

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY: EXPLORING AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE STUDENTS' FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES WITH COLLEGE ADJUSTMENT  
AND PERSISTENCE

by

Tiffany Nicole Baker

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 phenomenological study was to explore African American community college students' first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a two-year, predominantly White community college. Tinto's (1975) institutional departure theory which merges the constructs of social psychology and institutional climate was used in this study to analyze how social integration impacts African American community college student's first-year college adjustment experiences. Tinto's (1975) theory asserts that college students who experience an inadequate amount of social integration or view themselves as being of trivial value in the social and academic systems of a higher education institution, decrease in institutional commitment. This theoretical viewpoint demonstrates connections between high attrition rates and first-year college adjustment experiences of African American community college students. Due to the scarcity of qualitative literature that examines the interplay between social integration, persistence, and the first-year college adjustment experiences of African American community college students, a qualitative design was determined to be appropriate design for this study. Eleven participants from a large community college were involved in this study and were selected based on ethnicity, age, and academic year. Data was collected using individual interviews, a writing prompt, and a focus group. Data collected was analyzed using the memoing technique and clusters of meaning, and the data was organized and stored using the Microsoft Excel software. The findings of this study indicated that African American students' adjustment, motivation, and perseverance were impacted by first-year challenges with college transition and support, feeling a sense of belonging, and their institution's cultural environment.

*Keywords:* retention, college adjustment, African American, first year experiences, community colleges, social integration, student departure

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all who have been my encouragement and strength, and who have contributed to my success. First and foremost, to my Heavenly Father, my Creator, I dedicate this to You. For the many times that I have looked down and seen one set of footprints in the sand, knowing that You have carried me, I am so incredibly thankful for Your love and for bringing me this far. “In all thy ways, acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy path” Proverbs 3:6 (KJV). I will praise You forever.

To my amazing husband Ron, my love and best friend. Thank you for wiping the tears from my eyes whenever it got rough. Thank you for your sacrifice and for pushing me and always cheering and praying me through. I love you.

To my son Ryan, you are my inspiration. I thank God every day that He has chosen me to be your mother. You are my sunshine; your smile brings me so much joy! Always know that anything you put your heart and mind to do, with the grace of God, you can do it. I know this well because “For this child I have prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him” 1 Samuel 1:27 (KJV) Being your mother is my biggest accomplishment. I love you.

To my parents Pastor Elton Noel, Sr., and Gwendolyn Noel, who have instilled in me the importance of education, dedication, and hard work. Thank you for everything you sacrificed for your children. You are deeply loved and appreciated. To my younger brother David, thank you for being you, as I always say, you are one of my favorite human beings!

To the memory of my older brother Elton Jr. (Ejay), who always believed in my abilities to earn a doctorate. I dedicate this to you. I know you would be proud. I love and miss you.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

African American First-Year College Students (AAFYCS)

First-Year College Students (FYCS)

Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs)

Historically Black Community Colleges (HBCCs)

Institutional Departure (IDT)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Needs Support Teaching (NST)

Predominantly Black Community Colleges (PBCCs)

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)

Predominantly White Community Colleges (PWCCs)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

State Community College (SCC)

Students of Color (SOC)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to explore African American community college students' first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence. This chapter begins with the background of this study to include the historical, social, and theoretical contexts that will explain how the problem of college attrition of African American students during their first year has evolved. The background will assist in defining the issue of college attrition and the lack of research relating attrition of African American first-year college students' social integration and their college adjustment experiences during their first year at two-year community colleges. Following the description of the evolution of the problem will be the purpose statement. This opening chapter will also include the motivation that drives this study, expounding on the significance of the study, including the theoretical, empirical, and practical perspectives that will articulate the importance of this study. Lastly, this chapter will include the central research questions and sub-questions that this study will attempt to answer and definitions that are vital to understanding the contents of this study.

### **Background**

Public community colleges have historically been known to be diverse institutions, servicing approximately 9 million students across the United States (National Center of Education Statistics, 2021). Though first-year community college students have collectively contributed to low graduation rates, the African American first-year student population continues to lead in having the lowest persistence rates and highest dropout rates of all ethnic groups who attend community colleges (American Council of Education, 2019). The historical background of the problem of high attrition among African American first-year college students will be

addressed in this section. In addition, the social context of this section will discuss how college attrition of African American first-year college students has impacted society. Lastly, the theoretical context of this section will discuss what research has been conducted, exploring the phenomenon and how this research study will extend existing knowledge in this area.

### **Historical Context**

As the key performance indicator of institutional quality and effectiveness, the retention of students and academic outcomes such as high graduation rates are of major significance to colleges and universities (Tight, 2019). Student persistence as it relates to retention has long been recognized as a continuous challenge for postsecondary education institutions (Mertes & Hoover, 2014). Education scholars and researchers have conducted studies that have shown that four-year universities and two-year community colleges both see higher numbers in student attrition than student retention (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Williamson, 1988). However, two-year community colleges experience extremely higher withdrawal rates than four-year universities (Berger & Braxton, 1998). In addition to seeing higher student withdrawal rates, researchers have identified that the greatest portion of students leaving college are first-year college students (Bean, 1980; Braunstein & McGrath, 1997; Braxton, et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Surprisingly, despite the steady increase in student attrition rates, community college enrollment has substantially grown faster rates than universities (Drury, 2003; Ma & Baum, 2016). For many students, community college has become a legitimate option towards attaining postsecondary education and transferring into a four-year university as a junior to complete their bachelor's degree (Troester-Trate et al., 2019). Credit for the continuous growth in community college enrollment is partly due the open admissions policy many U.S. community colleges have which guarantees admission for all qualifying students (Best Colleges, 2021). Open admissions

policies remove the barrier of performance benchmarks such as standardized test (SAT or ACT) outside of basic admission requirements (Best College, 2021). Public two-year, community colleges are attractive for a variety of reasons as they are intended to be located closer to homes of students, cost effective, and provide remedial developmental courses and articulation programs that help springboard students to transferring into four-year universities (Hongwei, 2015; Ma & Baum, 2016). Therefore, community colleges are populated with a wide range of diverse students from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Community colleges are much more ethnically diverse despite many of them being predominantly White institutions. Predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are defined as colleges and universities where the majority of its students, faculty, staff, and leadership identify as White, Caucasian, or European (Baber, 2012). Predominantly White institutions, specifically, community colleges growth in diversity is not only in regard to racial and ethnic backgrounds of students but has also increased in regard to students of diverse socioeconomic statuses, educational backgrounds, and demographics (Ma & Baum, 2016; McClain & Perry, 2017). Between 1990 and 2000, enrollment of Students of Color (SOC) in higher education institutions significantly increased 11.5% and continues to increase (Bettendorf, 2008). African American students' enrollment numbers have tripled from 1976 to 2020 with enrollment rates of a 33% increase (Hanson, 2022). Community colleges have become the entryway into higher education for various underrepresented groups who have historically exhibited challenges in accessing postsecondary education (Humphries, 1995). However, despite this growth of enrollment among African American students, the number of African American students withdrawing from college are just as substantial as their enrollment rates (Grier-Reed et al., 2016; McClain & Perry, 2017).

