just as Benner et al. (2016) used data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, Day and Dotterer (2018) also used this study to obtain data for their study involving parental involvement across racial/ethnic groups. These studies are also similar in that they investigated students and the time beyond graduation (Benner et al., 2016; Day & Dotterer, 2018). Day and Dotterer (2018) followed students in the 10th grade until ten years after high school to investigate grade point averages and educational attainment related to parental involvement. Results indicated that all students benefitted from more academic socialization and school-based involvement, about their grade point averages; however, when adding the element of home-based involvement, mixed results were reported across ethnic

groups (Day & Dotterer, 2018). Yet “more home-based involvement combined with more academic socialization was particularly beneficial for Black and Hispanic/Latino adolescents” (Day & Dotterer, 2018, p. 1344).

To further emphasize the idea of culture playing a role in parent engagement, in the study conducted by Duan et al. (2018), it was noted that Chinese parents tend to focus more on learning-related involvement. However, American parents tend to also focus on social functioning. They further noted that “concerted cultivation exists in different cultural environments” (p. 6); this is indicative of the fact that in different cultures, the focus of parental involvement may also differ.

Although still within the American culture, a sub-culture to consider is that of the special education population, where parents may feel ostracized, feel as though they cannot advocate for their children, and are faced with a multitude of barriers when attempting to navigate special education services (Goss, 2019). Similarly, foster care students are another subset of the culture wherein many challenges for biological and foster parents inhibit the notion of family support (Morton, 2016). Furthermore, when Black parents can engage with the school, they are often met with rejection and, at times, exclusion. Research has shown that predominantly White, middle-class, female teachers are more likely to prefer the parenting styles of parents who are demographically like themselves. At the same time, they devalue Black parents’ parenting styles (Allen & White-Smith, 2018).

In a study of Chilean fourth-grade students, variables that significantly affected the academic performance gap were the school’s dependence, the family’s SES, and the sex of the student (Gubbins & Otero, 2016). Of note were parental expectations, which had an even stronger effect on school functioning than did the family structure, according to Gubbins and

Otero (2016). Reportedly, some of the parenting practices included punitive actions that draw attention to the intra-family dynamics, which is a mini culture (Gubbins & Otero, 2016). Goss (2019) emphasized this by noting that even within American culture, low-income parents of color typically do not have the same networking mechanisms as their White counterparts and that even within-family dynamics do not fit White middle-class norms.

While some research has provided insight on parental involvement at the elementary and middle school levels, Flores de Apodaca, Gentling, Steinhaus, and Rosenberg (2015) provided research investigating parent involvement with middle school students with disabilities. As noted with Gubbins and Otero (2016), Flores de Apodaca et al. (2015) found that parental expectations, rather than involvement, were noted to have a significant positive relationship with student achievement measured by grade point average. However, interestingly, unlike general education samples, parental communications and some aspects of parental involvement were noted to hurt student performance (Flores de Apodaca et al., 2015).

### **Students' Self-Efficacy**

In addition to building and enhancing student success, both academically and behaviorally, it is also important to strengthen students' self-efficacy, or their inherent capability to achieve success (Williams, Swift, Williams, & Van Daal, 2017). Using specified homework tasks to enhance parent-child interaction, Williams et al. (2017) noted two important themes emerging. The emerging themes resulted in more parental involvement being generated through the homework tasks and the children experiencing enjoyment in the homework; whereby, the homework turn-in rate was considerably higher than before the study (Williams et al., 2017).

In a similar study, which utilized homework as a tool for engagement, Doctoroff and Arnold (2017) conducted an exploration with elementary school students. The researchers found

and confirmed that those constructs impact one another when children show interest and skill (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017). Doctoroff and Arnold (2017) also reported that students who express low engagement on homework tasks might be at risk for poor academic achievement and further decreased interest. Finally, these researchers relayed that when parents display positive parenting behaviors and support their children's psychological needs for autonomy, associations were noted to increase engagement in homework-like tasks (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017).

Students' manners may begin to make them feel more competent and may differ across varying demographic groups (Bradley, 2019). For minority students who may be presented with various challenges, flexibility and perseverance are necessary tools to possess (Bradley, 2019). For Black males, a key component to success is establishing relationships with peers and faculty (Strayhorn, 2017). Similarly, Newland et al. (2019) supported this notion, as they reported that self-concept, mental health, and school satisfaction were more apparent when significant relationships were established with teachers. Additionally, when self-efficacy is established during an individual's youth, persistence through higher educational attainment is more likely to be realized (Glessner et al., 2017).

**Student engagement.** Student interest in school often declines when students do not experience academic success (Mac Iver et al., 2017). When students do not experience success by middle and high school, they become disengaged, typically manifested in attendance concerns and failure to pass assignments and classes (Mac Iver et al., 2017). According to the researchers, interpersonal relationships play a vital role in student achievement. Additionally, a key feature of student well-being, including happiness, satisfaction, and self-acceptance, is students' perceived school climate (Newland et al., 2018). Furthermore, when students are given a voice, are offered

assistance when needed, and share in the responsibility of maintaining a safe and supportive environment, positive outcomes have been reported (Newland et al. 2018).

Just as Doctoroff and Arnold (2017) and Williams et al. (2018) conducted research utilizing homework as a tool for collecting evidence of parental involvement, Madjar et al. (2015) also conducted research utilizing homework. However, in the latter study, children's motivation toward homework assignments was investigated. Their findings confirm that teachers should encourage parents to become involved; however, parenting styles and the type of involvement also matter (Epstein, 2018). When parents set clear rules, it was reported that it fosters more positive outcomes than parents who simply monitor their children's homework completion. Madjar et al. (2015) provided research to support the idea that children's engagement and motivation tended to mimic their parents' engagement and motivation regarding mastery and performance for the provided homework tasks.

In contrast, Raftery-Helmer and Grolnick (2018) examined parent and teacher effects on students' ability to cope and their classroom engagement. These researchers revealed that neither parent nor teacher structure was associated uniquely with students' cognitive appraisals, coping, nor engagement, over and above the effects of involvement and autonomy support (Raftery-Helmer & Grolnick, 2018). It is important to help youth develop the ability to overcome by helping them resolve everyday problems (Bradley, 2019). Additionally, what has been found is that children's feelings regarding failure are important for them in engaging in the classroom because they are linked with strategies they use to cope (Raftery-Helmer & Grolnick, 2018).

**Academic socialization.** Parenting and sharing in student learning responsibility result in positive outcomes (Ucus et al., 2019). Additionally, school relationships are also helpful in students being able to envision a meaningful future (Hill et al., 2017). It was noted that there is

an association between students envisioning meaningful futures and their academic engagements, and this study supported the idea of academic engagement while in the context of developing students' long-term aspirations (Hill et al., 2017).

Hill et al. (2017) noted that, ultimately, students develop a sense of autonomy by providing support through teacher and parent engagement. When considering similar academic socialization elements, parental educational expectations, and self-efficacy among Latino students, researchers confirmed that students' perceptions of their parents' expectations are positively associated with their academic self-efficacy (Cross et al., 2018). Hence, parents' messages influence students' performance. Parents from low income, ethnic minority backgrounds also hold high expectations for their students' learning, and they stress the importance of school achievement through parental academic socialization (Suizzo et al., 2016). According to Suizzo et al. (2016), parental academic socialization involves educational beliefs, practices, and values that support learning and highlight education's importance. Cross et al. (2018) conducted a study and concluded that when parents do not shame and pressure their children, academic functioning tends to improve. Furthermore, the study's findings suggested that the manners in which parents engage and send messages to their students regarding education significantly impact their functioning (Cross et al., 2018).

### **Community and School Engagements and Student Success**

One of the foremost challenges in education in this century is finding ways to ensure that minority students will complete high school and attend college and for those students to earn degrees (Iver, Iver, & Clark, 2019). Huerta et al. (2018) encourage education scholars, community outreach programs, and local colleges and universities to promote a college-going identity for students to be successful. Moreover, the voices of educators, researchers, and



advocates must collaborate to help promote more family and community involvement in recent years (Morgan et al., 2015). For partnerships with community entities to be effective long-term, it requires an on-going commitment and attention to maintenance on behalf of those involved (Valli et al., 2016).

**Partnership effectiveness.** Models of school-community collaboration have begun to re-surface, as a large and necessary focus of educators and stakeholders has been on the academic achievement gap (Medina et al., 2019). An increased focus has been on urban students' mental health needs, who typically lack access to mental health care (Miranda et al., 2017). DeMatthews and Brown (2019) confirmed through their interviews with urban principals that students' grief and loss due to violence in these settings require extended support to assist with mental health and other basic needs.

Likewise, other supports such as health care and social services are needed in the urban setting, and partnerships with community agencies have been shown to enhance learning, improve schools, and strengthen neighborhoods (Valli et al., 2018). Medina et al. (2019) reported that school-community collaboration models offer strategies that encourage schools and communities to engage to problem solve, increase access to services and resources, and build social capital amongst stakeholders. Effectiveness in these settings includes committed scholars and practitioners who provide comprehensive supports and are flexible and consistent in collaboration and organization and interactive while using effective communication skills (Medina et al., 2019).

As noted previously, relationships play a vital role in fostering student success (Mac Iver et al., 2017). Furthermore, Smith, Ralston, Naegele, and Waggoner (2019) confirmed that great impacts could potentially be made in district-community partnerships when needs are shared

based on data. Like Medina et al.'s (2019) conclusions, Smith et al. (2019) reported that when there is a consistent leadership entity committed to ensuring that collaboration occurs, greater benefits can be realized. In further investigating relationships, Mac Iver et al. (2017) explored the effects of mentorship support on student success, which supplemented the established structures already in place at the school level; students reported having positive experiences resulting from engaging with their mentors.

**Community supports for student success.** Jordaan and Mannega (2022) informed stakeholders that community partners need to feel as though they are a part of student development on a larger scale. Additionally, Cummings and Olson (2019) noted that community agencies can counteract some of the demands placed on schools, such as those imposed through high stakes or standardized testing. That help may come in the form of resources or teacher development and instructional practices (Cummings & Olson, 2019). In an era when public school settings, especially those within the urban environment, are under increased scrutiny to perform at higher levels than they have in the past, community organizations can provide the necessary support to school districts, teachers, and students that could aid in improvement and more success rates, generally (Cummings & Olson, 2019).

In a study conducted by Doran, Rhinesmith, and Arena (2021), community agencies were given a voice to relay information from the perspective of their organizations. Community partners conveyed their hopes to have more ownership over how decisions were made (Doran et al., 2021). Furthermore, Doran, et. al. (2019) stated that strong relationships which have been strengthened by open communication and consent were vital to the success of the service-learning projects they guided. Doran et. al. (2019) further noted that in the time of the Covid-19

Pandemic and other societal hardships, such as systemic racism and police brutality, relationships between communities and educational institutions have been especially critical.

College students, especially those in their first year, may encounter a wide range of challenges that inhibit their willingness and abilities to persist, thereby requiring support for holistic development and engagement (Farruggia, Solomon, Beck & Coupet, 2020). In a study conducted by Farruggia et al. (2020), barriers to student success were identified, which included financial, academic, executive functioning-related, and university-context challenges. Farruggia et al. (2020) further highlighted the desires academic institutions and community organizations have to increase access to information for students, ultimately leading to an increase in service effectiveness, as opposed to operating in the less informed manners in which each entity had historically operated. By fostering stronger engagement between community organizations and schools and allowing for access to student information, decision-making and planning strategies become more efficient as well as effective in promoting student success (Farruggia et al., 2020).

**School supports for student success.** The educational environment should be one in which growth and development occur (Miranda et al., 2017). However, students in urban environments often have to contend with deficiencies in the quality of education they may receive, such as using outdated materials and facilities and the fact that some teachers may lack credentials to teach certain subjects (Robison et al., 2017). Conversely, teaching in high-poverty, urban settings reveal that students present various needs and face many challenges (Kraft et al., 2015). In many instances, teachers are eager to teach complex material; however, many students lack the educational foundations and have poor study skills to be effective (Kraft et al., 2015). Additionally, there is a dire need for schools to have strong, consistent leaders who can establish

and maintain partnerships with functional community entities, such as mental health agencies and universities (DeMatthews & Brown, 2019; Miranda et al., 2017).

Maintaining relationships with community partners continues to be a vital aspect of support as students approach graduation and pursue college (Duncheon & Relles, 2019). Often, schools solicit community-based supports and develop partnerships to provide the needed services for students and their families (DeMatthews & Brown, 2019; Miranda et al., 2017). Relationships and networks forged between the school, community, and colleges are necessary and beneficial. In schools' pursuits in obtaining information and supports for students hoping to attend college, some students have been noted to feel overwhelmed as to the degree of information shared, which indicates the need for more organizational management at the school level (Duncheon & Relles, 2019).

It has been noted that educators cannot serve students well if the environments in which students live are shut out (Kraft et al., 2015). There is great potential for stakeholders' collaboration to help students in need (Smith et al., 2019). Lunceford et al. (2017) studied participants' successes in a college preparation program compared to those not in a program. According to Lunceford et al., more positive results were found for students receiving supports from the program than those who were not in each of the following areas: attendance, retention, behavior incidents, grade point average, graduation rates, and college attendance. Programs such as these offer a belief that academic expectations can be met through education as students overcome the many challenges they face, such as the conditions of poverty (Morgan et al., 2015).

### **Summary**

This literature review provided the theoretical framework for the current study, Epstein's (1987) theory of the overlapping spheres of influence. The overlapping spheres of influence

theory inform that family, school, and community partnerships are necessary for promoting student success (Epstein, 1987). Aspects such as (a) the history of the theory, (b) the theory-informed literature, and (c) the relevance to the proposed study were presented. Related literature to the current study was also presented. Social and cultural aspects that impact student success were highlighted, including first-generation college attendance, student resilience, and code-switching. Factors associated with parental involvement, including challenges and other associations between student successes related to parental involvement, were discussed. Student well-being, such as self-efficacy, student engagement, and academic associations, were presented. Finally, literature regarding community and school partnerships was provided to present information about the comprehensive supports needed for urban districts and students to succeed in their academic pursuits.

Research has confirmed that parent involvement is consistently related to students' success in school (Rattenborg et al., 2019). Hill et al. (2017) noted that, ultimately, students develop a sense of autonomy by providing support through teacher and parent engagement. College students, especially those in their first year, may encounter a wide range of challenges that inhibit their willingness and abilities to persist, thereby requiring support for holistic development and engagement (Ferruggia et al., 2020). Additionally, relationships play a vital role in fostering student success (Mac Iver et al., 2017). Also, community partners have a need to feel as though they are a part of the students' overall development (Jordaan & Mennega, 2022). Furthermore, relationships and networks forged between schools, communities, and colleges are necessary and beneficial (Duncheon and Relles, 2019).

Epstein (2018) reported that more work in this field needs to be done. Very few in-depth studies exist regarding the experiences of students [and teachers] in high poverty schools (Kraft

et al., 2015). Likewise, Cooper (2018) noted that more localized data should be obtained to inform schools and districts about the partnership needs and availability of resources, which speak to the current study's literature gap and need.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia and how such programs, in addition to the family, school, and community supports and partnerships, prepared them for college. Using methods outlined by Moustakas (1994), this transcendental phenomenological study provided insight into students' perceptions and lived experiences concerning the supports they received, leading to graduation and beyond. Emerging themes were extracted for textural and structural descriptions using the essential descriptions of students' perceived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The current chapter includes the design of the study and the general research questions. Additionally, the setting, participants, and procedures are also described. The manners in which the data were collected and analyzed are provided. Finally, trustworthiness and ethical considerations are discussed, followed by a summary of the chapter.

### **Design**

This qualitative study used a transcendental phenomenological approach. Data were gathered from the natural setting with an attempt to make sense of or derive meaning from the perceptions of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of receiving supports from their families, schools, and communities and who have also participated in a college transition program (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative methodology was chosen to understand the stories embedded in the richness of a specific time and setting/programs of the individuals providing the data. The data were subjective; it was solicited from the lived experiences, opinions, and holistic

accounts of high school graduates who have transitioned to an urban college and have also participated in a program that fosters success.

Conversely, a study that would be quantitative was not best suited here. The purpose was not to be prescriptive nor generalizable but to ascertain thematic patterns of the participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2015). The researcher uses preconceived concepts or theories to decide what specific data would be collected with quantitative studies. Qualitative data inquiry involves the researcher discovering concepts or theories once the data have been collected (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Additionally, to compare all individuals using statistical means overlooks the uniqueness of their differences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From the data collected, I synthesized the students' information into emerging themes (Moustakas, 1994).