Alarming high rates of attrition have long been an issue in the United States regarding African American collegians and the societal impact it provides (Clark & Crawford, 1992; Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Harper's (2012) study found that issues with retaining students are often associated with academic performance but asserts that institutional characteristics play a vital role in student retention. Therefore, the study of retention, persistence, and success of African American first-year college students continue to be an important topic studied by researchers in the higher education community (Bettendorf, 2008; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Clark, 1960; Seidman, 2005).

### **Social Context**

Community colleges are considered to be able to revitalize the national economy and to enhance social mobility (Abowitz, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). President Barak Obama announced in 2009, the American Graduation Initiative, investing billions of dollars into community colleges (Jaschik, 2009). Jenkins and Bailey (2009) explain that the aim of the initiative was to increase community college graduates by five million by the year 2020. The initiative required a stipulation, in that the increase of graduates would need to be 33% annually over the course of a ten-year period (Jenkins & Bailey, 2009). Earning a college degree today builds workforce skills, increases earning potential, and strengthens the national economy (Baum & Locke, 2004). Students who earn a degree from a community college generally make 20-30% more than students who only earn their high school diploma or GED (Pew Research Center, 2019). Research reported by entities such as the American Association of Community Colleges (2016) has shown that the average annual salary of an associate degree holder in 2016 was \$38,000 compared to high school only graduates who average at \$31,000. Workforce demand in the U.S. continues to grow, with 60% of employers requiring postsecondary degrees, certification, and training (Holland, 2015) and that percentage is growing (USA Facts, 2020).



Nationally, the retention rates of African American first-year college students are disproportionately lower than their White counterparts (Beasley & McClain, 2021; Hanson, 2022; McClain & Perry, 2017). Out of the general student population of community college students, only 34% earn a certificate or degree within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). This supports what researchers and statisticians have reported specifically about “underrepresented ethnic minority groups” having even lower degree completion rates in comparison to their White peers (Beasley & McClain, 2021; McClain & Perry, 2017). Consequently, African American community college student attrition impacts society by leaving a portion of the population underqualified and unable to contribute to the building of the national economy in the way that other ethnicities do (Harper, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2019). Due to many employers demanding some sort of postsecondary training (degrees, vocational, & technical certification), the impacts of African American community college students not completing their degrees only decreases the diversity in the U.S. workforce (Pew Research Center, 2019; USA Facts, 2020). Gaps in achievement among African American and Students of Color are due to the lack of access, socioeconomic status, college readiness, and systemic inequalities in education (Ulviye et al., 2019). However, Obama’s American Graduation Initiative and others like it seek to close the achievement gap by improving college readiness, postsecondary access, and assist in removing barriers and eliminating challenges that underrepresented student populations face concerning higher education (Holland, 2015; The White House, 2014). These initiatives also create a social and economic balance among Students of Color, namely, the African American population.

## **Theoretical Context**

While a variety of models on student retention have been developed, Tinto's (1975) institutional departure model, also known as interactionist model and student departure theory, has laid the groundwork for much of the scholarly research and literature on the topic (Mertes & Hoover, 2014). Tinto's (1975) model consists of two key constructs: social and academic integration (Tinto, 1975). Institutional departure theory asserts that newly enrolled college students who struggle to integrate into their institution socially and academically within their first year are less committed to the institution and are at higher risk of dropping out in contrast to those students who are (Tinto, 1975, 1993). The construct of social integration is defined as a student forming meaningful relationships and connections within an educational institution setting including with fellow peers, faculty, and staff (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Support of the institutional community becomes a vital contributor to the social rewards that stimulate social integration of first-year college students (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1975). In addition to the indicator, Tinto (1975) asserts that students also attribute these collective affiliations as cause for social commitment after they assess the value and benefits of attending and committing to an institution through to completion.

There is a combination of theories that support research on the experiences of first-year students and their adjustment and social integration into college further extending Tinto's (1975) theory. For example, Bean's (1980) student attrition model used the departure theory by adding in the exploration of variables such as university GPA, institutional satisfaction, and student engagement as factors for institutional departure. Astin (1999) developed the student involvement model building upon the social integration construct of Tinto's (1975) model. The student involvement model emphasizes that socially integrated students are more likely to persist

to completion if they are involved in a supportive community and are active within community (Astin, 1999). Tinto's (1975) institutional departure model is still being used to study retention today. For example, more current studies on college adjustment (van Rooij et al., 2017), student satisfaction (Culver & Bowman, 2020), engagement (Tight, 2019), sense of belonging (Means et al., 2017; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017) emotional and psychological impacts (Shcheglova et al., 2020) and motivation of ethnic minority students (Ulviye et al., 2018) use institutional departure to study student retention through those perspectives. In considering that these models were primarily used in retention research studying traditional students attending four-year universities (Burke, 2019), this research study will extend on the body of knowledge regarding the retention of African American first year college students through examination of their experiences with college adjustment and social integration at predominantly White, two-year, community colleges. Since a significant number of Students of Color enroll in two-year institutions with majority of them being African American and Hispanic students (Gipson et al., 2017; Hanson, 2022) and an equally significant percentage withdrawal before their second year (Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Hanson, 2022), this study through the theoretical lenses of Tinto's (1975) model will provide a unique perspective on African American college adjustment experiences during their first year of community college and how these experiences may play a role in their retainment.

### **Problem Statement**

Student attrition rates in higher education institutions continue to rise and have become a major concern among colleges and universities in the U.S. (Burke, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Tight, 2019). First-year college students are a huge population of students that contribute to the attrition rates found among postsecondary institutions (Hanson,

2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). In the United States, undergraduate students represent up to 40% of college dropouts with an estimated 73% of college dropouts leaving college within the first 12 months of enrolling nationwide (Hanson, 2022). The problem is that these high attrition rates are predominantly found among first-time, first-year college Students of Color (Chavous et al., 2018; Gipson et al., 2017) and African American students being 33.8% likely to dropout than the average student (Hanson, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Therefore, despite the increase of African American first-year college students enrolling in postsecondary institutions, this group consistently contribute to the high attrition of first-year, first-time college students across the country (Hanson, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Even with predominantly White institutions (PWIs) being successful in their efforts to diversify the student population, efforts to retain African American college students have not been successful (Beasley & McClain, 2021; McClain & Perry, 2017; Tight, 2019). Many explanations regarding the overrepresentation of African American first-year college students in high attrition rates have been addressed through assessing demographics, socioeconomic status, disparities in secondary school quality, funding, and readiness initiatives (Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Ulviye et al., 2018). However, there are gaps in the literature regarding how the social aspects of the first-year experiences of African American college students, their college adjustment, and social integration influence their persistence at predominantly White community colleges (PWCCs) (Hongwei, 2015; Gipson et al., 2017; Shcheglova et al., 2020).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore African American community college students' first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college (PWCC). At this stage in the research, predominantly White community colleges (PWCCs) are defined as two-year community colleges where the majority of its students, faculty, staff and leadership identify as White, Caucasian, or European (Baber, 2012). High attrition is often found among African American community college students attending PWCCs and primarily happens within the first year of enrollment (Gipson et al., 2017; Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Ulviye et al., 2018). Since this continues to be a significant problem in higher education, it is important to explore the first-year experiences of this group and their perceptions about factors that contribute to their dropout behaviors.

Institutional departure theory (Tinto, 1975) will be the theoretical framework that will guide this study as Tinto (1975) explains the processes of interaction and relationship between a student and their higher education institution that influence students' decisions to persist or depart (Tinto, 1975; 1993). Tinto (1975) asserts that newly matriculated college students who struggle to integrate into their institution socially and academically within their first year are at higher risk of dropping out than students who do. He further explains that deciding whether to stay or withdraw is impacted by students' first-year experiences with college adjustment, thus impeding their persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1993). This study seeks to understand through Tinto's (1975) model, how the first-year experiences with social integration of African American first-year college students, impacts their college adjustment and persistence at PWCCs. In understanding African American students' initial college adjustment experiences, leaders at

PWCCs will gain insight into the social and academic needs that can support them, such as various programs, initiatives, and institutional practices for Students of Color, specifically their African American students that will help propel them into student success beyond their first year (Rankin et al., 2018).

### **Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to explore African American community college students' first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college. Institutional departure behaviors found among African American college students primarily happen within the first year of enrollment (Grier et al., 2016; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Since this continues to be a significant problem in higher education, it is important to explore the first-year experiences of this group and their perceptions about factors that contribute to their dropout behaviors. In understanding their first-year college adjustment experiences, leaders at PWCCs will gain insight into the social and academic needs that can support them, such as various programs, initiatives, and institutional practices.

### **Theoretical Significance**

The complexity of student retention among first-year college students has been explored through various perspectives. Tinto's (1975) theory of institutional departure is a student retention model credited in shaping many studies on student retention. The institutional departure model (Tinto, 1975) consists of both social and academic integration constructs. These constructs posit that if students experience an inadequate amount of social interaction and academic achievement during their first year, the probability of withdrawal is extremely likely (Tinto, 1975, 1993). In using elements of social psychology and organizational psychology, Tinto

(1975) analyzes the social interactions, institutional environment, and adjustment with the origins of a first-year students dropout behavior. Tinto (1975) makes the connection by theorizing that colleges and universities are the societal systems in which the student seeks integration. This conceptualization then posits that if a student experiences an inadequate amount of interaction whether student-student or student-faculty interactions, for example, or view themselves as being of trivial value in the social system of the institution, the chances of them staying committed to the institution are slim to none (Tight, 2019).

Tinto's (1975) model emphasizes the causes of student attrition through the theoretical constructs of both social and academic integration. However, this study will extend further by highlighting the social construct of integration as it relates to adjustment of African American community college students during their first year. Recent studies conducted by McClain and Perry (2017), Chavous et al., (2018), and Ulviye et al., (2018), have revealed direct links to the high attrition rates of first-year college Students of Color, and their sense of belonging, inclusion, and social integration and adjustment to college. Participants in these studies have described their experiences in many college environments as leaving them to question their sense of social belonging and value as students (Chavous et al., 2018; McClain & Perry, 2017; Ulviye et al., 2018). Evidence of the critical role social integration (Tinto, 1975) and sense of belonging (Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017) play in the adjustment and persistence of students in higher education have been the foundation to studies of first year college students of diverse ethnic backgrounds (Chavous et al., 2018; Garcia-Ros et al., 2018; Museus et al., 2017). This demonstrates that successful social integration and adjustment to college significantly impacts African American students' attitudes about college (Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017), and their educational outcomes, such as motivation, efficacy, and persistence (Ulviye et al., 2018).

## **Empirical Significance**

The empirical significance point of view of this study is supported by current literature that confirms African American first-year college students' feelings about having a sense of belonging, connectedness, and value as attributes that they associate with a healthy, welcoming institutional environment (Lo, 2018; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Rankin et al., 2018; Ribera et al., 2017). Other studies such as McCall and Castles' (2020) study on student involvement, college community, and the first-year college experience of African Americans found that students who did not socially integrate through student involvement, or who felt the racial tensions within the college setting, did not feel motivated to persist at that institution. Additionally, Means and Pyne's (2017) study, participants reported that they were more likely to reach out for academic support at institutions that exhibited a supportive and welcoming learning environment. This includes support from faculty and campus support structures that gave them a sense of academic belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017; Roksa & Whitley, 2017). Considering that a large portion of the literature on student retention addresses challenges found among students attending four-year universities (Garcia-Ros et al., 2018; van Rooij et al., 2017), this study will further extend on to the existing body of knowledge on college adjustment by providing pivotal insight on experiences of African American first-year students who attend two-year, predominantly White community colleges.

## **Practical Significance**

The practical significance of this study will assist in bringing awareness and education to two-year, predominantly White community college leadership on how the development of programs that focus on and provide services that support Students of Color will help to increase retention rates among African American students. McCall and Castles (2020), emphasize this



need to provide insight on the importance of establishing support services and departments centered around diversity and inclusivity. Though these types of offices are becoming more prevalent on college campuses nationwide, programs and services within these departments are limited and services are offered to all ethnic groups thus, not fully focusing on the African American student population who are the most at risk for institutional departure (McCall & Castles, 2020). The lack of attention to the needs of African American students adds to their reserved feelings of being undervalued and underserved as a collective racial group (Caldwell, 2017).

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to explore African American community college students' first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college. The following questions provided structure and guidance to this research:

#### **Central Research Question**

How do African American students describe their first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college?