The current research used a phenomenological design; it entailed garnering students' perceptions and lived experiences on the influences their families, their schools, and community programs had on their evolution through the graduation and college acceptance processes. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), other qualitative research designs would not have been appropriate. With narrative research, the data would have likely included an exploration of the participants. Similarly, with grounded theory research, the inquiry would have included formulating a theory grounded in the field (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While an ethnography would have been utilized to describe and interpret the features of a subgroup, it would also not have been the best qualitative approach in that the focus would not have been directed toward a group of participants who share the same culture within that grouping, as described by Creswell and Poth (2018). Finally, a case study would not have been appropriate since the purpose would have been to develop a comprehensive description or analysis of a particular case or multiple cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018).



The transcendental phenomenological approach was the best approach for the current study in that it allowed for the exploration of experiences objectively. With the transcendental phenomenological approach, the data collector refrains from offering input regarding the phenomenon. This process is referred to as epoché instead of hermeneutic phenomenology, which involves researcher input (Martirano, 2016). Padilla-Diaz (2015) further explained that hermeneutic phenomenology typically refers to a study of personal experience requiring an interpretation of the researcher's meanings of the participants' phenomena. Another term for hermeneutic phenomenology can also be defined as interpretative or existential phenomenology (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Padilla-Diaz (2015) described another type of phenomenology, which was not appropriate to use, known as constitutional phenomenology. Within this research design, the self's analysis as a conscious entity is the focus; this approach appeals to universal consciousness. Therefore, utilizing the transcendental phenomenological approach remained the preferred choice of methodology in that the research is set to synthesize the essence of urban college students' experiences. They have received supports as they have transitioned to college (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

By obtaining these data from the students, revelations about what they experienced as the most and least beneficial aspects of their supportive networks were discovered. The obtained data also gave the participants a voice and illuminated their perspectives, ultimately providing rich information to stakeholders and policymakers (Patton, 2015). In a similar study, MacTaggart and Lynham (2019) used a transcendental phenomenological approach to obtain data regarding the essence of teachers' experiences as they reported on their thoughts, feelings, and sensual awareness of the stated phenomenon. From that information, textural and structural information

led to the researchers adding to the literature regarding teachers' experiences, similar to the current research (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2019).

Moustakas (1994) informed researchers that one of the beginning phases of this type of research is epoché or bracketing, which removes prior judgments and relies solely on the participants' reported experiences. It is the suspension or suppression of researcher judgment when the researcher is garnering the essence of the study participants' experiences and objectively reporting the data of the studied phenomena (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). For the current proposed study, participants answered questions during semi-structured interviews, participated in a focus group, and provided responses from a questionnaire. The data provided the necessary accounts of the students' lived experiences. Without judgment or personal bias, similarities in responses were generated into textural descriptions utilizing a transcendental approach for this research. Ultimately, the structural essences and themes helped garner further understanding of the phenomena from the students' perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

#### **Central Question**

What are the meanings of the perceptions and lived experiences of urban college students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how the family, school, and community support prepared them for college?

#### **Sub-Questions**

**SQ1.** What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the family prepared them for college?

**SQ2.** What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the school prepared them for college?

**SQ3.** What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the community prepared them for college?

### **Setting**

The study setting was within central Virginia, as it included participants who attended schools in an urban district there and whose residences are within the district. According to the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) (2020), the district serves approximately 25,000 students, with 54% considered disadvantaged. There are approximately 63% Black, 19% Hispanic, and 14% White students who attend school in this district. There are approximately 13% of English Language Learners and 14% of Students with Disabilities. The district includes 25 elementary, seven middle, and seven high schools. Additionally, one middle/high combined school, one special education school, one alternative school, one charter school, and three preschools (VDOE, 2020).

America's urban settings are in a crisis concerning graduation rates compared to those of the general population (Cooper, 2018). The 2018-2019 graduation rate for an urban Central Virginia district was 71.7%, as opposed to an approximately 91.5% graduation rate for Virginia for the same year. (VDOE, 2020). The rationale for selecting participants from the urban, Central Virginia setting was the demographic composition and the nearly 20% lower graduation rate.

The physical data collection site included virtual video calls via Zoom. However, it was proposed that variations in the proposed sites would have been available because the participants may have been attending colleges in locations other than within the identified district. Therefore,

data collection sites would have been convenient for participants (Patton, 2015). Such sites may have included the participant's college library or a library or facility near his/her permanent residence if he/she is on a break from college and agreed to meet there. The data collection site could have been at a location that was open to the public or other college students. Because the goal was to conduct the semi-structured interviews at various libraries, the general expectation was that the facilities would have been quiet and well-lit. The interviews would have been conducted within study rooms at the libraries to ensure privacy and ease conversation throughout the interview sessions. However, due to the global impacts of the COVID 19/Coronavirus pandemic, in-person contact was highly limited or eliminated on some campuses. Therefore, Zoom was used, and the interviews were recorded.

### **Participants**

This study included purposive sampling to select participants who provided informative insights regarding their urban students' experiences. The sampling criteria included participants selected based on their shared experiences of being participants in a college transition program, who were also graduates of high schools, and were currently attending college. These criteria were chosen to obtain perceptions of the lived experiences of students who have been successful in graduating from high school and were attending college. The themes generated from the students' responses provide information to stakeholders regarding the most effective support strategies for future students (Moustakas, 1994). All participants were at least 18 years of age.

While sample sizes can reach as many as 300, the recommended range was five to 25 (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The number of participants for the current study was 12 to fulfill university requirements, but no less than 10 (as two participants did not complete the questionnaire nor participate in the focus group) (Liberty University, 2019). Twelve was a

number that was sufficient to obtain enough information to describe the phenomenon adequately and address how it was experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Procedures**

To not infringe upon the rights to privacy of students and to determine the feasibility of conducting the study with students from desired college transition programs, I telephoned the administrators of the programs in central Virginia to describe the proposed study. Upon receiving the administrators' willingness to have their students participate in the study, I provided the administrators with an email description and invitation for them to disperse to the individuals who have transitioned through their programs, inviting them to participate in the study (Appendix A). Before initiating contact with the participants and obtaining data for this project, approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board was obtained by completing the necessary documentation and providing a description and copy of the original proposal. Once approval was granted from the university, I provided the consent form (Appendix B) to the administrators to disperse to the potential participants who confirmed their willingness to participate in the study. The first individuals who are at least 18 years of age, from an urban district in central Virginia, and who are currently attending college were utilized for the study.

Once consent was obtained, the researcher coordinated with the participants on the time which was convenient to the individual. The intent was to conduct a face-to-face interview, either in person or through video conferencing (i. e. Facetime, Skype, Zoom, or Google Hangouts), including pre-formulated questions. The interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the pandemic. The interviews were also semi-structured, which allowed for elaboration to describe the meaning of the experienced phenomenon by a small group of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The questions proposed to the individuals were standardized and open-ended, as

outlined by Moustakas (1994), and during the interview, the session was recorded, and notes were taken. Unlike an informal conversational interview, an interview guide approach, or closed, fixed response interview, the standardized, open-ended interview allowed for stronger organization of the obtained data for analysis purposes (Patton, 2015).

A focus group, which was conducted virtually, as well as an open-ended qualitative questionnaire, were utilized to obtain the subjective experiences from the participants. Throughout the data collection process, memoing techniques were utilized, to include field notes regarding observations of interactions and conversations, and other noteworthy occurrences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Additionally, once the data were collected and transcribed, the information was provided back to the participants for member checking and ensuring the collected data were representative of their responses (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). After the data collection, I analyzed the data.

### **The Researcher's Role**

As the human instrument in this study, it is important to be aware of my perspective and the relationship I have to the phenomena of urban college students' perspectives of their transitions to college (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I work in the nearby school district where the study participants held residences, and many of the programs in which they once participated were located. I serve a nearby district as a school psychologist, but I am currently assigned to elementary and middle schools. I do not know the high school graduates who were included as participants in this study; however, I am familiar with the students' culture being served in the high schools they once attended.

I have witnessed student situations that range from minimal parental involvement, like neglect and other abuses, and overwhelming or intense parental involvement; thus, the conditions

of the homes and schools of students within the district may have included a range of order and dysfunction. I have also observed some of the positive outcomes which are associated with appropriate community supports. Upon observing differences among students who have received extensive supports versus those who have not, I am a person in favor of stakeholder support networks. I am a proponent of the theory outlined by Epstein (1987), as she denoted the importance of providing support, guidance, and instruction to others (students) to promote development from the overlapping spheres of influence to include family, school, and community supports.

I also believe that many decisions are made about teens/students from entities such as the family, the school, and the community. Students seem to rarely have a voice in what structures and strategies are most effective for their success. This study allowed them to present their perspectives of their lived experiences with the supports they have received and offer their accounts on what would be more beneficial to their processes. As the researcher of the study, the goal was to remove my preconceived notions regarding students' educational tracks and allow them to provide real data of their lived experiences, as Moustakas (1994) suggested. Finally, I had no authority over the students who participated in this study.

### **Data Collection**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), several forms of data can be utilized when conducting qualitative studies. One of the primary data sources in phenomenological studies is the interview, the first data source for the current study in a semi-structured form (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) also encouraged the researcher to tape, or video record the interviews, which was also done. Additionally, a focus group with the participants was conducted virtually as another data source, as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). They indicated that data could

also be gathered from various formats. Finally, participants completed an open-ended questionnaire, which provided natural responses without manipulation or interventions, thereby providing information for descriptive purposes and thematic coding (Nassaji, 2015). While obtaining data, I produced memos and field notes documenting interactions, conversations, and other occurrences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These three types of data collection and coordination incorporated the idea of triangulation of the data to provide corroborating evidence that the information collected was valid (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The first of the data collection methods were individual, semi-structured interviews, as there were pre-formulated questions; however, modifications and additions were incorporated as needed (Moustakas, 1994). Conducting individual interviews allowed for an interactive process that evoked a full account of the participant's experience (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). In addition to obtaining background and demographic information, open-ended questions regarding participants' experiences, knowledge of the topic, and opinions were solicited (Moustakas, 1994). Video recordings of the interviews were generated to ensure an accurate depiction of responses and conversations were obtained, as encouraged by Moustakas (1994). Standardized, open-ended interview questions were as follows, and a more comprehensive interview template can be found in Appendix C:

1. How has your day/semester been thus far?
2. What is your major, and why?
3. What do you plan to do after you graduate college?
4. In retrospect, how would you describe your graduation and college acceptance/attendance processes?



5. Provide a general description of the challenges you faced as you matriculated through school.
6. Describe the nature of the barriers which inhibited support from family, the school, and the community.
7. Describe the supports you received from your family with schoolwork or with the college acceptance process. What is your perception of these supports?
8. Describe the supports you received from your high school with added academic support and the college acceptance process. What is your perception of these supports?
9. Describe the supports you received from the community (agencies other than your college transition program) with schoolwork or with the college acceptance process. What is your perception of these supports?
10. What were some tools you used to aid in your learning?
11. Describe the educational backgrounds of your immediate family members.
12. As a college student, what do you believe your family, school, and community expect of you?
13. What were your perceptions of college before your involvement with your college transition program?
14. How did you become involved with your college transition program, and what is your current involvement with this program?
15. How was your journey different from your peers who were not students in your college transition program?
16. How has your college transition program helped you?
17. What aspects of your college transition program would you change?

18. Describe the most impactful supports you have received in the process of graduating and now attending college.
19. Describe the least impactful supports you have received in the process of graduating and now attending college.
20. In your opinion, what should be done to promote family, school, and community partnerships?
21. What have you needed more assistance with that you have not yet received?
22. What supports have you utilized through your current college?
23. What else would you like to add to this discussion regarding the supports that assisted you with graduation and applying for/attending college?

Questions one through three were general rapport-establishing questions that ensured that the participants were comfortable (Moustakas, 1994). Questions four through six were general background questions and were meant to help establish a historical context to base the following questions (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, these questions helped identify existing difficulties that have been present and impeded the process of students advancing. It has been noted that environmental stressors, which are typically reflected in school and family characteristics, are important predictors of school success (Robison et al., 2017).

Questions seven through ten allowed participants to inform of the supports they received from family, school, and community aids, which have effectively promoted their success. These questions directly related to the research questions. Epstein (2001) informed that family, school, and community support and partnerships provide the necessary and comprehensive mechanisms to promote student success. Question 11 allowed the participant to take another's perspective by allowing him/her to take on the mindset of family members and school and community

representatives (Patton, 2015). Moustakas (1994) encouraged the researcher to allow the participant to take a moment and reflect on a particular awareness during the experience. This question provided the opportunity for the individual to reflect on others' points of view, but it also widened the scope of the participant's lived experiences.

Question 12 offered a transitional phase as the interview's focus began to shift toward the participant's program involvement (Patton, 2015). Lunceford et al. (2017) informed that supportive programs increase students' preparedness toward higher academic goals and help address some of the achievement gaps noted in public education. For questions 13 through 17, the participant discussed his/her lived experiences and served as the expert of those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Relating more specifically to the proposed central and sub- research questions, questions six through nine, 18, 19, 22, and 23 were designed to solicit the participants' experiences about the supports they received from the home, school, and community. It has been noted that there is a need for more qualitative inquiry as to students' perspectives regarding their well-being and that several factors impact their functioning and satisfaction, and these questions allowed for access into students' perceptions (Newland et al., 2019). Furthermore, partnerships such as those with schools and colleges can foster programs and interventions to reinforce and communicate the value of college education and remove perception barriers students may have that would impede college aspirations (Glessner et al., 2017).

Illustrative extremes regarding the most and least impactful supports that the participant has received during the process were noted for questions 18 and 19 (Patton, 2015). Conditions in the school experience influence (a) student motivation, (b) achievement, and (c) engagement (Mac Iver et al., 2017). These factors tend to underlie disengagement indicators for students (Mac Iver et al., 2017). The participant acted as the observer for question 20, as he/she was asked

to provide strategies to promote partnerships (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) further denoted the need to solicit thick descriptions of the participants' variations of perspectives and their feelings and thoughts on the given phenomena. For questions 21 and 22, the participant identified his/her own needs and discussed how to self-advocate (Patton, 2015). Newland et al. (2019) reported that students' subjective well-being had been noted as a significant indicator of health, development, and happiness. These questions also helped contextualize students' current situational experiences as they reported their current needs and supports (Newland et al., 2019). Finally, the closing question offered a one-shot inquiry that allowed the participant to provide any information which may not have been provided in the earlier discussion section of the interview (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

To effectively address and directly link the interview questions to the central and sub-questions, the following table provides a demonstration:

**Table 1**

*Research Questions Linked to Interview Questions*

Central Question: What are the meanings of the perceptions and lived experiences of urban college students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how such programs and supports of family, school, and community prepared them for college?

Sub-Questions:

Sub-Question 1: What are urban college students' perceptions of their experiences with family supports related to their goals to attend college while participating in a college transition program?

Interview Questions:

Question 6: Describe the nature of the barriers which inhibited support from family, the school, and the community.

Question 7: Describe the supports you received from your family with schoolwork or with the college acceptance process? What is your perception of these supports?

Question 18: Describe the most impactful supports you have received in the process of graduating and now attending college.

Sub-Question 2: What are urban college students' perceptions of their experiences with school supports related to their goals to attend college while participating in a college transition program?

Sub-Question 3: What are urban college students' perceptions of their experiences with community supports related to their goals to attend college while participating in a college transition program?

Question 19: Describe the least impactful supports you have received in the process of graduating and now attending college.

Question 6: Describe the nature of the barriers which inhibited support from family, the school, and the community.

Question 8: Describe the supports you received from your high school with added academic support and the college acceptance process? What is your perception of these supports?

Question 18: Describe the most impactful supports you have received in the process of graduating and now attending college.

Question 19: Describe the least impactful supports you have received in the process of graduating and now attending college.

Question 6: Describe the nature of the barriers which inhibited support from family, the school, and the community.

Question 9: Describe the support you received from the community (agencies other than your college transition program) with schoolwork or the college acceptance process? What is your perception of these supports?

Question 18: Describe the most impactful supports you have received in the process of graduating and now attending college.

Question 19: Describe the least impactful supports you have received in the process of graduating and now attending college.

## **Focus Group Interview**

The second form of data collection was a focus group. By conducting a virtual focus group, via Zoom and utilizing the focus group questions as a guide, information from the relatively homogenous group of participants highlighted commonalities and shared patterns of experiences (Patton, 2015). The focus group was conducted to supplement specific interview questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By conducting a focus group, individuals sharing similar backgrounds were provided the opportunity to interact through meaningful conversations regarding their college transition experiences (Patton, 2015). Full descriptions of the participants' experiences were encouraged. The expectation was that as the participants answered questions, others' memories would have been triggered, prompting them to share their experiences more candidly (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). The focus group discussion was moderated using ten open-ended questions and conducted within one hour (Patton, 2015). The focus group questions are located in Appendix D and are read as follows:

1. What is your perception of your educational experience before entering college?
2. Describe your feelings when you decided to attend college.
3. What were your perceptions regarding how receptive your family members were to you attending college?
4. How do you feel about the guidance you received from school staff members, such as teachers, counselors, and administrators, regarding college attendance?
5. As a college student, how do you feel about the support you have received from college staff members?
6. How do you feel about the supports you have received from your college transition program, aiding you academically, emotionally, financially, and procedurally?