#### **Sub-Question One**

How do African American community college students describe their expectations and experiences with the transition, enrollment, and adjustment to college during their first year at a predominantly White community college?

#### **Sub-Question Two**

How do African American community college students describe their experiences with social integration during their first year at a predominantly White community college?

### Sub-Question Three

How do African American students describe the impacts of institutional culture and diversity on their college adjustment, integration, and persistence at a predominantly White community college?

#### Definitions

1. *Academic Self-Concept* - student's personal feelings, attitudes, and ideas about their intellectual or academic ability, specifically when compared to their peers (Cokley, 2000; Haktanir et al., 2020; Preckel et al., 2017)
2. *African American* – commonly interchangeable with the term “Black,” African Americans are descendants of African origin (Jones, 2006).
3. *Attrition* - the loss of student attendance at an institution due to withdrawal, and/or transferring out (Spady, 1970).
4. *College Adjustment* - the process of adjusting to a college institution one is attending, learning the character, culture, and behavioral norms of the institution, and internalizing the changes that may take place in a student's role, relationships, as well as the new academic and social demands. (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
5. *First-Year College Experience* - experiences that occur within the first two semesters of the first academic year (Garner, 2012).
6. *Institutional Climate* - attitudes, internal characteristics of a higher education institution that influence the perceptions and behaviors of the institution's members and is observed through perspectives of individuals of different racial or ethnic backgrounds (Campbell et al., 2019).

7. *Institutional Departure* - a student's choice to drop out of college, or a particular institution of higher education (Tinto, 1975).
8. *Persistence* – determination demonstrated by students to maintain enrollment at an institution of higher education to graduation (Hall, 2017).
9. *Predominantly White Community Colleges* – community colleges where the majority of its students, faculty, staff, and leadership identify as White, Caucasian, or European (Baber, 2012).
10. *Predominantly White Institutions* –colleges and universities where majority of its students, faculty, staff, and leadership identify as White, Caucasian, or European (Baber, 2012).
11. *Schemas* - "mental structures composed of networks of linked thoughts, feelings, and attitudes" (Brondolo et al., 2018, p. 222).
12. *Sense of Belonging* - personal involvement within a social system or among a social group where a person feels valued and is an integral part of the group or social system (Anant, 1967).
13. *Student Retention* - described as a student's status of enrollment at the same institution from academic year to academic year (Tinto, 1975, 1993).
14. *Social Integration* - social integration under the constructs of Tinto's (1975) institutional departure model, is when a student forms relationships and connections within an educational institution.
15. *Student Attrition* - the number or rate of students leaving a school or program with the intent not to complete or graduate at that institution (Otu & Mkhize, 2018)

16. *Students of Color* - any student who racial identifies as Black or African American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian or a combination of two or more of these racial groups (McClain & Perry, 2017).

### **Summary**

Through this phenomenological study, African American students' experience with college adjustment during their first year attending community college was explored through the historical, social, and theoretical contexts. The historical context discussed the origins of community college student retention research and how it's developed over time. The societal context provided insight into the effects of African American student attrition on society. The theoretical context discussed the theoretical underpinnings of retention research and how researchers and education scholars have extended Tinto's (1975) theory. The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to explore African American community college students' first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a two-year, predominantly White community college. Due to the problem of African American college students' disproportional representation of college attrition rate in the United States continuing to rise, the examination of the social experiences that influence dropout behaviors needs further investigation. African American students represent 12.5% of the nation's enrolled college student population (Hanson, 2022), yet 33.8% of them are dropping out and not retained (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). In understanding their experiences with social integration and college adjustment there may be opportunities to develop practical applications through service, initiatives, programs, and social integration strategies, which will bring institutions of higher learning one step closer to closing the attrition gap.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the problem of the high attrition rates among first-year, African American college students and the impact their social experiences at a two-year, predominantly White community college (PWCC) have on their adjustment to college and persistence. This literature review will explore the relevance of Institutional Departure Theory (IDT) with college adjustment by exploring African American college students' first-year experiences with social integration, self-efficacy, and persistence at a PWCC. This chapter will explore various related, current literature concerning this study. The first section will discuss the theory of institutional departure and its applicability to college adjustment and first-year experiences of African American students. Then a synthesis of the relevant literature concerning social and psychological factors that prompt departure behaviors of African American college students, such as sense of belonging, emotional well-being, and self-efficacy and motivation, will be discussed next. Lastly, the literature surrounding institutional characteristics such as campus climate, faculty interaction and representation, and institutional practices and intervention strategies that may foster social support in the transition, matriculation, and adjustment of African American first-year college students will be discussed. In the end, gaps in literature will be identified and provide validity for the current study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of institutional departure is the theory that has guided the framework of this study. The model of institutional departure presents constructs that are determined to forecast dropout behaviors in first-year college students, such as the failure to integrate academically, a lack of sense of belonging, unsuccessful social integration, and

challenges with adjustment to the new academic and social systems of higher education (Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Tinto, 1975). This theory's social, academic, and institutional constructs may provide a foundational conceptualization of dropout behaviors of African American first-year college students related to adjustment and persistence at two-year, predominantly White community colleges (PWCCs). This study demonstrates that African American students attending PWCCs benefit from institutional practices that bridge the social gaps that may hinder persistence and perseverance to completion. As a result, academic motivation and social integration increase.

The theory of institutional departure conceived by Tinto (1975, 1993) is a retention model that concentrates on student dropout behaviors and institutional characteristics. Three primary integration constructs within this theory's components include academic, social, and institutional integration and commitment (Tinto, 1975, 1993; van Rooij et al., 2017). Institutional departure theory is a theoretical framework that explains the processes of interaction and relationship between a student and their higher education institution that influence students' decisions to persist or depart (Tinto, 1975; 1993). Tinto (1975) asserts that newly matriculated college students who struggle to integrate into their institution socially and academically within their first year are at higher risk of dropping out than students who do. This hypothesis holds even more true for first-year college students who struggle to transition from secondary to postsecondary education and adjustment to higher education's rigorous and fast-paced social and academic environment (De Clercq et al., 2016; Goodlad et al., 2019; McGhie, 2017). According to Tinto (1975), first-year college students who successfully navigate and adapt to the new social environment of higher education are on the path to college success.

Upon enrollment, first-year students encounter two institutional systems (academic and social), with each system having both formal and informal interactions (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) argued that the departure of students within their first year derives from students' experiences within the academic and social systems of their college and the lack of significant social and academic integration into these higher education systems (Tinto, 1975). Institutional departure theory asserts an interplay between both academic and social systems. Students who succeed at integrating into both institutional systems are most likely to exhibit institutional commitment and persist to graduation (Tinto, 1993). School adjustment through the lenses of Tinto's (1975) model suggests that students' progress and achievement are at stake as they bring specific pre-existing attitudes and perceptions about college with them and their perceptions about their skills and abilities. Consequently, if first-year students fail to adjust, mental and psychological stressors such as anxiety, loneliness, and increased absenteeism could result in institutional departure (Rankin et al., 2018; Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) argues that deciding whether to stay or withdraw is impacted by students' first-year experiences with college adjustment, thus impeding their persistence.

***Academic Integration.*** Academic integration occurs when individuals become intellectually attached to the college through their academic grade performance and intellect (Tinto, 1975). Excellent grades and a high-grade point average (GPA) are regarded as the external motivational reward of integration into the academic system of an institution and are the variables that measure whether a student has successfully integrated into a college's academic system (Kuh, 2006; Romsa et al., 2017; Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1993) believed that institutional attributes construct the framework for academic integration and persistence when infused with a student's internal self-beliefs and self-efficacy. In addition to actual grade performance,

motivational factors have identified fundamental components of academic performance. These factors include academic self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and emotional awareness (Arguedas et al., 2016; van Rooij et al., 2018). Particularly, academic self-efficacy has proven to influence academic achievement significantly and is the progenitor of self-regulation in learning (Ayllon et al., 2019; Baier et al., 2016; Beasley & McClain, 2021; Jeffords et al., 2020).

***Social Integration & Institutional Attributes.*** Social integration occurs when a student cultivates meaningful social relationships and connections with individuals in the institution and engages in interactions that foster a sense of belonging and community (Tinto, 1975, 1993). As a result, socially integrated students are likely to demonstrate persistence now that they are involved in a community where they feel they belong, are accepted, supported, and encouraged to persist (Braxton, 2019; Cole et al., 2020). An example of social integration into a college or university social system, according to Tinto (1993), would include positive interactions and engagement with peer communities, faculty, and staff, and other institutional attributes that foster a welcoming campus environment and a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Tinto (1993) believed that faculty influence, classroom culture, and curriculum relevancy contribute to first-year college students' academic motivation, social integration, and overall adjustment to college. Student-faculty relationships and interactions with institutional staff can significantly impact a student's self-efficacy, academic motivation, and longevity in college (Ayllon et al., 2019; Naylor et al., 2017; O'Keefe, 2013; Rosma et al., 2017; Tinto, 1997). Opportunities to foster social engagement facilitated by an institution reduce student isolation (Bowman et al., 2019). These social engagement opportunities include extracurricular activities, clubs and organizations, peer groups, student support, and mentorship programs (Baier et al.,



2016). In addition, student interactions with faculty, administrators, and other personnel on campus strengthen students' commitment to persistence in the institution and adjustment to college (Tinto, 1975; Romsa et al., 2017). Tinto (1997) theorized that when students classify their relationship with faculty and academic support staff as significant, their sense of belonging increases, and academic performance strengthens. In contrast, when students see their relationship with faculty and academic support staff as insignificant, they tend to withdraw or isolate themselves and their academic motivation declines (Tinto, 1997). This relationship has shown to play a significant role in student learning and engagement as many first-year college students see faculty as role models and mentors throughout their learning experience and the bridge between themselves and the institution (Baier et al., 2016; Ribera et al., 2017; Rosma et al., 2017).

### **Origins of Institutional Departure Theory**

Tinto's (1975) institutional departure model was developed on the premise of Durkheim's (1961) theory of suicide by capturing the elements of social and educational psychology to analyze both the social interactions and the origins of an individual's dropout behaviors. In Durkheim's (1961) suicide theory, he posits that individuals who lack adequate integration into the framework of society pose a higher threat of committing suicide. Additionally, Durkheim's (1961) suicide theory explains that social integration possesses two essential characteristics; moral integration (value) and collective affiliation (common connection), which are a part of a social collectivity. Durkheim (1962) asserted further that when one or both two characteristics of societal integration go unmet, the likelihood of suicide within that society increases, and fatality is eminent. When applying Durkheim's (1961) theory to higher education, Tinto (1975, 1993) theorizes that colleges and universities are, in this instance, the social system or society in which

the student seeks a sense of belonging, acceptance, and community. Evidently, the social conditions that stimulate dropout behavior from the social system (colleges or universities) become equivalent to suicide in the broader society (Tinto, 1975). This conceptualization then suggests that if students experience an insufficient amount of social interaction and lack a sense of belonging, for example, viewing themselves as insignificant and of trivial value in the social system of the college, the chances of them staying committed to that institution will be threatened (Tinto, 1975).

### **Application of Tinto's Theory in Studies**

Through the theoretical lenses of Tinto's (1975) student retention model, other researchers and scholars have extended the theory further, adding multidimensional perspectives to higher education's student attrition issue. For example, Bean's (1980) student attrition model used the institutional departure theory by exploring variables such as university GPA, institutional satisfaction, and student engagement as factors that influence institutional departure. Astin (1999) developed the student involvement model building upon the social integration construct of Tinto's (1975) model. Astin's (1999) student involvement model emphasizes that socially integrated students are more likely to persist to completion if they are involved in a supportive peer community and are active within the community (peer groups, clubs, organizations, campus extracurricular activities, etc.). In more current studies, Tinto's (1975) theoretical framework continues to be foundational in student retention and is used widely across various disciplines with diverse perspectives. Most common areas in education, for example, are college adjustment (van Rooij et al., 2017), student satisfaction (Culver & Bowman, 2020), engagement (Parker et al., 2021; Ribera et al., 2018; Tight, 2019), sense of belonging (Brouwer et al., 2019; Cole et al., 2020; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Ribera et al., 2018) emotional

and psychological impacts (Bowman, 2010; Jeffords et al., 2020) and motivation of ethnic minority students (Hunter et al., 2019; Johnson, 2020; McClain & Perry, 2017; Ulviye et al., 2018). Tinto's model is still the most used model concerning student retention and continues to lay the groundwork for current and future studies.