7. How do you feel your transition to college experience could be improved?
8. In what areas have you needed the most assistance as you have transitioned to college?
9. In what areas have you needed the most assistance since you have been attending college?
10. What insights do you have now that you wish you would have had before your college application process?

Questions one, two, eight, and nine supplemented the specific interview questions of four through six by establishing a historical context that helped generate further discussion on the students' perceptions leading to the decision to attend college (Moustakas, 1994). Question three provided an opportunity for participants to share their thoughts on their family members' receptiveness regarding their decisions to attend college and was also related to sub-question one. Adolescents are influenced by their messages at home through parents' actions and academic socialization (Day & Dotterer, 2018). Questions four, five, and six further supplemented interview questions eight through ten. The focus group participants shared extended details about their experiences with schools' and college transition programs' guidance and enrichment as the students journeyed to and attended college. Questions four, five, and six also related to sub-questions two and three.

Referencing Epstein's (2001) model of overlapping spheres of influence; these questions garnered how schools and community programs aided students in their college access and attendance. Questions seven and ten solicited urban students' opinions, having experienced the phenomenon of transitioning to college, and their insights on what improvements could enhance their processes. These questions helped to widen the scope of the participants' experiences by

allowing them the opportunity to reflect on their awareness of their navigations through the college acceptance and attendance processes (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Qualitative Questionnaire**

The third form of data collection was a qualitative questionnaire. The open-ended questionnaire, yielding descriptive responses, was considered qualitative. The questions solicited participants' perceptions and feelings regarding their lived experiences with their family backgrounds, schools, and community agencies/college transition programs. The questionnaire was formatted using Google Forms and was comprised of eight questions to supplement the interview and the focus group questions. At the time of the study, the questionnaire was accessed electronically by the participants.

Because the instrument appeared to measure the participants' feelings regarding their college transition experiences, face validity is addressed (Warner, 2013). Similarly, the content validity was assessed by having expert judges, such as a panel of three college instructors, decide whether the content coverage is complete (Warner, 2013). Pilot testing was conducted on a small sample of current college students with similar qualities as the proposed study participants to determine whether the instrument measured what it was designed to measure (Warner, 2013). Upon the study participants' completion of the questionnaire, the information was compiled with the interview and focus group responses to be analyzed. The questions from the questionnaire are located in Appendix E and read as follows:

1. Describe your community and the environment where you lived while growing up.
2. How would you describe your family's financial situation?
3. How do you feel now that you are in college?
4. As a college student, where do you feel the most supported, and why?



5. Discuss your feelings during the application process.
6. Discuss your feelings as a new student attending your college/university.
7. What are your plans after you graduate?
8. How could your transition to college have been better?

During the data collection process, an important feature of qualitative inquiry involves the researcher making extensive field notes or memos, which are descriptive of the encounters, informal observations, and conversations with participants (Patton, 2015). Moustakas (1994) and Patton (2015) noted that while conducting qualitative inquiry presents the objective researcher's idea, ideas, and insights, judgments occur. At these times, extensive field notes should be documented. Therefore, detailed and descriptive notations were made during the data collection process (Patton, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

According to Moustakas (1994), data analysis should include what phenomenon the participants experienced and how it was experienced. During the interviewing process, open-ended questions were composed before the session, which were used for each participant. During virtual interview sessions, a series of 23 questions were asked of the participants. Semi-structured interviewing processes were utilized to allow for further probing to occur for clarification or further enlightenment on the topic, and modifications occurred as needed (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews were video recorded, as encouraged by Moustakas (1994). Once the interview sessions were concluded, transcriptions of the information obtained during the interviews was generated. Once the data were collected and transcribed the information was provided back to the participants for member checking, to ensure trustworthiness, and to enhance the rigor of the collected data (Birt et al., 2016). I generated codes from the transcribed

responses, which aligned with the interview questions. Once the codes were established, I organized the data into general themes and sub-themes and coordinated this with other forms of data collection processes as a means to triangulate the data.

An additional data source included a focus group, which allowed the participants to assemble virtually and answer similar questions. By conducting the focus group, the opportunity was created, which allowed the participants to engage in meaningful conversations about their transitions to and attendance in college (Patton, 2015). As Patton (2015) expressed, focus groups are useful tools when hearing from participants who may have been marginalized and for cultural minority groups, potentially aligning with the prospective participants. The focus group was video recorded and transcribed. Like the interview data, I aligned codes to the participant responses, and from that information, the themes which emerged were coordinated with the other forms of data for triangulation purposes. Furthermore, questionnaire responses provided percentages to strengthen the general interview and focus group discussions. I used the responses from the questionnaire as another form of confirmatory analysis as they coordinated with the interview and focus group responses, again, ensuring triangulation.

### **Semi-Structured Interview and Focus Group Analysis**

The generated data were related to the proposed research questions. Although there was consideration to use the coding software, MaxQDA, coding and analysis of themes were generated by hand. The transcripts of the collected data were sorted with an initial list of codes and variables for statements made and responses to questions asked of the participants (Gizzi, 2019). The data were then refined and categorized into major themes, as suggested by Moustakas (1994). Additionally, significant statements were highlighted, coded, and analyzed as congruent with others to formulate the essence of what was being characterized, further signifying the

emergence of themes and patterns in participant responses (Moustakas, 1994). The analyzed information, in addition to memos and other observations obtained during interactions with participants, were structured to address the proposed central and sub research questions. Using the themed data, descriptive conclusions were drawn relative to the essences and lived experiences of the urban college participants of the study and their perceptions of college transition programs, as well as the supports they received from their families, schools, and communities (Gizzi, 2019).

### **Questionnaire Data Analysis**

Data obtained from the questionnaire were utilized to supplement the semi-structured interview and the focus group data by obtaining additional naturalistic information (Patton, 2015). According to Nassaji (2015), a more holistic and rich collection of data through various sources allowed for a more thorough understanding of the participants' experiences, including their attitudes, perceptions, and opinions. The collected data described the phenomenon and characteristics of the participants' experiences as frequencies and themes emerged based on participant responses (Nassaji, 2015).

### **Trustworthiness**

Similar to validity and reliability in quantitative research, trustworthiness ensures the information presented is legitimate and accountable for qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness involves researchers' abilities to ensure the rigor of their work without forsaking its relevance (Krefting, 1991). Readers of qualitative research need to recognize the utilization of these strategies to assess the research's value and findings (Krefting, 1991). Patton (2015) noted that time spent with participants, building relationships, and spending time at the research sites contribute to qualitative data's trustworthiness. By establishing rapport and getting

to know the participants through some of the proposed questions, it is believed that the solicited data's trustworthiness was obtained.

### **Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research is obtained when the researcher provides assurances that there is a fit between participants' perceptions of their experiences and the researcher's representations of those experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility involves truth value, which is the confidence established in the findings' truth for those providing the accounts of their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of multiple sources of data, as with triangulation, provided credibility for the current study, as the data collected across the various data collection approaches such as interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires allowed for cross-verification (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As themes emerged with each form of data collection, those themes were then compared and analyzed to present a cohesive picture of the participants' experiences, ensuring that participants' experiences were correctly illuminated and were representative of the accounts presented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure that participants' accounts of their experiences are accurate, I have also had my project reviewed by peers or other researchers, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), when performing this research type.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that dependability refers to the inquiry process and is a manner to ensure that the process of the study is logical, traceable, and well documented. Also, Guba (1981) informed that dependability would be obtained by ensuring that the data collected is consistent. For the current research study, an audit trail was utilized to ensure this occurred, which was a manner to document all aspects of the study so that the manners in which the researcher arrived at their findings are evident (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pilot testing was

conducted on a small sample of current college students with similar qualities as the study participants to determine whether the instrument measured what it was designed to measure (Warner, 2013). A peer and content expert also reviewed the study to ensure confirmability in trustworthiness. Also, by utilizing the idea of reflexivity, it is important to understand one's own biases while being diligent in ensuring that the data is not clouded by those biases while remaining neutral, which was done for the current study as well (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Transferability**

A key feature of transferability in qualitative research involves the idea that the findings obtained represent other similar cases upon which those findings might be transferred (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For transferability to occur, the researcher should provide thick descriptions of the data. By providing a full description of the study's process, from the data collection to the thematic analysis and development, transferability was confirmed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A comparison of characteristics of the participant group to those they represent was an additional measure to ensure transferability, which was also utilized for the proposed study (Krefting, 1991). Once the current study participants have reviewed the information, the information was compared to others who were representative of similar backgrounds with similar challenges and experiences to determine the similarities and differences that manifested.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained through Liberty University to ensure proper protocol was conducted when engaging with human participants. No potential emotional or physical harm was expected to occur with the participants. At the beginning of the engagement with participants, they were provided with informed consent, outlining the study and

the requests made of them, which also entailed their freedom to discontinue their participation if they so chose, as encouraged by Patton (2015).

As Patton (2015) outlined, to ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout the study for the participants, the schools they represent, the district, and the city. Similarly, the confidentiality of the information they disclosed and wished not to share were ensured; however, confidentiality limits were explained, including illegal activities or harm to self and others if shared. Additionally, there was also respect for privacy and sensitivity for participants' time by allowing for flexibility in interview times. All recordings and documents will be maintained in a secure location during and after the data collection and analysis processes for no more than three years (Patton, 2015).

### **Summary**

Chapter Three provided details regarding the methods and design of the current study. For the current study, I used qualitative methodology, as information was gathered from the natural setting to make sense of or derive meaning from the data gathered from the perceptions of individuals who have experienced phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) noted that researchers using the transcendental phenomenological approach “engage in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated” (p. 22). The transcendental phenomenological inquiry was the specific design approach. I obtained data about the experiences of participants who have been a part of an urban program that promotes high school graduation and college attendance while excluding prejudgments regarding the phenomenon.

For the proposed qualitative research study, 12 college students were participants. Guiding research questions have been restated, and sampling procedures have been discussed.

Data collection methods included a semi-structured interview, a virtual focus group, and an open-ended questionnaire (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Data analysis procedures, as outlined by Moustakas (1994), were also discussed and manual coding was used for data analysis. The collected data from interviews, focus group transcriptions, and questionnaire responses were thoroughly examined to cluster the meanings of the essence of the information to make sense of the phenomena' and lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Descriptive and reflective notes allowed for a more accurate recording of the data obtained here (Moustakas, 1994). Composite descriptions of the experiences of the participants were constructed (Saldana, 2016). Specific trustworthiness issues, such as credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability, have been provided. Finally, ethical considerations were discussed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia and how the family, school, and community supports and partnerships, prepared them for college. This qualitative study provided an opportunity for college students to provide first-hand accounts of their experiences as recipients of supports provided to them as they transitioned from high school to college and/or supported them during their college attendance. The central research question was: What are the meanings of the perceptions and lived experiences of urban college students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how the family, school, and community supports prepared them for college? The Sub-Questions were: Sub-Question 1: What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the family prepared them for college? Sub-Question 2: What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the school prepared them for college? Sub-Question 3: What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the community prepared them for college? This chapter will include participant descriptions, the themes that emerged from the data, and research question responses.

### **Participants**

This study's participants were 12 college students who identified as Black or African American and are completing their bachelor's degrees, except for one participant who is pursuing a master's degree. The participants ranged in age from 18-25 years. These students



were mainly female, except for two males. All attend a historically Black university and have received support from programs which have assisted them in some way, to include guidance/advising, financial support, academic tutoring, social-emotional engagement, or mentoring. Participants were provided pseudonyms, and descriptions of each of them are in the following sections. At the conclusion of the descriptions, a table will be provided to summarize participant information.

In Table 2, the demographic information pertaining to each participant is featured. The descriptive data contained therein delineates the specific characteristics of the participants and provides context relative to the other participants. The pertinent column headings include student participant, age, gender, college year, major, and whether at least one of their parents did attend college.

**Table 2**

*Student Participants*

<b>Student Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>College Year</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Parent(s) Attended College?</b>
<b>Victoria</b>	18	Female	1 <sup>st</sup>	Elem. Ed.	Yes
<b>Ruby</b>	20	Female	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Elem. Ed.	Yes
<b>Demetria</b>	20	Female	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Spec. Ed.	Yes
<b>Denise</b>	20	Female	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Spec. Ed.	Yes
<b>Dalia</b>	18	Female	1 <sup>st</sup>	Elem. Ed.	Yes
<b>Isaiah</b>	19	Male	1 <sup>st</sup>	Bus. Marktg.	Yes
<b>Nivea</b>	21	Female	4 <sup>th</sup>	Crim. Justice	No

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<b>Aliyah</b>	21	Female	4 <sup>th</sup>	Biology	No
<b>Ayanna</b>	20	Female	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Bus. Mgmt.	Yes
<b>Shay</b>	25	Male	5 <sup>th</sup>	Hum. Dev.	Yes
<b>Lolita</b>	19	Female	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Early Elem. Ed.	Yes
<b>Kylie</b>	19	Female	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Pre-Nursing	Yes

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### **Victoria**

Victoria is an 18-year-old female who was in her first year of college. She was home-schooled for high school and received quite a bit of support from her parents. Because her parents were self-employed, she traveled often and would at times get behind in her schoolwork. Her major is Early Elementary Education, and she participates in a student support program that provides financial support, mentorship, and student-to-student interaction. Her parents attended college, and she has one older brother who is also a college student.

### **Ruby**

Ruby is a 20-year-old female who is a second semester junior. She attended a specialized military public high school in an urban setting. She has participated in a high school program which assists with college transitions as well as in a program which assists with financial savings for college. Her major is Elementary Education, and she wishes to pursue a career in teaching in the public school system in which she attended, as well as eventually owning a daycare business. Her mother attended college, and her grandmother obtained her undergraduate and master's degrees.

**Demetria**

Demetria is a 20-year-old female who is a second semester junior. She attended high school in a suburban setting. She has participated in a high school program which promotes networking with others and motivating students by emphasizing various careers. Additionally, she is in a student support program through her university which provides financial assistance, student-to-student interaction, and mentorship. Her mother has obtained a bachelor's degree, and two master's degrees. Her father attended college, and her brother did not attend college. Her sister is currently in college. She wishes to teach, further her education, and someday build a student academy to creatively instruct students.

**Denise**

Denise is a 20-year-old female who is a second semester junior. She attended high school in a suburban setting. She participated in a high school program which promotes networking with others and motivating students by emphasizing various careers. She is in a student support program through her university which provides financial assistance, student-to-student interaction, and mentorship. Her mother has obtained a bachelor's degree, and two master's degrees. Her father attended college, and her brother did not attend college. Her sister is currently in college. She wishes to teach, further her education, and some day build a student academy to creatively instruct students.

**Dalia**

Dalia is an 18-year-old female who is a second semester first-year student. She attended high school in an urban setting. Her major is Elementary Education. She participates in a college program which promotes team building and reflecting on various facets of teaching and

instruction. All the members of her family graduated college. Her hope is to obtain her bachelor's degree and teach science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) to young elementary students.

### **Isaiah**

Isaiah is a 19-year-old male who is a first-year student but has enough credit hours to be considered a Junior. He attended high school in a suburban setting. He participated in a specialty high school program for student scholars interested in business administration. He currently participates in a student program through his university which provides financial awards to students with stellar academic histories. This program also affords students to check in with program advisors. Isaiah's mother has obtained her master's degree, his father has obtained his doctorate degree. His older sister is currently enrolled in a graduate program.

### **Nivea**

Nivea is a 21-year-old female who is a second semester senior. She attended high school in a suburban setting. She participates in a student support program which promotes women's empowerment. Additionally, she has become involved with other civic-based organizations which are related to her major of Criminal Justice. In high school, her father died, and as a sophomore in college, her mother died. Each of her parents graduated high school and her older brother attended college and completed one and a half years of school. Nivea is interested in forensics and would like to pursue graduate school upon completion of her bachelor's degree.

### **Aliyah**

Aliyah is a 21-year-old female who is a senior who began studying biology, but currently, she is majoring in forensic psychology. She attended high school in a suburban setting. She participated in a high school program which promotes strong social engagements with a familial

context. The student support program she has been affiliated with while attending college focuses on academic supports to supplement instruction. Aliyah's mother completed business school, her father owned a business driving tractor-trailers, her sister is employed, and her younger brother is in high school. Upon completion of her bachelor's degree, Aliyah plans to pursue a career in forensics.

### **Ayanna**

Ayanna is a 20-year-old female who is a second semester junior majoring in Business Management. She attended high school in a suburban setting. She participated in a high school program which helped students earn their associate degree prior to entering college. As a college student, Ayanna has participated in a program which promotes social-emotional wellness. Her mother has obtained two master's degrees, her father has obtained a doctorate degree, and her older brother is currently a senior in college. Upon graduation, Ayanna would like to own a photography business, and her second career choice is to be a Talent Acquisition Specialist.

### **Shay**

Shay is a 25-year-old, Black male who is studying Human Development at a state college. He is also an athlete who is pursuing a career in sports. He participated in preparatory classes in high school which instructed him in the areas of test-taking and content for college acceptance tests. While both of his parents have advanced degrees, one has a master's degree in engineering, and the other has a law degree. Shay also has a younger brother who attends college at a state university. This student indicated that he relied heavily on his family, as he has transferred various times while attending high school, noting that his family was his only source of consistency during that time.

**Lolita**

Lolita is a 19-year-old, Black female who is a sophomore in college, studying Early Elementary Education. Lolita participated in a high school program for stellar students pursuing college who were also gifted in the arts. As a college student, Lolita has been a participant in an organization which promotes peer supports through school spirit, which also offers an element of social-emotional support to peers within as well as outside of the organization. She has also been a part of a leadership group on campus, as well. Both of Lolita's parents, her sister, and her grandmother have master's degrees. Upon graduation, Lolita would like to teach students in the first or second grades.

**Kylie**

Kylie is a 19-year-old, Black female who is a sophomore in college, studying Pre-Nursing. Kylie participated in a high school program for stellar students who were interested in humanities. As a college student, Kylie has been a participant in organizations which promote public service to the community and mentorship of younger students. These organizations also offer a social-emotional element when helping others as well. Kylie's mother attended a state college as well as a community college and earned certification as a respiratory nurse. Kylie stated that several of her family members attended college, which resulted in her not being a first-generation college student. Ultimately, Kylie would like to pursue a career as an obstetric-gynecological nurse practitioner in an under-served community.

**Results**

This study was guided by a central research question and three sub-questions to ascertain the meanings of students' perceptions of the supports they received as they applied for and attended college. The participants engaged in virtual individual interviews, completed electronic

qualitative questionnaires, and contributed within a virtual focus group. A table of codes, themes, and sub-themes is in Appendix F.

Additionally, all the participants responded similarly to the interview question which asked their opinions on how to promote family, school, and community partnerships. They all stated that more advertising of events or engagements should be done. They generally stated that more communication and coordination between these three entities would likely enhance the experiences of rising college attendees, which aligns with Epstein's (1987) theory. The theory, in part, acknowledges that through partnerships, there is a recognition of shared responsibilities of the family, the school, and the community for students' learning and development (Epstein, 2001).

Many of the interview questions, open-ended questionnaire items, and focus group questions were utilized to unearth students' perceptions and experiences of how prepared they felt for college as the themes emerged, they were grouped to align with the three entities of Epstein's (1987) theory, which involved family, school, and community supports. The first grouping of emerged themes included how participants felt supported by their families. Financial supports, emotional supports, as well as how their families served as role models and offered guidance to the participants were the resulting themes. Table 3 provides an overview of the themes and sub-themes that emerged and the sources of the responses.

**Table 3**

*Sources of Codes Leading to Themes*

Themes	Sub-Themes	Theme Frequency	Theme Frequency	Theme Frequency	Totals

		from Questionnaire	from Focus Group	from Interview	
Financial Support		3		5	8
Emotional Support		6	3	9	18
Role Models				10	10
Family Guidance		1	1	11	13
Rigor	Academics	1	3	8	12
	Learner Evolution	3	1	10	14
	Resilience	5	1	10	16
Advising	Counselors and Advisors	1	2	10	13
	Teachers and Professors	1	2	7	10
Programs and Organizations	Church	1		6	7
	Leadership	1	3	9	13
	Mentorship and Empowerment	1	2	11	14



Peers and Culture		7	1	11	18
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*Note:* This table depicts the themes and sub-themes that emerged during a qualitative questionnaire, a focus group discussion, and interviews with participants. The numerical values indicate the number of codes found from each source.

### **Theme 1: Financial Support**

The first theme was that of financial support. One of the challenges students have in attending college is the ability to pay tuition. According to Hanson (2022), the United States average of in-state college tuition and fees per year is \$9,349. In addition to tuition, there may be other costs associated with college attendance. If students received scholarships, some incurred debts prior to and after receiving those funds. Many of the participants took college admissions tests and some took courses to prepare to take those tests. Victoria stated that her parents paid for the American College Testing (ACT) test, and the fees associated with applying for college. She further stated, “a lot of my family members contributed money, so that I can save in case I needed anything, and many of them live nearby and have offered to help if I need anything in terms of driving anywhere for something for school or for my dorm.” Likewise, when asked about financial support, Nivea received from her family, she shared, “definitely financial support, uh they did make sure like, you know as far as like fee, admission fees, so they helped me with all that.” Similarly, Dalia reported, “I feel the most supported at home because my family is helping me emotionally, mentally, physically, and financially.”

Furthermore, family members supported their children by helping them gain access to scholarships and loans, as Nivea also stated that her family members helped with the “FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid], I would say like just doing little stuff like that related

to school. They always made sure I was like up on it, and I didn't really slack on my grades or anything." Additionally, regarding the supports provided by her family, Dalia shared:

They were very supportive. They helped me apply for different scholarships and colleges. If I had problems with the process, with the application, they would help. They took me to different scholarship events. Yeah, I'd have to say they were supportive.

## **Theme 2: Emotional Support**

Emotional support from family members was a second theme that emerged from the participants. Encouragement to maintain a commitment to progressing toward an end goal were noted as the types of emotional supports the participants conveyed as necessary throughout their processes. When asked where the participants felt most supported, Ruby stated:

As a college student, I feel the most support from my family. My family has always been by my side to motivate and accept any and all of my dreams. I can always talk to my family to get the needed guidance to make me feel better and excel in life. Life is so challenging without support. I am blessed to have my family pushing me every step of the way.

With regard to family support, Nivea added a comprehensive illustration of the manners in which her family provided for her, as she noted, "...and emotional support, always being there, like not really missing an event, as far as like my graduation, and my move in processes every year when I lived on campus, so those, they were always there to like help with that." During the questionnaire, Demetria reported a close relationship between a mother and daughter to further illustrate the emotional support of family as she stated:

As a college student, I feel the most support from my mother. Since day one, she has been my number one supporter no matter the trial, tribulations, and speed bumps. My mom has been the one that has stayed by my side throughout my whole life.

Similarly, Kylie reported that her mother and her grandmother were highly supportive of her decisions and how they were willing to encourage her throughout the college process as she conveyed:

My mother and my nanna were really big supports. They kind of just gave me the mindset that you can go wherever you want to go, just make sure you know you're doing what you need to do, and they really supported where I wanted to go, or where I wanted to apply to, what kinds of factors I was looking into for college, my major. So, I would say they were very supportive and it, um I would say that helped the most during that process because again, I said I wasn't sure really where I wanted to go, but knowing that I would have support either way, that definitely helped.

In addition to families providing support to the students, there were also a number of life challenges that affected some of the participants. Despite those challenges, their families were instrumental in ensuring the emotional well-being of the college attendees. Ayanna explained how her family supported her through a trying situation, as she shared:

And another challenge would be my parents splitting up the end of my sophomore year and like navigating that, and uh coming back to school with two separate parent households and all of that in itself, uh but I think that and like the class load and trying to graduate on time, those would definitely be a couple of challenges that I faced...Um, I mean my parents have always been supportive of me, and my family has always been supportive of me.

The challenges some of the students faced were varied. While all the students experienced the challenges of the pandemic, to include virtual instruction and adhering to precautionary health measures, some encountered frequent moves, one was diagnosed with a condition, and another had loved ones die during their high school and college years. Arguably, losing loved ones may be considered one of the most emotionally challenging situations an individual may experience, both of Nivea's parents died during her high school and college years. This time in her life is depicted in her account:

My dad passed away my sophomore year of high school, so that, I was like kind of young. And then, a couple of years later, my mom was diagnosed with cancer and passed away my, going into my sophomore year of college. So, that was probably the two biggest things I dealt with going through high school and college...after my dad passed away, my mom was still alive, so she really wanted me to go to college, and she wanted me to finish. So, that's something I look forward to.

Nivea further explained that her extended family members continue to support her if she needs something or if they happen to provide her with gifts, such as care packages or gift cards.

Another challenge participants endured but had the support of their families was frequent relocation. Both Victoria and Shay provided accounts of how the mobility of their family units affected them, yet how they were able to be resilient through the supports provided to them from their families. Whereas Victoria's family owned a business and traveled often, her parents home-schooled her. Even if she fell behind at times, she stated that she was still able to catch up and persevere to the extent that she graduated early. In the interview, when asked what challenges she faced and the details of her school history, she stated:

...sometimes traveling. My parents, do their own work. They don't work for somebody else. So, we would go and travel and do things, so sometimes I could get behind on school work because I couldn't, my brain can't focus on more than one thing at once...the friends that I had from [My School], they're still in their last year of high school...with home school, I was able to finish. I didn't take a summer off. I just did a couple week break and then I was able to finish everything faster.

Shay described how he and his family moved three times during high school and how, because of his family, he was able to endure in spite of not knowing new peers, teachers, and systems with each move. On the questionnaire, Shay described his community and the environment in which he lived while growing up, by stating, "I lived in a safe environment and a good community, which was more so focused on my immediate family because I moved around a lot when I was younger. In his interview, Shay stated:

...I really relied on my family because we had moved around a lot, like as I mentioned, and I went to three different high schools. So, I went to high school in the [first area code], then down to [another state], then when I moved back to [original state], it was in [another area code].

### **Theme 3: Role Models**

For the third theme, 11 of the 12 participants reported that their immediate family members either attended college, completed another program following high school, or had obtained advanced degrees. Furthermore, most of the participants reported that it was understood that they themselves would attend college one day. Five participants have chosen the same colleges their relatives attended, four have chosen the same fields as some of their family members. All of them, in some way, have felt supported for the decisions they have made in

reference to their educational choices. Aliyah noted, “my aunt took me to like all of my college tours, my mom’s younger sister...she actually attended Public State University, so that was another reason why I chose to go here.” Ayanna provided similar experiences, as she stated:

[attending college] was something my parents instilled in us at a very young age. We actually grew up, my older brother and I, on the campus of Public State University. So, while they were matriculating through Public State, they had us. So, we would go to classes with them and sit in our strollers and listen to what the professors had to say, so college was always a dream for me.

From the choice of college to career paths, families played a vital role in shaping the lives of the participants. Lolita explained her journey as it relates to the role her family played in her decisions, as she stated, “my major is education because a lot of my family [members] are educators. My dad is an educator. My grandmother is an educator.” Ruby shared similar sentiments as she reported:

My grandmother, she has her master’s degree, but she didn’t get it until she was in her late fifties...she took time off, but she still got it done, and I look up to her for that cause I was only four years old when I went to her graduation. I don’t even think I was that old.

Another aspiring educator, Demetria, previously informed that one of her mother’s endorsements was in special education, so she shared:

I have always emphasized, and I’ve always wanted to be a teacher and to be in education. Um, not only did I grow up with educators in my family and with my mom being an educator, but experiencing, you know, struggling as a student, as an aspiring educator, I will be able to connect with my students with disabilities and let them know, I was there.

Kylie explained why she aspires to follow a similar career path as her mother, and she further described the other influences that impacted her decision:

Ever since I was little, I wanted to be a nurse. My mother, she works in a hospital. She's a respiratory therapist. So, that was a big influence on me, and I grew up around my great grandparents a lot, and since they're older, they did have a couple of like health issues, or stuff like that. So, I grew up around people who had to take care of them, and as I got older, I had to as well. So, I feel like that really started the drive for me to want to be a nurse.

These participants provided vivid descriptions of how their family members influenced their decisions and had profound impacts on their chosen higher education settings and their career paths.

#### **Theme 4: Family Guidance**

The fourth theme that emerged was family guidance. Typically, the process of graduating high school, applying for college, taking entrance exams, meeting deadlines, and beginning college, can seem daunting and overwhelming. Students are fortunate to have someone to guide them through each step to the next level of their education. Participants provided several accounts of their perceptions of how their families guided them through the processes of applying for and attending college. Denise described how her journey was guided by her mother:

So, in the process of college applications, the process of financial aid, um college move in/housing, I mean as a college freshman, that's a lot to, there's a lot to keep up with and I have to say all the credit, um all everything goes to my mom...she really stayed on track. She helped me realize like ok, this is a new world that you're entering where you

have to be independent. You have to be responsible. There's going to be a lot coming at you at once. You have to organize yourself.

Isaiah communicated similar perceptions of his experience. This included an indication of the need to be motivated in this process, especially due to the pandemic having a grave effect on his aspirations:

For the most part, they were just consistent, in my life reminding me of why I was doing it and making sure that I was on top of it and just giving me something to work for and then as far as like college went, they were a really big help because they sort of just pushed me to apply to colleges and do the whole process because I wasn't really trying to do that because it was so different with COVID and everything, so.

He also stated that he felt the most supported at home because it is guaranteed.

The guidance provided by some of the participants' families varied in degree from others. While some parents took on the role of more intensive supports, others helped somewhat less so. However, they remained constant for the rising college attendees and offered support when necessary. Lolita's depiction of her experience provides an illustration of the guidance she received from her parents:

My parents are kind of like, uh, we're going to support you, but we're not going to hold your hand while you do it. So, a lot of times, I was doing a lot of applications on my own, but a lot of times they checked after me, and I could ask them questions and things like that. So, when it comes to support, I feel like my family was definitely there, and I knew that if I had any problems, that I could reach out to them if I needed to.

An area of specific need was described by Shay as he recalled a portion of the application process in which he required more guidance:



They helped guide me through the whole process, especially when it came down to writing those letters because some of them had a word limit, some of them didn't. So, they kind of became, it was kind of like a peer review. So, I would write it out. They would give me little suggestions, and then I would take that into account and then kind of re-write or re-word my essays. So, that was big for me because when you're trying to get into college, it's a different language than high school.

While direct support may not have been feasible, Ayanna described an instance in which her parents were not able to provide direct help to her, but they were instrumental in assisting her to obtain the necessary support:

They had connections with other people that did go through business classes like I did, and they reached out to them, and they reached out to me and helped me get through those classes that seemed like I couldn't get through.

During the focus group discussion, Isaiah commented, "...my parents always wanted me to have a plan, so this certain set plan that they had was always me going to college, so they sort of expected that." These participants indicated that the guidance provided by their family members was helpful and necessary for them to progress to the next level of their educational journeys. Even with varying degrees and types of supports, the participants remarked on the vital roles that families played in their success and in their forward progress to and through college.

The next set of emerged themes aligned with the second entity of Epstein's (1987) theory, which included school supports. These themes emerged from participant responses during the interview, the focus group, and the questionnaire of their high school and college experiences. At the pre-college level, participants encountered experiences that they perceived as impactful to their preparations for college. Additionally, as they continued to college, their

perceptions of their experiences at their institutions were also impactful to their functionality in that environment as well. The themes of rigor and advising, were highlighted themes of how they felt their schools prepared them to enter and attend college. More specifically, the sub-themes of academics, learner evolution, and resilience emerged for the general theme of rigor, while the sub-themes of counselors and advisors, as well as teachers and professors emerged for the general theme of advising.

### **Theme 5: Rigor**

A fifth theme that emerged was rigor. Rigor is defined as the quality of being detailed, careful, and complete (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2022). With both high school and college curricula, students are able to gain knowledge to help propel them to their next phase of learning. Participants conveyed the extent to which their schools provided standards, as well as their own abilities to meet or exceed those standards, given the challenges with which they were met, in addition to using their own skill sets to evolve.

#### ***Sub-Theme 1: Academics***

More specifically, the first sub-theme under rigor included academics. Responses during the focus group provided insight into the perceptions of the participants concerning academic preparedness. Ruby stated, "...well, I attended [a military school] in the [city]...and I believe that I received the foundations I needed that provided me the accessibilities to want to further my education and go into teaching." Correspondingly, Denise described her experience prior to entering college, and she noted how it helped to shape and prepare her for the next phase of the educational journey:

...my education before college was also, it also prepared me for higher education. It was very regimented, very academic-based, very get-involved-based. My four years of high school certainly encouraged me to go to college. Like that was my option.

Similarly, Kylie continued:

Yeah, I definitely believe high school, like middle school, they definitely set me up to know that I wanted to further my education. So, it definitely gave me that look that I know I wanted to continue to enrich myself with education, and I know that I wanted to further [attain] my career goals and where I wanted to be in life. It set me up to know that I need to, not so much need to go to college, but I know I definitely want to go to college to get to where I want to be.

Isaiah added, “I feel like education sort of set a foundation of like what you need in the future and like showing that you can learn and like just showing that you have that ability.”

During the interview sessions, Isaiah, Kylie, and Lolita, reported that they were in specialty programs their districts offered, which entailed an application process and more specialized rigorous instruction in designated content areas. Isaiah noted:

They [school officials] reach out to middle schools in the area and like give [students] an overview, and they just like show the different programs they had in the county. So, I just applied to both of them and got into both of them and chose the school of business.