### **Criticism of Institutional Departure Theory**

Despite the widespread Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory and its use as the theoretical framework for this study, Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory has some missed opportunities regarding its validity based on the type of institution and student population used to develop the initial framework. According to Braxton et al. (2004), Tinto's (1975, 1993) model did not consider student retention at commuter colleges (Braxton et al., 2004; Harper & Hurtado, 2007) but solely focused on longitudinal samples that consisted of religiously affiliated residential four-year universities (Baker et al., 2021). Additionally, the student sample consisted of full-time, first-year students and did not include the exploration of institutional departure of minority first-year college students (Braxton, 2004; Braxton et al., 2014; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). However, Tinto's critics have agreed that social integration was significantly linked to positive first-year experiences and influenced subsequent commitment to the institution, predicting student persistence (Baker et al., 2021; Braxton, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019). According to Tinto (1975), social integration symbolizes students' perception of their level of social affiliation with their peers and others on campus, as well as the congruence level regarding the attitudes, beliefs, culture, and social values of the institution (Baker et al., 2021; Braxton et al., 2014). Despite these valid perspectives of critics on Tinto's (1975) retention theory and their claim that the design only explained retention outcomes of four-year institutions, the significant correlation between social integration, institutional commitment, and first-year experiences found time and

again throughout research studies is the rationale for the use of institutional departure theory as the theoretical framework for this study.

### **Institutional Departure Theory in this Study**

In considering that Tinto's model was primarily used in retention research studying traditional students attending four-year universities (Braxton et al., 2004; Harper & Hurtado, 2007), this research study will extend on the body of knowledge regarding college adjustment experiences of African American students and the impact those first-year experiences have on their persistence at a two-year, predominantly White community college. Since a significant number of African Americans enroll in community colleges (Braxton et al., 2014; Chavous et al., 2017; Gipson et al., 2017; Hanson, 2022) and an equally substantial percentage withdraw before their second year (Grier-Reed et al., 2016; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). This study through the theoretical lenses of Tinto's (1975) model will provide a unique perspective on African American students' college adjustment experiences during their first year and how these experiences or lack thereof, may play a role in their high attrition rates.

Additionally, this theoretical framework will focus specifically on the social integration and institutional constructs of institutional departure theory which aims to understand the social experiences of African American first-year college students attending a PWCC. The relevancy between demonstrated dropout behaviors (gradual reduction in interest, absenteeism, withdrawal) and experiences with socially integrating may provide insight into the psychosocial side of dropout behaviors demonstrated by African American students (Jeffords et al., 2020; Pennington et al., 2016; Rankin et al., 2018). Additionally, this research could show connections between the challenges with social integration of African American first-year college students

and their first-year experiences attending PWIs, namely, two-year community colleges (Baber, 2018; Beasley & McClain, 2021; Gipson et al., 2017; Karkouti, 2016; McClain & Perry, 2017).

### **Related Literature**

Student attrition rates in higher education institutions continue to rise and have become a significant concern among colleges and universities in the United States (Bean, 1980; Burke, 2019; Tight, 2019). Amongst various social and racial-ethnic groups, these rates vary. First-time, first-year college students make up a significant percentage of the student population that contribute to the attrition rates of postsecondary institutions (Hanson, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Though Students of Color who identify as Native American have been reported to have the highest dropout rates of all ethnicities represented at 45.1%, they make up only 0.64% of the national college student population (Hanson, 2022). However, Students of Color who identify as Black or African American have shown to make up 33.8% of dropout rates found amongst first-year college students (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019) and make up 12.5% of the national college student population (Hanson, 2022). Explanations for the overrepresentation of African American college student attrition and gaps in achievement are numerous and differ across spectrums to include demographics, socioeconomic status, disparities in secondary school quality and funding, inadequate resources, and much more (Chavous et al., 2017; Grier-Reed et al., 2016). However, the discussion regarding the social adjustment of African American attending PWIs and the literature around attrition and dropout behaviors demonstrated among African American first-year college students has become a topic of equal importance and relevance (Chavous et al., 2017; Grier-Reed et al., 2016; McCall & Castles, 2020; McClain & Perry, 2017; Museus et al., 2018). By looking at related literature on college adjustment and student attrition among African

American collegians, the literature may demonstrate areas that overlap, showing connection and a common phenomenon amongst African American students and the high attrition rates that frequently occur at PWIs across the country.

### **Attrition Rates in Higher Education**

Student attrition is one of the most discussed and most critical problems that institutions of higher learning have been facing for decades (Braxton & Francis, 2017; Burke, 2019; Tight, 2019). In the United States, undergraduate students represent up to 40% of college dropouts (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019) with an estimated 73% of college dropouts leaving college within the first 12 months of enrolling nationwide (Hanson, 2022). The American College Testing Program (2016) reported that two-year community college students accounted for 56.4% of students who dropped and 43.6% did not return to the college they initially enrolled in (Braxton & Francis, 2017). When considering why students are not being retained, higher education institutions have been paying closer attention to the social and academic institutional environments that are the foundation of the student experience (Burke, 2019; Garcia-Ros et al., 2018; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017). Student attrition is defined as the continued withdrawal of students within their first to the second year of enrollment who withdraw before degree attainment (Bean 1980; Burke, 2019; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). In the United States, the success of colleges and universities are determined by their ability to successfully retain and graduate students (Tight, 2019). For decades, this critical dilemma has drawn pioneers in student retention research and literature such as Tinto's (1975, 1993) institutional departure model, Astin's (1999) student involvement model, and Bean's (1980) student attrition model, to continue to investigate and make significant contributions to the field in efforts to understand the phenomena behind dropout behaviors and

the predictors that mitigate the student's decision to withdraw (Burke, 2019; Krsmanovic et al., 2020; Tight, 2019).

*Attrition of First-Year College Students.* The first year in postsecondary education is one of the most significant and crucial periods of a novice college student's educational career (Naylor et al., 2017). This challenging transitional stage from high school to college (Parker et al., 2021) reflects the high attrition rates found amongst first-year students of all ethnic backgrounds within the traditional-age (18 to 21 years old) who are experiencing the transition into adulthood (Arnett, 2016; Bowman et al., 2019; De Clercq et al., 2017; Maymon et al., 2019). The difficulty of academic and social integration into postsecondary education has shown to have unfavorable implications with student persistence, retention, and personal well-being (Bowman, 2010; Cole et al., 2020; Maymon et al., 2019; Rankin et al., 2018; Strayhorn et al., 2015). In the United States, over half of undergraduate college students drop out prior to completing their degrees (Hanson, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). First-year college students make up a significant percentage of the 40% of undergraduates reported to drop out (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019), with 73% of them dropping within the first 12 months of enrollment (Hanson, 2022).