Kylie noted that she became aware of the amount of work it took to get into college through her experience in high school, as she stated, “I didn’t know how much effort went into college. I guess I kind of caught a glimpse of that because I was in the [specialty program] at [High School].”

While Lolita stated that she was in a specialty program and took advanced placement courses, she also said that she was not a person who studied in high school. She stated:

I focused a lot on just passing tests rather than like turning things in. So, a lot of times, you would see holes in my grade book, because I knew I wasn't, I didn't really push myself in high school, but somehow, I still ended up with good grades because I knew how to take tests and do projects like that.

Like Lolita, Aliyah commented how she was less than challenged in high school, revealing, "Well, in high school, I'm not going to lie, high school was very easy for me. I didn't really need to study or get any extra help there."

While some students felt as though they were not being challenged, some commented on how they received support due to the difficulties they faced, especially in the early phases of school. Demetria commented on her feelings after having transferred to a new environment and the overwhelm of sensing that she was behind her peers:

[the instruction was] like a snap of a finger, going through it, getting through it, and I'm kind of like it's like all these cars were passing me, and I'm like barely going the speed limit. They're just already speeding ahead, and so with that transition, I had to definitely get used to it. I was in small reading groups. I was pulled out to do some work in another room with a smaller group, and that definitely made me feel, I guess, not really worthy.

Denise shared similarly, "I struggled in school, especially in reading, so I was in remedial groups for reading and math really, and I know how it feels to feel like the only one in the classroom who was just not getting it." These participants provided vivid examples of the types of experiences they had in reference to the academic rigors of their pre-college schooling. From extremely challenging to minimally so, the accounts of participants' experiences enhance the

understanding of programming in schools and the manners in which supports are designed to promote student learning.

### ***Sub-Theme 2: Learner Evolution***

Another sub-theme which emerged from rigor, is learner evolution. As the participants worked on various assignments and school activities over time, they were able to learn more about themselves and the processes which fostered their success. The participants stated how their experiences helped them grow as learners and evolve as they changed in their understanding of what helped them become more successful students. Key features of this sub-theme included participants recognizing some of their needs and gaining an understanding of how they learned best. Furthermore, at least three participants recounted their feelings and commented on the notions of preparedness as related to independence. Dalia expressed:

High school in general...really didn't prepare us for what college is. Grade-wise, yes. But the reality of college, high school didn't prepare us for how we were going to live on our own, how we were going to be in charge of our own lives, yeah, it was just high school.

Demetria provided a retrospective description of some of the overwhelming feelings she experienced as she was approaching her entry into college and having to function on her own:

My perceptions of college were just...[that it was] impossible. It seemed like...a ring full of big bulldogs and me having to matriculate through those hurdles and through wars and fights. The workload in college is heavy, and also the independence, like what is that like? You know, moving out of home, moving away from home, even though I'm not that far from home, being in my own spot and going days at a time without parents and without family...it's just me figuring it out.

Lolita communicated a highly stressful time in her life in which she had a scheduling conflict, and the college did not assign an instructor for the class that she was registered for. Through several encounters with her advisor and being dismissively treated, her recourse was to involve her mother, which resulted in a more desirable outcome for her course, yet her feelings of independence were compromised. In spite of having to get her mother involved, the experience provided Lolita with self-advocacy skills and persistence:

My mom had to email the dean of students, and my opinion on that is just like, we're in college and you're [the college] trying to get us to speak for ourselves as grown adults, but it's like, I won't be heard unless my mother gets involved, and it was really frustrating to me because my mom said pretty much the same things I did, but they didn't fix it until she got on the email thread.

Another area of evolution included participants relaying the importance of learning how to manage their time as they advanced to the next levels within their educational tracks. This coping skill was crucial to their evolutions as students, especially if they had to juggle other responsibilities. Ayanna conveyed that she realized she needed more assistance with, "...handling the workload of school and work at the same time." Shay expressed a comparable experience responding to the challenges he faced as a student athlete:

As a student athlete, we are used to structure, so when things are structured, we're good. So, in the public school [it was] structured...when I went to the academy, I had classes from 8 to 12, 9 to 12, and then you had the rest of the day off, either for lunch or for sporting, and I struggled with that. Then when I got to college, I kind of had no idea of how to deal with that time management...[it was] definitely an eye opener and something I had to work on.

Furthermore, Lolita shared that she needed more assistance with time management. She stated:

Sometimes, I feel like I pack too much stuff in one day, and then some days, I don't do anything, which is fine. But I feel like I could use a little bit more work in time management, in spreading things out, cause sometimes I put too much load on myself, and then some days, I feel like I just don't do enough.

Dalia summed up her feelings in a response from the questionnaire, stating, "if you're organized and have time management skills, you are set to be a good student."

Another commonality that emerged for participants, whether they recalled it from a high school experience or from a current college experience, was the desire to be afforded more tutoring support. If they were currently engaged in tutoring, then their appreciation was also shared. Of an experience she recalled in high school, Ruby expressed:

I wish we did the tutoring sessions more often because they were only held on Monday and Wednesday. I think it should have been more time and like more study sessions during the week...cause each day it would be a separate subject...and if you don't come that day, then you miss out for that week.

Aliyah recalled benefitting from peer tutoring supports:

...my freshman year, I went to these things called SIs at my school, and it's like supplemental instruction. So, every week, I would have to like review all of my bio stuff for like all my classes and go to them...it's like from students and they could just be like a class higher than you, so a sophomore can tutor a freshman or maybe a second semester freshman can tutor a first semester freshman.

Even for students taking upper-level courses, tutoring was noted as a desirable service, as Isaiah presented, “I feel like I could use some tutoring for certain classes, but it’s hard to find tutors since I’m taking those higher-level courses.”

Furthermore, several participants revealed that they had discovered more about themselves as students. These students shared experiences about their learning styles, which study habits work best for them, and the tools they have used to aid in their learning. Kylie explained that she is more successful when she differs her mode of study based on the subject matter.

Definitely learning my style of how I learn, cause not everybody learns the same. I get distracted really easy, and the way I retain stuff, it’s depending on the subject. I’ll do one type of study technique and the other one the same technique won’t work for another subject.

Lolita also acknowledged that her grades improved when she became more interested in the topic as she expressed, “...I started writing things down, and I started writing a calendar, making sure that I knew when things were due, when things were done.” She further relayed, “I started taking education classes this year, so I was just a little bit more interested in my classes, which caused my academics to do better.” Shay divulged how he thrived:

[I learned] how to note take and in a way that I can understand it, whether it’s abbreviating words, and if I could, if the teacher allowed it, take pictures, even saving power points to re-write stuff down...for me, it’s about repetition, especially when it came time for quizzes or exams...whatever way I could get repetition, whether it was writing it down, or visually, or speaking it out loud.



Similarly, Ayanna commented that the tools she uses to learn were, “flash cards, and study groups. I had a couple of friends, we would all go to the library, and we’d just work there and do work together, and we’d keep each other focused the entire time.” Like Ayanna, Nivea shared congruent practices, by reporting, “I use flash cards. I am a visual learner. I like to get tested on information, and I like to test people to make sure I know it, without necessarily looking at my notes and stuff.”

The participants provided introspective accounts of their development as students. While some of their experiences presented them with challenges, albeit minimal, for others, that was not the case. As they matriculated through high school and college, they were able to determine what their academic needs were and identify their own learning styles and strategies that promoted their success.

### ***Sub-Theme 3: Resilience***

The third sub-theme from rigor was resilience. While participants made transitions through the levels of high school and college seem effortless, they have had obstacles. Their perceptions of their experiences as they lived through the Covid – 19 pandemic in 2019 - 2020 and their personal school struggles highlight how these students persevered. Most of the participants mentioned the pandemic as a challenge around which they had to navigate. By persevering and overcoming the obstacles they encountered, the participants demonstrated resilience. While they could not avoid these life-altering struggles, the participants were able to continue on their educational journeys without dropping out of school. Even with becoming overwhelmed or feeling overlooked, they remained focused on their goals, thereby demonstrating resilience both mentally and emotionally. Lolita recounted:

...just being an athlete in high school and playing a sport for four years, just to get my spring year like kind of ripped away from me...and you know every senior gets a senior night. They get their final game, and I didn't even get to play one game, so that was definitely lack-luster, and that took a mental toll on me.

Responding to an item on the questionnaire about her feelings as a new college student, she further explained:

I entered college during a pandemic, so I do not feel like any freshman during 2020 felt like they received the full experience of being a freshman on campus. I was not able to get the welcome week and buffer before starting classes. We were immediately registered and started classes online at home before moving in on campus. I felt a little thrown into the classes without actually feeling like I was in college.

Upon reflecting on what aspects of the college transition process she would change, Aliyah mentioned, "I just wish like I had more time, like ever since Covid happened, we got like two years basically taken out...I just wish I had more time in undergrad." In response to what she thought she needed more assistance with, she stated:

...in the present, we probably need more assistance with learning because we're in our majors, but honestly, school is not how it was before like Covid happened. Stuff is all on-line. We're not able to just like go see our professors when we want to or if we actually need help. There's only but so much I feel like a person can do through a Zoom call.

One of the challenges Ruby faced was being sent home early due to the protocols for the pandemic. When asked of the challenges, she responded:

Definitely Covid. So, when I started my freshman year, we literally got sent home my spring semester. I literally got the ability to live on campus two semesters, and they sent

us home, and I've been home since, sadly. I am supposed to have a face-to-face class this semester, but right now it's virtual.

Responding to questionnaire item related to how she felt as a new college student, Kylie expressed, "because of the pandemic, I didn't get the new student experience." Additionally, in response to an interview question posed for her to describe the challenges she has faced, she informed:

The pandemic of 2020, I would say that probably was a big challenge, especially having to get comfortable with virtual/on-line school, and then within this past year, having to switch back to kind of being more normal, going back to in-person. I feel like that was kind of a really big shift because it was very different. I think adjusting was a big challenge.

As mentioned previously, some of the personal struggles the participants endured included the following: Nivea's father died when she was in high school, and her mother died while she was in college, Ayanna's parents divorced in the process of her college transition (and she later sought counseling and was experiencing the effects an existing diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and Shay's family moved at least three times during high school. In addition to life events occurring and the need to be adaptable emerged, some participants reported struggling with emotional difficulties or conditions. On his questionnaire, Isaiah wrote, "I felt little care or motivation during the application process from everything that was going on, and [I had] little faith in the college system." Victoria mentioned that her semester started off fairly well, but later, she reported, "I got really depressed. The schoolwork itself, I got As and Bs, thank God for that, but I just didn't have the motivation to do anything because I just felt tired at some point."

Participants in the focus group stated that the college was unorganized, which presented yet another challenge that they have had to overcome. Ruby stated:

It's just been kind of chaotic lately, like this semester, with trying to cram these tests in for teaching. And, it's like, I wish I knew about this; I wish I had the preparation beforehand, and not just like, now...it's like last minute. I wish it was laid out a little better.

Victoria added:

I agree, some things feel a little bit more scattered than they should be; not really organized as they could be in terms of like field experience or the tests we're supposed to take and tutoring for that. It's a little disorganized with how they set it up for us and how they convey information.

Demetria, in a personal interview, conveyed that extra assistance was needed in the education department due to a lack of involvement. She further explained that the department was unorganized and described:

...there are so many things, especially in the education department that can be done that can be very creative with their students, especially when they have aspiring educators in the department...you need to be as creative [and as] energetic, as empowered as you can be so that you won't lose or put less motivation on your education students.

Related to the rigors of school, participants explained how they were able to navigate through their individual journeys. However, the sub-themes of academics, learner evolution, and resilience encapsulated their common experiences.

## **Theme 6: Advising**

A sixth theme that emerged was advising. Students attempting to transition from high school to college generally benefitted from the guidance they received from school (guidance) counselors and/or teachers. Similarly, once in college, continued advice was necessary. Participants reported that they tended to consult their advisors and professors to solicit the direction they needed. Participants spoke about the help they were (or were not) provided by school counselors and college advisors on the courses they should take and the options that were available to them. While some expected to receive more comprehensive guidance on their prospective courses, some participants stated that they received minimal to no guidance, which resulted in disappointment.

***Sub-Theme 1: Counselors and Advisors***

The first sub-theme involved counselors and advisors, and this sub-theme depicted how students attempting to transition from high school to college generally benefitted from the guidance they received from school (guidance) counselors and/or teachers. Similarly, once in college, participants continued to need advice, and they tended to consult their advisors for clarity on the direction they should take. Conversely, except for Victoria, who was homeschooled, the participants stated that their experiences with their high school counselors were less than optimal. Demetria reflected:

So, junior/senior year, during those counselor visits, my counselor, she was a pretty cool counselor, but we didn't have a relationship. I saw that she had relationships with other students. ...I was going to an HBCU, um perhaps she couldn't connect to that type of college experience or college process...I didn't really connect with my counselor maybe because I wasn't going to a prestigious college.

Furthermore, some participants did not feel as though their counselors provided them with much help. One student observed how her counselor only appeared to hold the job of guidance counselor but did not offer much help to her students. Because of the lack of support, this participant got what she needed without the help of her guidance counselor. Denise commented:

I really didn't meet with my school counselor. If I did, it was very like this is the job that I have to do; like you are the next student on my list type thing...She really isn't someone who got me into college or really motivated or empowered me to fill out scholarship applications.

At least five of remaining participants indicated that school counselors were helpful when preparing them for college. Isaiah mentioned that he thought it was helpful to reach out to the counselors, as he stated, "they were there to answer any questions I had related to college, and then they also gave me like information for certain colleges." Nivea recalled the process of applying for college, stating, "for me, it was easy cause like I had a guidance counselor who helped me a lot." Ayanna described her experience:

I can definitely say that my guidance counselor helped push me to get my applications in for college, and you know she was there to help if I had any questions about financial aid or any scholarships that I wanted to apply for...if I had any issues with essays, she would send me to the English teachers and they would also assist me with the essays checking them, making sure they were college level ready.

Although Lolita's school counselor was expecting a baby, she ensured that her students were supported as much as possible prior to maternity leave. Lolita explained:

She was actually very supportive of me choosing what schools I should go to and making sure that I was on the right academic pathway. I had multiple meetings with my

counselor, and she was very helpful in me figuring out how to apply and how to send transcripts and things like that.

Kylie also indicated how her counselor aided her in the process, by stating, “my counselor was very helpful as well with like letting me know deadlines that I may not have known myself, like that type of thing. I felt like that really helped.” Ruby’s recollection of her high school counselor included her counselor always going above expectations to help her. She recalled, “I felt like to she took the extra step to prove that she cared...it was very helpful.”

While advisors were not as prominently discussed, Isaiah perceived them to be helpful supports during his college attendance, as he illustrated:

I’ve used the support of my...advisors for the honors program. They just showed different major opportunities when I was getting my minor in fashion, and then when I’m trying to look into studying abroad now, so they sort of had that also trying to find some more information on that and they’re helping.

Unlike Isaiah however, Lolita experienced a situation where she had difficulty securing a necessary class. Her encounter with the advisor was less than optimal. She recounted her experience:

...I emailed my advisor again after speaking to her on the phone, and she was very rude to me. I had spoken to her on the phone before that process, and she kind of went on a rampage about how it wasn’t her responsibility as an advisor, which confused me, because you’re my advisor, so she told me that that was not her responsibility and that she doesn’t understand why everybody’s calling her...that was a huge barrier that stressed me out in the moment.

Discussion ensued during the focus group as to the difficulties the participants have experienced with their advisors. Lolita continued that she has had three advisors, and she believed that none were helpful. She stated, “I didn’t feel like there was a lot of support coming from them...and when we reached out to them, to talk to them about our courses, I feel like we were bothering them.” Kylie commented, “I feel like they are supportive to an extent. So, if you feel like you need more support, more guidance, they do the bare minimum.” Shay confirmed, “advisors don’t help that much. They kind of just try to get you to just schedule classes, not knowing who the professor is or who’s taken the class and how they have done.”

### ***Sub-Theme 2: Teachers and Professors***

The second sub-theme related to advising included teachers and professors. In their discussions of how they were impacted by the school, participants shared their perceptions and experiences with high school teachers and college professors. Generally, individuals reported feeling some level of support from their instructors. Some of the participants expressed how their relationships with their instructors were helpful. However, not all the experiences were as positive as others. Demetria expressed her perception of her experience within her high school setting:

I had very little support. I had a couple of teachers that I could go to, to talk to or get help, but for the most part, it was kind of like you’re on your own kind of thing. I didn’t really receive like that sympathetic, caring educator, teacher-student relationship, and so, I was on my own. If I didn’t do well on a test, it was kind of like, “here are some test corrections” and “you should do better, and it’s going in the gradebook anyway”.



Denise shared a similar experience. In an effort to describe the nature of the barriers that might have inhibited support, she provided a general impression of her high school experience, as she reported:

...some of my teachers were barriers because they didn't really give me attention academically. There wasn't really like a you know, "Denise let's step to the side, let's talk about this, like what can I do to help, I see that you're not understanding this part of the content", so I guess I could say my teachers were a barrier to a certain extent.

However, Denise went on to share that there was an exception to her general feelings about her high school teachers. She expressed how one of the teachers who was a sponsor to one of Denise's organizations provided quite a bit of support to her. She detailed her experience by stating:

She was really like a strong advocate...I would say any recommendation letters, of course, I felt the most comfortable in going to her first. She was always just so supportive and so like really proud of me. So, my perception is [Ms. Teacher] was really a leading factor to a lot of my success in high school and college admission.

In addition to these two individuals sharing their experiences with teachers, Ayanna commented in the focus group and provided a vivid description of her journey:

I did have teachers my senior year that really really pushed me when they found out I wanted to go to college...they were helping me with essay questions. I know my English teacher blocked out a couple of weeks from learning. I guess she like stopped teaching us what we were supposed to do in the curriculum, and she changed her lesson plans to help every single student with college essays. So we would write the essays. She would

critique them, and...let us know what we could do better on it. We would re-write it and give it back to her.

Dalia shared how she perceived she was supported in high school. During the focus group, she stated, “like two days out of the week the teachers would come together and if your student needed help with college applications or research about the schools, they would do like college research days.”

Likewise, participants shared their experiences having engaged with college professors. Generally, the overarching perceptions were positive, as many of them found their relationships with them to be rewarding. Many noted how they benefitted from the supports and guidance they received from them. In reference to Ruby’s test anxiety, she stated that she has gotten better since being in college, as she said, “since I’ve been in college, my professors have given me different tips to better help me to take tests and to do better with my tests in math, that’s always been a challenge for me, math.”

In response to how she felt most supported as a college student, Demetria provided feedback on her questionnaire by stating:

As a college student, I feel most supported in my academics. [My university] is very resourceful and supportive of students’ academic achievement. From day 1, I have and continue to build relationships with professors and my department. My department truly feels like family because I trust I have their support.

Isaiah provided a parallel statement when the discussion arose in the focus group. There, he commented:

...I feel like the professors are like really on hands and active with making sure all the students are accounted for, as long as you like show that you're willing to take your teacher serious, then they're more helpful that I've seen from any other school.

Shay added. "...In my experience, professors definitely give more help and more attention to you if they see that you're interested or somewhat interested or committed to whatever your major or minor is." Akin to these remarks, Ayanna communicated:

I would say I have professors that are really, really caring, and they really care about their students. So, I think definitely those professors; I've reached out to them, and we've had conversations, and they've supported me and helped me through my journey here at [My University].

In her interview, Lolita expressed how initially, she was afraid to engage with her professors beyond general instruction. However, as she got to know them, she was able to learn more from them. Here, she asserted:

...I was a little bit scared of my professors, but this year, you can kind of talk to them. Most of them you can email them or whatever, and they're very lenient and a lot of times they'll help you more than you might think...when you make a relationship with your professors, they can give you a lot of insight on things you might not know.

These participants provided commentary on their perceptions of experiences with individuals at their high schools and how they prepared them to apply for and attend college. Their accounts of their experiences included what happened during their time as students and the feelings that related to those times. Their responses included details of the individuals with whom they interacted, and the impacts those individuals may or may not have had on them and their journeys. As their journeys continue as college students, they have also lived through

various encounters with individuals who have helped shape their perceptions of their experiences at that level as well. Denise provided a summarizing statement, “I can certainly say...having...just one person, having one teacher, (or one program, one organization), it certainly makes a difference...my mom was a 100 percent help...but school was certainly like a cherry on top.”

The third grouping of emerged themes aligned with Epstein’s (1987) third facet of overlapping spheres of influence, which is that of community. It should be noted that in this context, community supports may be best described as external entities which aided students, exclusive of family and curriculum-based school supports. While some of the programs or organizations operated within schools because they were not curriculum-based, they are being described as community supports. This grouping of emerged themes included programs and organizations and peers and culture. The sub-themes of church, leadership, and mentorship and empowerment emerged under the general theme of programs and organizations. All the participants shared that they were a part of a program or organization in high school, college, or both. Additionally, the social facets of community, with regard to peers and culture, manifested as important details in the participants’ educational journeys.

### **Theme7: Programs and Organizations**

A seventh theme which emerged included programs and organizations. From programs which enhance school performance to community organizations such as church, participants experienced positive support systems. In many instances, being a part of certain programs afforded individuals the opportunities to be introduced to other programs and services, allowing for additional benefits for the participants. The sub-themes of church, leadership, and mentorship and empowerment were highlighted.

### ***Sub-Theme 1: Church***

The first sub-theme for programs and organizations included responses regarding the church, as participants provided a glimpse of their feelings as related to the support they received there. Ruby described how she was active in her church prior to the pandemic and how it led to other avenues:

I received assistance from like, I was very active in my church before Covid hit. So, in my church we had different programs. Like, I was in the Girls Group. The Girls Group, they helped mold me, like I received the Girls Group Top Award my senior year of high school. That kind of helped me to transition to college. It gave me a better set of communication [skills].

Kylie mentioned support from her church and stated, “I had people like at church that helped me.” Nivea also noted that her church was a great support to her, especially, when her parents passed away. She stated, “I would say my church [was supportive] because they were like active. They were always active, and I’m a member back home.” Ayanna professed similar feelings, noting that her father was the pastor of her church, yet she truly felt the support she received from individuals there, as she recalled:

I guess my community is definitely the church my dad is the pastor of. They have been 100% supportive from the beginning...when I finally announced where I was going, they were just super supportive. Every time I have little break downs, they’re always there to encourage me and lift me up.

### ***Sub-Theme 2: Leadership***

Participants provided data of organizations which enhanced their leadership skills, a second sub-theme of programs and organizations. One such program in which Denise holds an

office, was a continuation of a little sister program that she participated in during high school.

Here, she described her experience:

So, from high school, I was in [Future Teachers] in which we participated in [Teachers Uplifted]-sponsored conferences and different trainings, and so, now that I'm in college, I'm in [Teachers Uplifted] and I am also vice president...We are trying to get to that high school to college pipeline first [for] prospective teachers, just to increase our family of teachers.

In addition to Denise reporting that she held a leadership position in their teaching organization, Lolita also expressed her feelings regarding a leadership program with which she was affiliated.

She noted:

I was a part of a club called [My Leader Club] where you tracked your grades and everything. I know my director was very supportive of me going off to school. We would share roses and thorns [positive and negative experiences], and we used to share our college acceptances...some of the seniors would get together and just have like big celebrations of moving on, doing well, and sharing plans.

After becoming a special education teacher, Demetria reported her aspirations in leadership in a response on the questionnaire, as she wrote:

I will obtain a master's degree in administration and supervision. I will utilize this specialization in becoming assistant principal of an elementary or middle school, or a specialist for middle school special education. After years of experience in leadership, I will obtain a doctorate degree in special education, where I will become a principal of an elementary or middle school.

These participants expressed their current roles and future aspirations in leadership. In addition, as members of these organizations and with them holding leadership positions, they have also been afforded the opportunity to network with their peers and organization sponsors.

### ***Sub-Theme 3: Mentorship and Empowerment***

Mentorship and empowerment were a third sub-theme for programs and organizations. Individuals also supplied their recollections of mentorship programs with which they were affiliated. For those that spoke of those types of experiences, they recalled how they began as mentees, but later they became mentors of those programs. Demetria described one such experience:

So, in high school, I was in an organization called [My Organization] and it was an all-girls program, and I was a mentee and then I went into a mentor. During my mentee process, we did college tours and one of the tours was [My University]. And so, [My Organization] was really a ladies empowerment group [that stressed] the importance of academics, the importance of self-care, self-love, and self-respect.

Nivea noted a similar program that she was a member of, which stood for respectable qualities, as she reported:

...the organization I joined was like a women's empowerment organization, so I knew, like I just saw them around campus...I wanted to join based on what they stood for...it broke me out of my shell and got me doing community service. It also helped with my public speaking. It helped me grow and I feel like build my resume, teach me professional skills.

Shay reported experiences that mimicked those of Demetria. Here, he explained:

I was a mentee when I was in my early years in high school...either the 11<sup>th</sup> grader or the 12<sup>th</sup> grader would just sit down with us for about ten, 15 minutes during lunch a couple times a week and we just talk about what's going on, how you are adjusting, things of that nature.

Another program in which Denise participated involved aspiring teachers providing social-emotional lessons to middle school students. Here, she detailed her experiences:

We were basically students who wanted to be teachers, and we got to also attend middle schools and give lessons...on social emotional skills. So, it was kind of like we got to come in and be the fun people with the bucket of candy and snacks for a Friday and kind of like the fun activities.

Kylie informed of her experience as a mentor and as one who provided service to others. This time in her life was fulfilling as she shared:

I know because we have a lot of principles based on mentorship and like service. So, I knew that when I got into the organization, I would want to be a mentor for someone else, to give them the insight on college, kind of what I wished I had for myself. I feel like that was really a drive in me, why I wanted to join the organizations I'm in because I knew I wanted that role model for myself. I kind of see myself doing that now with the middle schoolers we mentor.

### **Theme 8: Peers and Culture**

Peers and culture represented the eighth theme which emerged. Each participant shared that they were members of various organizations or programs in both high school and college, and the rewards of those affiliations were many. The social aspects of community, to include the



peers and the cultures of the settings in which they operate, were important features of the experiences of the participants. Kylie provided insight as to this concept:

I guess with the organizations that I'm in, having people around you that's going through the exact same things as you are or have gone through the exact same things as you and they can tell you how they dealt with it, that definitely helps. Again, having your peers, being able to be surrounded by people who are actively going through the same things as you, I feel like that definitely is a big support.

Similarly, Ruby reported her excitement when she realized she had met some girls prior to re-engaging with them in college:

[Being a part of Girls Group] helped me when I transitioned to college. It gave me a better set of communication [skills] cause I actually met some [Girls Group] that were going to my [My University], and it was kind of a good experience to meet girls that were going to [My University] that I have a connection with that I could connect with once I got there so I won't be alone and scared.

Isaiah noted how he obtained support and inspiration from his peers through sports and music, as he stated, "kind of provided like a safe haven in sports I would do or music I would do. It was kind of like a safe space, and there were people to look up to there, so they kind of gave me inspiration." Shay also discussed how he relied on his teammates as supports, as he commented, "I've used my teammates really because some of them have been there a few years, and so I really relied on their experiences."

Of an organization Lolita was a part of, she stated how good it felt to be a part of something, as she informed:

It feels good to be a part of something. I know cause I always like the idea of being a part of something bigger than myself...when you're taking classes, a lot of that is just like you're on your own. You're focused on yourself...but when you're in a program, it's not just about you, it's about everybody in the room...and everybody making a connection...it feels good to check in with other people versus always dwelling on yourself.

Akin to feeling a sense of belonging amongst peers, acknowledging the culture of the environment is also a facet of the community supports shared by the participants. The idea of having to change to a new environment was something Victoria expressed being reluctant about, as she described her feelings as she transitioned to college, stating, "I'll be honest, it was kind of stressful because I knew it was going to be a different environment, [so] it was exciting, but nerve-wracking." Conversely, Aliyah presented how being around a diverse group of people, she became more attuned to what was available to her, as she informed:

I don't feel like anybody had an experience like I had my freshman year, just of me like knowing these people. I found out like so much just by leaving campus and being around different types of people and...I was introduced to a different person every single day and a different organization, of modeling, whatever.

She further explained how this experience has helped her become more personable, and it has strengthened her ability to orchestrate business matters. Demetria presented an experience which also enhanced her ability to navigate in an arena which was different from what she was accustomed to. She expressed, "I started getting to know the practices and the culture of being at a predominantly white school, so I would say [My School] shaped me into the student I am today...so I appreciate those experiences."

Participants shared rich personal accounts of their experiences as related to the community supports, they have been afforded. As a part of programs and organizations in high school, college, or both, each person's encounters evidenced how they were shaped by their experiences. Although varied, the students' engagements with peers in the context of culture enhanced their educational journeys.

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

The data obtained from this study generally contained responses which related to other participants' statements. However, there were comments or situations that were different from others for this study. They will be described in this section.

#### ***Outlier Finding #1***

One student in the study did not attend high school with her peers. Instead, she was home-schooled. She did not experience what it was like to engage with her school counselor or schoolteachers throughout the journey of applying to schools or for scholarships. Whereas most of the other participants found solace and support from their peers, during the focus group, Victoria stated:

I think the biggest thing for me was that I was socially unprepared when I came here, cause I was home-schooled, and I think that was the biggest thing that I was nervous about, being around people my age.

#### ***Outlier Finding #2***

Another outlier was that Shay conveyed that his high school experience was different from what is typical of others due to his living situation. By not having consistency and the establishment of relationships within a school environment, his access to information may have been affected. Shay stated that he lived in the state of Virginia, moved to Florida, and moved

back to Virginia in a different region within the state. As he responded to the nature of the barriers that inhibited family, school, or community support, he stated:

We moved around a lot, and I went to three different high schools. I went to high school in the [1<sup>st</sup>] area code then went down in Florida, then when I moved back to Virginia, it was in the [2<sup>nd</sup>] area code, so it's just uh, really not having too much outside support I should say, so we were really relying on what we knew and what we thought and the research that we could find out, but I don't know if there is really too much other outside experiences or outside people we could rely on to help through that process.

### **Research Question Responses**

This research study was guided by a central research question and three sub-research questions. Using the qualitative data generated from a semi-structured interview, a focus group, and a questionnaire, the central and sub-research questions were addressed. Quotes from some of the participants will provide examples of how each research question was answered.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the meanings of the perceptions and lived experiences of urban college students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how the family, school, and community support prepared them for college? The participants generally relayed that from their perspectives, not only did they have a desire to attend college, but they were supported in various ways, by families, their schools, and their communities. Participants conveyed that supports from their families, schools, and communities were necessary for them to be successful throughout their journeys from high school to college. Financial and emotional supports from their families and their families serving as role models and offering guidance were themes which emerged for the family. Supports provided by the school involved themes including the rigors

related to academics, learner evolution, and resilience. Additionally, school supports also included advising from school guidance counselors and college advisors, as well as teachers and professors. Themes for community included programs and organizations, with the sub-themes of church, leadership, and mentorship and empowerment. Finally, peers and culture as related to community was the last theme.

Examples were noted when Denise stated, “I can certainly say...even if it’s just one person, having one teacher, one program, one organization, it certainly makes a difference...and I just give my mom 100% because she just gets all the credit, but school was certainly like a cherry on top.” A comment from Lolita described how more comprehensive supports would be optimal, as she said, “I feel like if everyone was as open to doing new things, I feel like ties and partnerships would strengthen, like you know like community...mixed with school and families, and stuff like that.”

### **Sub-Question One**

What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the family prepared them for college? Participants’ responses revealed that supports from their families were vital to their success as students. The themes which emerged included financial supports, emotional supports, family as role models, and families offering guidance. Participants spoke about how their successful transitions from high school to college relied heavily on their family members providing them with the money for application fees and tuition, in addition to the encouragement that their families gave to them through emotional supports. By having attended college and being successful in their careers, parents also served as role models for their children. Many parents also offered guidance, especially with the college application process and with overcoming the

obstacles that affected their children. Shay stated, “they helped guide me through like the whole process, especially when it came down to writing those letters, because some of those had a word limit...they supported me financially as well as with the application process.”

### **Sub-Question Two**

What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the school prepared them for college? Responses included experiences from the high school as well as the college level on how the school curricula and/or the individuals of each institution prepared them for college. The general themes which emerged included rigor and advising. For the theme of rigor, the sub-themes of academics, learner evolution, and resilience were noted. As participants described the details of their high school and college journeys, the rigors associated with the curricula were discussed. Additionally, with the challenges the participants faced throughout their educational tracks, they were able to grow as learners and determine their personal learning styles. Furthermore, by overcoming various obstacles, they proved to be resilient.

For the theme of advising, sub-themes of counselors and advisors and teachers and professors emerged. At the high school level, participants spoke about those who seemed to help them the most. For some, their guidance counselors were helpful in assisting students with course scheduling and with the college application process, while others were not as helpful. This was similar to college advisors. Participants also spoke about how helpful some of their teachers and professors have been to them with instructing and supporting them through clarifying taught concepts.

An example of a response includes Kylie’s statement, as she stated:

...definitely, a lot of the schools that I applied to, they um did come to our high school to like talk to us and stuff like that, so I felt like that was a really big support cause, even though I knew I wanted to apply to these schools, having someone come in as like a representation of the school and having them come to my high school, I guess that really helped a lot, and my teachers were very supportive, whether it be with grades or with anything I needed to know to make sure that I still had decent grades, to make sure everything was up to par. And my counselor, she was very helpful as well with like letting me know deadlines that I may not have known myself, like that type of thing. I felt like that really helped.