Researchers have examined multiple approaches and strategies around student attrition, especially among first-year college students (Culver & Bowman, 2020; Burke, 2019; Garcia-Ros et al., 2018; Roska et al., 2017). The results of recent research have emphasized the importance of student behavior regarding college adjustment, persistence, and overall academic success (Baier et al., 2016; Krsmanovic, et al., 2020). Due to the complexities of understanding student persistence, researchers (Browning et al., 2018; Cole et al., 2020; Goodlad et al., 2019; Johnson, 2020) have considered the social and psychological components that influence student dropout

behaviors. It has been emphasized that the social-cognitive influences of student persistence include students' social/physical environment (Browning et al., 2018; Museus et al., 2017; Secore, 2018), behavioral (Krsmanovic, et al., 2020), and personal attributes (Baier et al., 2016). In most recent studies, researchers have found that first-year college students attribute feelings of belonging and community as influential social factors in their decision to remain in college (Brouwer et al., 2019; Cole et al., 2020; Museus et al., 2017; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Ribera et al., 2017), more so than noncognitive factors such as unpreparedness, lack of motivation, financial difficulties, or cognitive-developmental factors (Means & Pyne, 2017; Maymon et al., 2019). The sense of community and social support provides first-year students with a sense of belonging and direction as they strive to navigate their new social and academic environment (Goodlad et al., 2019). Students entering their first semester, Bowman et al. (2019) assert, are confronted with feelings of alienation, loneliness, overwhelming feelings of uncertainty, and other social-emotional challenges as they enter an unfamiliar environment. Moreover, several researchers have confirmed that social barriers and challenges with connectedness, belonging, personal independence, and navigating the unfamiliar of higher education are what first-year college students attribute to their persistence (Cole et al., 2020; Goodlad et al., 2019; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Ribera et al., 2017). These research studies' findings encompass the validity in Tinto's (1975) assertion that socially integrated students value connectivity and belonging to a community that primarily develops during their first year.

***Attrition of African American First-Year College Students.*** High attrition and low completion rates continue to plague colleges and universities across the country (Braxton & Francis, 2017), and Students of Color continue to lead in the trend over their White peers



(Museus et al., 2019). African American students' enrollment numbers have tripled from 1976 to 2020 with enrollment rates of a 33% increase and currently represent 12.5% of the college student population (Hanson, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). However, researchers have identified that withdrawal rates of this group are just as high as their enrollment (Chavous et al., 2018; Gipson et al., 2017) with being 33.8% more likely to dropout than the average student (Hanson, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Statistics, 2019). The American Association of Community Colleges (2016) reported that in 2011, 14.5% of community college students, nationwide, identified as African American which is approximately 1.17 million individuals. Six years later, the number of African American community college students decreased to 12.7% which equates to a loss of 890,000 African American community college students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). Therefore, despite the increase of African American first-year college students enrolling in postsecondary institutions, this group consistently contribute to the high attrition of first-year college and university students collectively across the country (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016; Hanson, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019).

More recognized contributing factors of dropout behaviors among African American first-year college students include noncognitive factors such as demographics, socioeconomic status, disparities in secondary school quality, funding, and pre-college readiness initiatives (Chavous et al., 2017; Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2019; Ulviye et al., 2018). However, despite the relevancy of these factors, the research literature on the connection between the psychosocial aspects of their first-year experiences, college adjustment and institutional departure from PWIs are scarce. Fortunately, there is an increase in African

American students sharing their lived experiences with social integration and adjustment to college at PWIs and how those experiences impact their persistence (Gipson et al., 2017; Goodlad et al., 2019; Museus et al., 2017).

### **Matriculation into Predominantly White Community Colleges (PWCCs)**

More students have had access to higher education than ever before. The influx of enrollment at community colleges across America substantially increased in 2010 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016; National Education Statistics, 2021). Community colleges serve approximately 9 million students across the U. S. (National Education Statistics, 2021). The overall mission of two-year community colleges is to provide opportunity and accessibility to individuals who desire to pursue higher education (Ma & Baum, 2016; Troester-Trate et al., 2019). Becoming much more diverse now than traditional four-year universities, community colleges' student population consists of students from various socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, demographics, and ethnically diverse student bodies (Ma & Baum, 2016; McClain & Perry, 2017). For historically underrepresented and at-risk students, community colleges have become the most feasible and cost-effective way to earn a higher education (Kolbe & Baker, 2018). This is particularly evident for Students of Color, Students with Disabilities, first-generation college students, and low-income students (Parnes et al., 2020).

*African Americans Choosing PWCCs.* African American and Hispanic students matriculate into community colleges in higher proportions (Hanson, 2022; Moss & Slate, 2019) and choosing to enroll in two-year, PWCCs over four-year universities (Parnes et al., 2020). According to Zalaznick (2022), the United States has a total of 12 historically Black community colleges (HBCCs), and 49 predominantly Black community colleges (PBCCs). The U.S. Department of Education (2017) reported the total amount of community colleges in the country

are approximately 1,462 nationwide to include public and private institutions as well as HBCCs and PBCCs. With African Americans and Hispanic students choosing two-year institutions more, these numbers indicate that for many Students of Color, there is limited opportunity to enroll in a HBCCs or PBCCs and that community colleges that are predominantly White are more accessible to them. For most students, Secore (2018) asserts that college choice derives from a combination of first-year student's sociological, psychological, and economic circumstances which significantly influence the choice of institution. For African American community college prospects, an institution's size, proximity and amount of locations, tuition cost, and open accessibility to potentially attend a four-year university are factors that influence their choice to attend PWCCs (Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2019; Ulviye et al., 2018). For example, African American students are more likely to register as part-time students due to family responsibilities such as working to financially provide for their families, obstacles with tuition financing, and academic challenges (Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2019; Ulviye et al., 2018) indicating the convenience of attending colleges that are close in vicinity of their neighborhoods. With the limited amount of community colleges that are predominantly and/or historically Black, Students of Color are more likely to have access to and matriculate into one of the 1,401 PWCCs.

*Accessibility to Four-Year Universities.* As beforementioned, community colleges throughout the country have become the entryway into four-year universities for historically underrepresented groups who have had challenges accessing postsecondary education (Ma & Baum, 2016; Troester-Trate et al., 2019). The growth in matriculation into public community colleges has been mostly attributed to direct access into higher education through open admissions policies (Best Colleges, 2021; Grubbs, 2020; Troester-Trate et al., 2019). These

policies have removed admission barriers (standardized tests such as SAT or ACT) and other performance benchmarks that four-year public and private universities employ, guaranteeing admission to individuals with basic education requirements. Community colleges provide remedial developmental courses and articulation programs that help underprepared students springboard into transferring into four-year universities after acquiring an associate in arts degree (Ma & Baum, 2016; Troester-Trate et al., 2019). Fortunately, due to the implementation of these policies, community colleges have become a viable, attractive way of pursuing higher education for Students of Color and other marginalized students as well as nontraditional degrees and certification seekers (Ma & Baum, 2016; Troester-Trate et al., 2019).