### **Sub-Question Three**

What are the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how has the community prepared them for college? One of the general themes for community supports included responses regarding programs and organizations, while the second theme involve peers and culture. For the first theme, the sub-themes of church, leadership and mentorship and empowerment were noted. The churches that some participants attended supported these individuals financially, emotionally, and spiritually. As members of organizations, the participants benefited from the services that were provided to them. Additionally, many served in leadership capacities and were able to acquire leadership skills such as knowing how to conduct a meeting, public speaking, and governing the organizations' practices. Being members of organizations also afforded the participants the ability to be mentored by those with more experience and for the participants to later mentor others. The same is true for being empowered to excel in a given area, and then for the participants to later empower others. Participants provided information about being amongst

their peers and how the cultures of each group that they were a part of had an impact on them.

Ruby provided a description of her community experience with her description:

Well, I received um like assistance from like, I was very active in my church like before COVID hit, so my church we had like different programs, like I was in the [Girl Group]. The [Girl Group], they helped me to mold me. Like I received the um [Girl's Group Star] award my senior year in high school. That kind of helped me to transition to college. It gave me a better set of communication [skills] cause I actually met some [Girl's Group girls] that were going to [My School] and it was kind of a good experience to meet girls outside of [My School], well that were going to [My School] that I have a connection with that I could connect with once I get there so I won't feel alone or scared.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a description of the research results on how the supports from the family, school, and community have prepared urban college students. The information in this chapter was presented to address the central research question of what the meanings of the perceptions and lived experiences are of urban college students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia, and how the family, school, and community support prepared them for college. Through personal interviews, a focus group session, and an open-ended questionnaire, the data indicated that several supportive experiences from their families, schools, and communities helped shape the journeys of the participants.

Family supports for the participants were highlighted with four general areas which aided the students. One area was that of financial support. Here, participants expressed how their parents supported them with application fees, college entry test fees, and overall provision while in school. Participants also discussed how their families provided them with emotional support



through the process of graduating high school and applying for and attending college. Families also served as role models for the students, and a majority of their family members had obtained degrees, to include in some cases, advanced degrees. Participants also reported that they received quite a bit of guidance from their families during the application process and through their transition to college as to how to prepare themselves for the new environment of college.

Regarding how the school prepared students for college, a theme that was presented included rigor. Participants reported how some of their experiences included specialty programs which offered a bit more of a challenge than the general curriculum. For others, some challenges were overwhelming. With the appropriate supports, participants depicted experiences which displayed their evolution as learners. In spite of the many extraneous challenges as progressing through a pandemic, losing parents, and experiencing the divorce of parents, students' resilience was featured.

The school was also noteworthy for its advising. At the high school, counselors were generally helpful. However, some students felt a lack of connection with their counselors. In college, students generally experienced a lack of thorough support from their advisors. Regarding teachers and professors, at the high school and college, respectively, students tended to express that they felt supported and encouraged by these individuals.

Community supports for participants included their experiences within their environments, as well as members of various programs and organizations. Additionally, some of them encountered support from their church communities. Leadership was featured as a shared experience of many of the participants, with many holding offices in their programs and with other leadership opportunities. Also, through community supports, many individuals experienced mentorship and empowerment through their affiliations. Likewise, peers and culture resulted as

other facets of community which provided participants with needed supports. Finally, outliers such as one participant being home-schooled and one participant attending three high schools were noted as well, highlighting non-traditional aspects of their high school experiences.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to determine the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia and how the family, school, and community prepared them for college. Information from the literature has been noted, indicating that external support partnerships and collaboration are critical in impacting the success of youth (Smith, Ralston, Naegele, & Waggoner, 2019). The literature provides further detailed insight into the importance of family, school, and community engaging in students' learning processes, especially those in the urban setting, (Smith, et al., 2019). There have been minimal studies regarding the experiences of students and teachers in high poverty schools (Kraft et al., 2015). Epstein (2018) reported that more work in this field needs to be done because newly hired teachers have been ill-prepared to conduct effective and equitable partnership programs to aid in student learning.

### **Discussion**

The theoretical framework upon which the current study is built is Epstein's (1987) overlapping spheres of influence. The premise behind Epstein's (1987) theory is that in the school entity's quest to educate children, the incorporation of a parent or home support as well as the supports that can be provided by community agencies or entities are vital to the comprehensive care students need to be successful (Epstein, 2001). When students are excited about their aspirations and their virtues, they typically have emotional resilience (Kryza-Lacombe et al., 2019). The overlapping spheres of influence theory by Epstein (1987) provides information, especially to stakeholders, contributing to student success outcomes that are typically comprised of supports from the home, school, and community. This theory indicates

that students experience higher success rates when entities such as the home, the school, and the community intersect, which promotes student learning and development (Epstein, 1987). It also impacts student retention and later college pursuits (Hebert, 2018).

Also, it is important to examine the social and cultural factors that may be related to student achievement over time and may be a strong predictor promoting student success, which has been noted as parental involvement (Hurley et al., 2016). Additionally, when there is a coordinated effort on behalf of the school and community, the unit can provide a sense of cohesion as they take a common route toward a stronger future for students (Peck & Reitzug, 2018). There must be a commitment to work together to support all students with the necessary tools to be successful, even if their needs require flexibility in decisions regarding race, culture, ethnicity, language, and special needs, since all differences must be considered (Gbolo & Grier-Reed, 2019).

This research study contributed to the body of existing literature by gaining insight into the lived experiences of urban college students who have encountered transition from high school to college. Participants from the current study conveyed experiences that align with the theory of the overlapping spheres of influence of Epstein (1987). Through their perceptions, participants noted how they were supported by their family members, their schools and their communities. Participants communicated how they progressed in their transitions from high school to college through financial support and guidance from their families, the rigors of school curricula and supports from counselors, advisors, teachers, and professors, and the supports of their community programs, peers, and cultures.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Results from this research study built upon previous research. The existing research presented that although parental engagement in students' educational tracks often decrease as students develop, it continues to be a necessary support mechanism for high school students' educational success, as noted in a study conducted by Day and Dotterer (2018).

Day and Dotterer (2018) followed students in the 10th grade until ten years after high school to investigate grade point averages and educational attainment related to parental involvement. Results indicated that all students benefitted from more academic socialization and school-based involvement, about their grade point averages; however, when adding the element of home-based involvement, mixed results were reported across ethnic groups (Day & Dotterer, 2018). Yet, "more home-based involvement combined with more academic socialization was particularly beneficial for Black and Hispanic/Latino adolescents" (Day & Dotterer, 2018, p. 1344). Additionally, Flores de Apodaca et al. (2015) found in their study that parental expectations, rather than involvement, were noted to have a significant positive relationship with student achievement measured by grade point average.

### *Summary of Thematic Findings*

The thematic findings of the current research study provided insight into the lived experiences of the participants providing the information. Based on the respondents' statements, supports from their families, their school personnel, and their community agencies and peers/culture were vital to their transitions from high school to college. Students conveyed that the supports they received financially and emotionally from their families were necessary and useful. They also viewed their family members as role models and reported that their families offered them guidance. The rigors of school in addition to the advising they received from school

were themes of the participants as well. Their supports from programs and organizations as well as from their peers and culture were also noted themes.

**Financial and emotional supports.** The first theme that emerged from the findings is that parents provide financial and emotional supports as most participants informed of how vital their parental influences and supports were. Through each phase of their experiences, students reported of how their parents' help was vital to their success with accomplishing their goals. They also reported of how they gave them the necessary tools financially to assist them with obtaining the next levels within the college attendance process.

As noted in the literature, overwhelming parental support indicators are paramount to student achievement (Parsons et al., 2018). This idea aligned with this study with parents providing emotional support and motivation to students when they became leery or uninspired. An instance where this was noted specifically, included a student whose parent became involved in a situation in college, due to the university being neglectful of the instruction they should have been providing. Another was when a student lost motivation due to the overwhelming pandemic, which affected people's lives in a multitude of ways.

**Role models and guidance.** According to Herbert (2018), first-generation college students are those whose parents or guardians did not begin a postsecondary degree or did not obtain a degree after enrollment. Contrastingly, this study mostly included participants whose parents had attended college and had obtained degrees. For those whose parents did not, there were other ways those parents were role models, such as owning their own businesses or obtaining status in other ways at their places of employment. Because of these accomplishments, many participants saw their parents and family members as role models.

As noted by Rattenborg et al. (2019), communication plays a vital role in parents' engagement at the school level. This communication was displayed as highly effective when offering their children guidance throughout the process of accessing college. Participants indicated that their parents and other family members led them through various aspects of the application process, access on campus, and housing.

**Rigor.** While students considered to be first-generation college attendees compose approximately half of those who attend college, and for those attending four-year institutions, that amount falls to approximately one third, many of those students are disproportionately students of color, are from low socio-economic backgrounds, or both (Hebert, 2018). This study included all students of color, and all but two of the participants' parents attended college. For the students who completed the questionnaire for this study (ten of them), they all described their families' financial situation as middle class or stable.

The research indicated that despite the expectations, millions of students are overcoming difficult and tragic circumstances and are excelling academically (Hebert, 2018). Furthermore, upon recognizing all the challenges stacked against urban students, what emerges is the idea that these students are not only resilient, but they have grit and a great deal of emotional intelligence (Emdin, 2017). That appeared to be true for this study, as it was noted that the students were resilient despite challenges. Participants reported that they struggled academically early in their school careers, yet they were resilient and are quite successful now. Similarly, other participants reported how they, as learners, evolved and became more independent.

**Advising.** Additionally, according to Portnoi and Kwong (2019), school counselors play a vital role in the college-navigation process for most students at the school level. They further suggested that counselors can be considered gatekeepers for those students who may not have

had any family examples of how the college acceptance process works. A key sub-theme in this study indicated that high school counselors kept them abreast and led them along the way during the college acceptance process. While most of the participants felt this way, another perception was that a school counselor had not forged a relationship with the student, which made it difficult for the student to feel as though she mattered. Additionally, students reported the academic rigor in their schools was appropriately challenging, with the exception of a few. However, the research suggests that youth, typically Black and Latina/o, who attend public schools in an urban environment, encounter less access to higher education experiences; this remains true despite the call for increased accountability measures for school communities to develop college-ready students (Knight-Manuel et al., 2019). In a study by Mac Iver et al. (2017), researchers explored the effects of mentorship support on student success, which supplemented the established structures already in place at the school level; students reported having positive experiences resulting from engaging with their mentors. The current study revealed similar experiences. For those students who were afforded the opportunity to engage with their mentors, to include teachers and professors and/or counselors or advisors, generally positive experiences were reported.

Additionally, a key characteristic of resilient students is that they feel good about themselves, which can be enhanced through positive relationships with caring adults, such as their teachers (Wasserberg, 2017). Findings from this study corroborate this research. Participants in this study reported how their relationships with key individuals at their schools were vital to their success. At both the high school and college, students conveyed how they were guided through the college application process with help on essays and mentoring, to



actually being in college and receiving assistance from professors regarding test-taking strategies.

**Programs and organizations.** Elliott, et al., (2018) explained that social capital includes resources available through social relationships and structures that can be accessed when necessary to ensure success is met with an attempted action. Social networks, both formal and informal, provide students with needed supports through this process. (Elliott et al., 2018).

In a study conducted by Lunceford et al. (2017), these researchers studied participants' successes in a college preparation program compared to those not in a program. According to Lunceford et al. (2017), more positive results were found for students receiving supports from the program than those who were not in each of the following areas: attendance, retention, behavior incidents, grade point average, graduation rates, and college attendance. For the current study, the participants provided lived accounts of how they received supports from programs and organizations in high school and college. Other supports such as church were noted to be reported as well. Through several of the programs and organizations some of the students were a part of, many of them held leadership positions. Additionally, many participants started as mentees and became mentors in their processes.

**Peers and culture.** A very strong support was that of peer groups and affiliations. Students reported feeling a sense of belonging to their social networks and indicated how they felt they were helped by being a part of their groups. The accounts of the students in this study indicated that their peer groups helped them when they were involved in challenging situations. These results are congruent with the literature, as noted by Mac Iver et al. (2017), interpersonal relationships play a vital role in student achievement.

Also, a key feature of student well-being, including happiness and satisfaction, and self-acceptance, is students' perceived school climate (Newland et al., 2018). When students are given a voice, are helped when needed, and share in the responsibility of maintaining a safe and supportive environment, positive outcomes have been reported (Newland et al. 2018).

Participants noted that when they feel they are a part of something larger than themselves and feel that they have a safe environment, they thrive. Additionally, many students indicated their communities felt like family, something that many of them appreciated. As previously stated, although varied, the students' engagements with peers in the context of culture enhanced their educational journeys.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings for the current research study provide several implications for families, schools, and communities that provide support for students transitioning to college. This research study revealed implications for families as they support their children as they transition to college. For most aspiring college students, the tasks of applying to college, paying fees, and taking entrance exams are daunting at best. Students typically feel overwhelmed and may possess feelings of inadequacy as they launch into college application mode. Because of this, it is important for families to provide as much support and information as possible. Assisting a son or daughter with the pros and cons of the universities in which they may be interested, aids students with making a sounder decision of their potential college.

Additionally, by relieving students of application fees and college entrance exam fees, it is likely to lessen the degree of stress some students may have otherwise experienced. Another financial support families can offer students is to help students navigate and apply for

scholarships. Much of the support in this realm may come from assisting students to know what scholarships are available and how to convey their qualifications such that they align with the qualifying criteria. Assistance is also encouraged when applying for loans. Any other provisional supports such as tuition payments, room and board, and purchase of materials such as books, supplies, and dorm room items give students the necessary tools to aid them along the way to college success.

It is important for families to aid their younger family members with the needed emotional support as well. Students who may feel overwhelmed in this realm of uncharted territory need to have supports that will help them cope. Parents and other family members typically offer a safe and nurturing environment in which this can occur. Maintaining open lines of communication should help students feel empowered to reach out to their family members when they have emotional concerns or need a break. Similarly, while it is important not to hover over their children, parents should also be mindful to check on their children's well-being while they may be away at college.

Having family members who have already attended college appear to inspire students to proceed in a similar manner. As with many of the participants in this study, parents and other family members who have attended college prior to them, stand as role models and as viable resources for the questions that may arise from rising college students. Although those who have graduated college may not work in their fields of study, simply having a college degree may assist with employment opportunities, and by observing this with their family members, students are able to understand the necessity of obtaining their own degrees. Additionally, even for those whose parents may not have attended college but may be employed in their own careers, being

able to witness the strong work ethic in their family members will inspire students to endeavor in their own pursuits.

Schools play a vital role in students' lives, especially as they endeavor to attend college. Academic preparation is paramount to the success of future college students. It is incumbent on schools to strengthen student learning, as well as provide the necessary remediation in areas in which they may be weak. Not only should school personnel provide instruction, but it is also important to offer consultation for individuals, just to ensure that students are on the appropriate track and to offer any guidance that might be necessary. By strengthening student success, students are likely to also strengthen their work ethics and their academic confidence to pursue higher levels of education as evidenced in this study.

Because of the significant part schools play in students' lives, when students experience challenging life situations, it is also necessary for them to receive encouragement, support, and understanding at the school level. Just as students in this study dealt with grief, parental divorce, and a pandemic, students everywhere experience similar hardships and more. Receiving assistance, and to some extent, tolerance, students are afforded the chance to be resilient and evolve to a more developed version of themselves.

Communication and relationship building are important features of teacher-student partnering. The current study provided data which noted that when students felt heard, they felt more comfortable with seeking guidance from both teachers and professors. Prior to more engaging relationships, students explained that they felt intimidated or scared to seek assistance from their professors. By instructors providing a more welcoming environment and pursuing ways to help, students are likely to respond favorably or at least consider the options they have been afforded.

Like instructor-student relationships, counselor/advisor-student relationships are also necessary. For those students in this study who encountered less than optimal experiences with counselors or advisors, they reported how it made them feel unimportant and cast aside. This led to them seeking other alternatives to garner assistance in getting their needs met, which should have been unnecessary had the appropriate individuals initially provided what was needed. However, students with more positive engagements with counselors and advisors reported how effective those supports were to them. Ultimately, when school counselors and college advisors perform the duties described in their titles, counsel and advise, students are propelled to a more functional footing educationally. Assistance with obtaining resources and structuring a process to obtain goals are what aspiring college students need.

Like schools, the community also plays a vital role in students' lives. In the current study, each participant was a part of several organizations or programs during high school and college. By participating in these programs, students learn how to structure their lives in ways that help them learn to multi-task. If they happen to hold offices in these programs, as many of the participants of this study did, they learn how to lead, delegate, and carry out tasks in order to achieve programmatic goals. It also provides them with opportunities to, yet again, feel as though they are a part of entities bigger than themselves.

With other types of community engagement, such as church, students indicated that they felt a great deal of support. Knowing that they have people to encourage and assist them, students benefit from this assurance. When community agencies offer tutoring, instruction on college application processes, and provide field trips to colleges or college fairs, it places students on the road to success; all of which the current study confirmed. Additionally, within these organizations, students who are mentored by program facilitators or other students are

benefitted by the insight offered to them on how to advance in their efforts to higher achievements.

Peer support and the familial aspect of the culture of the school was a highlighted feature of the current study, regarding the facet of community. As explained by some participants, it was a challenge to feel accepted within the culture of the school. When this occurs, students feel less confident and less engaged, thereby missing out on various opportunities. Contrastingly, when students feel a part of their community and when they have a strong and supportive peer group, they are more likely to accomplish goals and achievements. With a strong peer group, students can share experiences with one another and be provided with first-hand knowledge of similar experiences. This sharing equips students to make decisions regarding their own situational dilemmas.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

The information obtained from the current study, as compiled from the experiences of current college students, corroborated Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influences. Participants provided experiential recollections of the supports they received from their families, their schools, and their communities, and their reports confirmed that when they are supported from each of the named three entities, they have experienced more success. As with Epstein's (1987) theory, when the three entities intersect, more comprehensive support for student success can be manifested. The participants in the current study acknowledged that when any of the supports were lacking, it was noticed and had a meaningful impact on their school success.

As with the theoretical implications, the empirical implications of this study align with previous studies which specified how the supports received by parents and families, schools, to

include teachers and counselors, and communities to include programs and socio-cultural interactions, provide students with the necessary support mechanisms to succeed (Day & Dotterer, 2018; Lunceford et al. 2017; Mac Iver et al. 2017). As Day and Dotterer (2018) noted, more home-based involvement (in addition to more academic socialization) was particularly beneficial for Black and Hispanic/Latino adolescents. The current research study provided aligned evidence from the students' perspectives on the financial and emotional supports they received from their families, as well as being provided with role models and general guidance from their families, as well.

Likewise, a previous study conducted by Mac Iver et al. (2017), indicated that mentors played a crucial role in the success of students. Similarly, the current study further revealed that there was a notable difference when the participants encountered positive and negative mentor support from teachers or professors, as well as from counselors or advisors. The advice and guidance provided to the students, or lack thereof, were impactful and this information adds to the existing body of literature in that it provides first-hand accounts of students' experiences with supports of advisement.

As Lunceford et al. (2017) reported in their study, more positive results were found for students receiving supports from a program than those who were not in a variety of ways. Each of the students in the current research study provided verbal accounts of the importance of their involvement in the various programs or organizations they may have been a part of. They convey information on how the programs may have enhanced their experiences as they spoke positively on what they encountered.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations and delimitations for this study include the parameters by which the study was set. The limitations feature the manners in which the data were collected and how representative of the general population the results may be (University of Southern California, 2022). Many of the delimitations were intentional to obtain perceptions from a concise group of individuals.

### **Limitations**

According to Atiena (2009), “the main disadvantage of qualitative approaches to corpus analysis is that their findings cannot be extended to wider populations with the same degree of certainty that quantitative analyses can. This is because the findings of the research are not tested to discover whether they are statistically significant or due to chance” (p. 5). Furthermore, Chetty (2016) described some of the limitations in qualitative research to be time consuming and labor-intensive, with no result verification as well as difficulty in investigating causality, contrary to many quantitative studies. Those descriptors are applicable to the current study, in that the data were representative of participants’ experiences, which were subjective accounts. Several limitations were noted for this study, which confine parameters and impact the generalizability of the study (University of Southern California, 2022). Likewise, samples in qualitative research are rarely representative of the larger population as much of the data include personal biases (NurseKey, 2017).

One limitation of this study was the lack of variation in the colleges of the participants. While they were a part of a variety of programs in their high schools and colleges, many of the students who participated were from HBCUs and none from predominately white institutions (even though attempts were also made to solicit participants from a predominately white, urban



institution). This also limits the potential generalizability and applicability of the findings as their experiences may be less varied due to the systematic functioning of each of the universities and not to a specific encounter experienced by a student by chance. Similarly, each of the participants identified as Black or African American, which again limits this study, making it less representative of other populations. Additionally, because the interviews were conducted virtually, it is possible that some of the non-verbal communication that typically occurs in face-to-face contact could have been lost as face-to-face interaction is a central part of human interaction, and it is used to convey ideas, share information, understand intentions and emotions, build trust, and help in learning and decision making (Aburumman, Gillies, Ward, & Hamilton, 2022).

According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), “saturation is considered the cornerstone of rigor in determining sample sizes in qualitative research, and saturation can be achieved in a narrow range of interviews (9–17) or focus group discussions (4–8), particularly in studies with relatively homogenous study populations and narrowly defined objectives” (p. 9). The number of the current study participants fit within the range with 12 participants providing individual interview data, however, there was only one focus group discussion, which falls shy of the range denoted in Hennink’s and Kaiser’s (2022) research. Another limitation is that 10 of the 12 participants completed all three forms of the data collection process. There were two individuals who completed only the individual interview and not the questionnaire or the focus group. Here, vital pieces of information may have been missed.

Also, more follow-up questions, as noted by Moustakas (1994), could have been asked during the interview sessions as well as the focus group, which is another limitation of this study. More thematic information could have been obtained if further explanations were solicited. One

of the major limitations of this study was the interference of the pandemic. This limited access to the students as potential participants significantly. Whereas more in-person explanations on college campuses might have provided more student participation, the pandemic gravely interfered with this process. It also prolonged college feedback, as their willingness to agree to allow a study to be performed with their students because many of the school officials were working virtually or in a limited capacity. Additionally, response rates of participants agreeing to be a part of the study were slow. Having to use the university/program facilitators as the disseminators of the study information may have affected who and how the information was provided to the potential participants. Because this process is unknown, it gives way to a potential limitation.

### **Delimitations**

This study was delimited to urban college students in Virginia who had been a part of programs that supported them in their college entry and attendance processes. This qualitative study used a transcendental phenomenological approach. Data were gathered from the natural setting with an attempt to make sense of or derive meaning from the perceptions of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of receiving supports from their families, schools, and communities and who have also participated in a college transition program (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative methodology was chosen to understand the stories embedded in the richness of a specific time, setting, and programs of the individuals providing the data.

With very few in-depth studies existing regarding the experiences of students [and teachers] in high poverty schools (Kraft et al., 2015), this group was selected because it speaks to the gap in the literature providing urban students a voice in sharing their experiences in the college application and attendance processes. The overlapping spheres of influence theory,

originated by Epstein (1987), was used as a theoretical framework for this study. The premise behind Epstein's (1987) theory is that in the school entity's quest to educate children, the incorporation of a parent or home support as well as the supports that can be provided by community agencies or entities are vital to the comprehensive care students need to be successful (Epstein, 2001).

Students over the age of 18 were the desired group due to there not being the need to obtain parental consent for the participants being minors. This provided students with a degree of autonomy, and it also allowed for students to speak candidly regarding their experiences, without the idea of parents having potential influence over their responses (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The primary data source in this phenomenological study was the interview, and it was in a semi-structured format (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) also encouraged taping or video recording the interviews, which was completed via Zoom due to the pandemic as the colleges scarcely allowed visitors to campus. Also, these virtual interactions were also utilized in order to allow for social distancing. Additionally, a focus group with the participants was conducted virtually as another data source, as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), who indicated that data could also be gathered from various formats. Finally, participants completed an open-ended questionnaire, which provided natural responses without manipulation or interventions, thereby providing information for descriptive purposes and thematic coding (Nassaji, 2015).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are many recommendations for future research based on the findings of this study. Future studies should incorporate a more varied participant pool if possible. By enlarging the potential sources of where the participants are requested, it is likely to increase the number of participants as well as vary the demographic composition of the participant pool. Another

recommendation is to collect data from high school students who may be currently experiencing the college application process. That information would supply lived experiences of the current moments of those individuals.

Future research should further explore the manners in which the three entities of family, school, and community worked more collaboratively. While the current study sought information on how each of these concepts supported students, there was an understanding that organizations were within the school environments, thereby suggesting collaboration, yet not as much information was accessed which spoke to deliberate interactivity. Participants often noted that sometimes parents were not aware of what was occurring in the schools or programs.

Lastly, many of the participants for this study were not first-generation college attendees. It would be informative to see the manners in which participants' experiences would be different if their parents or other family members had not gone to college. Even as this study's participants ran into challenges, giving a voice to those whose parents may not have gone to college will allow them an opportunity to share their plights through the college application and attendance processes.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students who participated in college transition programs in Virginia and how the family, school, and community supports and partnerships, prepared them for college. Data were collected through individual interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and a focus group session. Results of this study indicated that with family, financial and emotional supports played vital roles in the lives of students. Additionally highlighted were the importance of families serving as role models and offering guidance. For

schools, results indicated that academic rigor, learner evolution, and resilience manifested as key features while counselor/advisor and instructor supports were also noted from the participants' perspectives. With the community supports, participants reported involvement in many programs and organizations and encouragement and more intensive support included the church for some participants. Also, within the organizations, participants engaged in leadership as well as mentorship and empowerment. Data also revealed that peers and the culture of the setting of the individuals contributed to their feelings of support and comfort.

These results add to the body of research in determining what supports students believed aided them in the college application and attendance processes about the family, the school, and the community supporting them. It highlighted the perceptions and lived experiences of urban students in Virginia. The overlapping spheres of influence theory, originated by Epstein (1987), was used as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory supported the overall study by obtaining students' views of the three components of this theory: family, school, and community supports. This study confirmed Epstein's (2001) research related to this theory, which noted that "students want their families to be knowledgeable partners with their schools in their education and available as helpful sources of information, assistance, or guidance" (p. 44). The premise behind Epstein's (1987) theory is that in the school entity's quest to educate children, the incorporation of a parent or home support as well as the supports that can be provided by community agencies or entities are vital to the comprehensive care students need to be successful (Epstein, 2001). Students' accounts of their experiences in this study depicted this premise.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**Description and Invitation**

To Whom It May Concern,

Graduate student, Marlene Gooding, is conducting a study with current college students who have participated in college transition programs. Because you are a college student who has participated in our program and is at least 18 years of age, she is requesting that you consider participating in her study. The study will include a semi-structured interview, a focus group session, and a qualitative questionnaire comprised of eight questions. Your participation in the study will provide a body of work that will provide an in-depth look into what factors contributed to your success from your perspective, which ultimately resulted in high school graduation and college attendance. If you are interested in participating, please respond stating such, and I will disseminate a consent form to you, provided by Mrs. Gooding. Upon her receipt of the consent form, she will be in contact with you to begin the data collection process of the study. Thank you in advance for your consideration to add to the breadth of educational research.

**APPENDIX B**  
**Informed Consent**

Student: Marlene Gooding

Institution: Liberty University

Study Title: Urban Programs That Promote High School Graduation and College Entry: A Phenomenological Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study that is being conducted with college students who have been a part of a college transition program. The purpose of this study is to provide information to educators, families, policymakers, students, and other stakeholders as to the lived experiences of students who have been a part of this type of program. This information will inform as to what supports were and were not beneficial to your success as a high school graduate and with becoming a college student.

As a potential participant, you have the right to be informed as to the procedures of the study for you to be able to decide whether you would like to participate. The procedures include a face-to-face or virtual interview, which will be video recorded for the sole purposes of data transcription and is believed to take no more than an hour. Your image and voice will only be viewed and heard by the data collector. Additionally, you will be asked to be a part of a confidential, virtual focus group regarding your experiences as a student. Also, you will be asked to complete an electronic questionnaire. Your name and institutions of learning will remain anonymous, and pseudonyms will be used instead. Personal information disclosed to the data collector will remain confidential unless there is a risk of harm to you or someone else or if illegal activities have been disclosed. The raw data will be kept for a total of three years in a locked, secure environment in the researcher's home. After three years, the data will be destroyed.

Approximately 15 students will be asked to participate in this study. If you are willing to participate, the data collector will contact you to coordinate a time and location, such as your campus, local library, or virtually, which will be convenient for you. The focus group will be conducted virtually. Your participation is voluntary, and if you decide not to participate or to participate initially and later decline to continue, you may do so without penalty. There are no perceived risks believed to occur to you for participating, and there is no cost to you. If you need assistance with understanding these procedures, or clarity at any time during the data collection process, you may make these requests at any time at [REDACTED] or by cell at [REDACTED].

Consent:

I have read this form, and my questions have been answered. By signing below, I am providing my consent to participate. I realize that at any time that I wish not to participate, I can decline to continue to take part in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Email

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## APPENDIX C

### Interview Template

#### Demographic Information

Name:	Date:	Time:
Location:	Age:	Gender:
Graduating High School:	Current College and Year:	Race/Ethnicity:

#### Open-Ended Questioning

1. How has your day/semester been thus far?
2. What is your major, and why?
3. What do you plan to do after you graduate college?
4. In retrospect, how would you describe your graduation and college acceptance/attendance processes?
5. Provide a general description of the challenges you faced as you matriculated through school.
6. Describe the nature of the barriers which inhibited support from family, the school, and the community.
7. Describe the supports you received from your family with schoolwork or with the college acceptance process? What is your perception of these supports?
8. Describe the supports you received from your high school with added academic supports and with the college acceptance process? What is your perception of these supports?
9. Describe the supports you received from the community (agencies other than your college transition program) with schoolwork or with the college acceptance process? What is your perception of these supports?
10. What were some tools you used to aid in your learning?
11. Describe the educational backgrounds of your immediate family members.
12. As a college student, what do you believe your family, school, and community expect of you?
13. What were your perceptions of college before your involvement with your college transition program?
14. How did you become involved with your college transition program, and what is your current involvement with this program?
15. How was your journey different from your peers who were not students in your college transition program?
16. How has your college transition program helped you?
17. What aspects of your college transition program would you change?
18. Describe the most impactful supports you have received in the process of graduating and now attending college.
19. Describe the least impactful supports you have received in the process of graduating and now attending college.
20. In your opinion, what should be done to promote family, school, and community partnerships?
21. What have you needed more assistance with that you have not yet received?
22. What supports have you utilized through your current college?

23. Is there anything you would like to add to this discussion regarding the supports you received, assisting you with graduation, and applying for/attending college?

**APPENDIX D**  
**Focus Group**

1. What is your perception of your educational experience before entering college?
2. Describe your feelings when you decided to attend college.
3. What were your perceptions regarding how receptive your family members were to you attending college?
4. How do you feel about the guidance you received from school staff members, such as teachers, counselors, and administrators, regarding college attendance?
5. As a college student, how do you feel about the support you have received from college staff members?
6. How do you feel about the supports you have received from your college transition program, aiding you academically, emotionally, financially, and procedurally?
7. How do you feel your transition to college experience could be improved?
8. In what areas have you needed the most assistance as you have transitioned to college?
9. In what areas have you needed the most assistance since you have been attending college?
10. What insights do you have now that you wish you would have had before your college application process?

**APPENDIX E**  
**Qualitative Questionnaire**

1. Describe your community and the environment where you lived while growing up.
2. How would you describe your family's financial situation?
3. How do you feel now that you are in college?
4. As a college student, where do you feel the most supported and why?
5. Discuss your feelings during the application process.
6. Discuss your feelings as a new student attending your college/university.
7. What are your plans after you graduate?
8. How could your transition to college have been better?

**APPENDIX F**  
**Codes, Themes, and Sub-Themes**

<b>Family Supports</b>	<b>School Supports</b>	<b>Community Supports</b>
<b>Financial Support</b>	<b>Rigor</b>	<b>Programs and Organizations</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application Fees</li> </ul>	Academics	Church
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entrance Exam Fees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenging Curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purchase of Materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specialty Academic Centers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honor Courses</li> </ul>	
<b>Emotional Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remediation</li> </ul>	Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouragement</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Held Leadership Positions</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inspired to Apply</li> </ul>	Learner Evolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct Business</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counseling Solicited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Advocacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Security</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time Management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Style</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attending Events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study Skills</li> </ul>	Mentorship and Empowerment
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tutoring Support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentors</li> </ul>
<b>Role Models</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentees</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong Careers</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women's Empowerment</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• College Attendance</li> </ul>	Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance to Others</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bachelor's Degree</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pandemic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sororities</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advanced Degrees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health Challenges</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Same/Similar College</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional Challenges</li> </ul>	<b>Peers and Culture</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Situations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer Supports</li> </ul>
<b>Family Guidance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grief</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sports Teams</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application Help</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scholarship Assistance</li> </ul>	<b>Advising</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help With University</li> </ul>	Counselors and Advisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Socialization</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reminders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Un)Helpful</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instruction and Forewarning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transport</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dismissive/Caring</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance</li> </ul>	

	Teachers and Professors	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Essay Help</li></ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Study Tips</li></ul>	