### **First-Year Social Experiences Impacting College Adjustment**

College adjustment is a critical aspect of the first-year experience of first-time college students (Bowman et al., 2019; Haktanir et al., 2021; Lee & Ahn, 2020). College adjustment refers to students' ability to successfully manage the academic demands (rigorous course workload, grades, and schedule), institutional expectations, and the social environment of higher education (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Haktanir et al., 2021). Part of first year adjustment consists of students' management of their emotional and psychological well-being (Bowman, 2010; Bowman et al., 2019) and integration into their institution's academic and social systems (Haktanir et al., 2021). Unlike college transition, which focuses primarily on first-year students' ability to manage the process of matriculation (applying, registering, financing, appropriate academic pathway alignment) which generally takes place prior to the start of the first semester (Baber, 2018; De Clercq et al., 2017), college adjustment is centered around students' experiences with balancing, integrating and adapting to a new social system during their freshman year (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Bowman et al., 2019). During the first semester of college,

students experience high stress as they seek stability in juggling school, personal commitments, new interpersonal relationships, and time management (Bowman et al., 2019). It is evident that first-year students will encounter positive and negative social experiences that will affect their sense of belonging and membership in their new community (Bowman et al., 2019).

*College Adjustment at PWCCs.* Though these challenges with adjusting to college during the first year occur among students from all diverse ethnic backgrounds (Bowman et al., 2019), for African American students the level of stress, anxiety, and overall well-being at PWCCs often determines their social and academic integration and institutional commitment (Baber, 2018; Beasley & McClain, 2021; Gipson et al., 2017; Karkouti, 2016; McClain & Perry, 2017). Well-being for Students of Color consist of the emotional and psychological challenges they face (overwhelming feelings of isolation, separation, anxiety) that evidently impact their adjustment experiences during their first initial interaction with their institution (Bowman et al., 2019; Jeffords et al., 2020; Rankin et al., 2018). McDougal et al. (2018) asserts that African American first-year college students who attend PWIs to include community colleges have described their social experiences with adjusting to college life and to a new cultural environment as significantly more challenging than they expected. Griffith et al. (2019) along with many other scholars (Kartouti, 2016; McClain & Perry, 2017; Means & Pyne, 2017) have described the experiences of racial minority groups who attend PWIs as an environment where they questioned their social belongingness and their value as students. First-year college students bring certain expectations of being a part of a new social community, making new friends, and forming new supportive relationships (Grier-Reed et al., 2016; McCall & Castles, 2020). Acceptance of peers and belonging to a social community enhances the first-year college adjustment experiences and positively impacts students' self-confidence, academic self-concept, and persistence (Patterson

Silver Wolf et al., 2017). For African Americans and other Students of Color who attend both two-year PWCCs and four-year PWIs, many have shared their experiences of predominantly White campus' climates as unwelcoming, isolating, and culturally insensitive (Fjeldal, 2018; Griffith et al., 2019; Karkouti, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018). Internalization of these feelings can make it challenging, mentally exhausting, and strenuous to integrate into PWCCs socially and academically (Campbell et al., 2019; Johnson, 2020).

***Social Integration at PWCCs.*** The construct of social integration is defined as a student forming meaningful relationships and connections within an educational institution setting including with fellow peers, faculty, and staff (Tinto, 1975, 1993). African American first-year college students' successful social integration and college adjustment significantly impact their educational outcomes, including academic motivation, performance, and persistence (Beasley & McClain, 2020; Cabrera et al., 2017). These experiences either enhance their academic self-concept and efficacy or hinder their overall success (Beasley & McClain, 2020; Karkouti, 2016). With African American and Hispanic students' enrollment increasing at community colleges (Hanson, 2022), especially PWCCs, it is essential that these institutions demonstrate inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and equality for all students which increases the opportunity for social integration of Students of Color (Museus et al., 2018). It is apparent through literature that the same barriers and challenges that the typical first-year college student attributes to success in college such as connectedness, belonging, institutional support, academic workload, and overcoming challenges (Berwise & Mena, 2020; Oliver et al., 2017) are the same for students of marginalized groups (Cole et al., 2020). However, the difference is that African American college students have the additional psychosocial challenges of overcoming stereotypes, stigmas, and other discriminatory attitudes displayed towards themselves and their ethnic group

(Campbell et al., 2019; Karkouti, 2016; Oliver et al., 2017). Students of Color attending PWIs are confronted with difficulties that limit their first-year transition and adjustment progress (Karkouti, 2016). McCall and Castles' (2020) study on student involvement, college community, and the first-year college experience of African Americans at PWIs, found that students who did not socially integrate due to racial tensions within the college setting, did not feel motivated to persist at that institution. The stereotypical perceptions infused in the racial climate of a higher education institution counteracts successful social integration (Museus et al., 2017, 2018). Instead of a sense of belonging and acceptance, Thelamour et al., (2019) asserts African American students encounter psychological feelings of social alienation and disconnectedness from their institution and sometimes their White peers and faculty. These experiences and perceptions can be linked to Tinto's (1975) institutional departure theory that asserts the importance of social integration of first-year students.

### **Psychosocial Impacts on African American First-Year College Adjustment**

In addition to the challenges with social integration and connectivity that occur among first-year college students of all racial backgrounds, researchers have acknowledged that African American first-year students are faced with psychological (attitudes, self-beliefs, identity) and social (culture, acceptance, community) challenges that are deeply rooted in pre-college experiences with racially related nuances, stereotypes, and microaggression towards their ethnic group's social and intellectual competence (Bowman et al., 2019; Chavous et al., 2018; Johnson, 2020; Oliver et al., 2017; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Johnson (2020) exclaims that African Americans undergo interpersonal interactions to discrimination within institutional settings (education, employment, housing, health care) to cultural contexts (the ubiquitous acceptance of negative stereotypes). These psychosocial challenges may affect how they perceive and interact

with their college environment. (Bowman et al., 2019; Chapman-Hillard & Beasley, 2018).

Overcoming these psychosocial challenges are integral to the persistence and retention of the African American student population (Jeffords et al., 2020; Museus et al., 2018) especially those who attend PWCCs. For example, Secore (2018) mention that African American students' positive perception of their campus culture (welcoming, supportive, understanding) significantly impacted their attempt to socially integrate. Additionally, Museus et al. (2018) found that culturally engaging educational environments were a significant social variable in their study on the sense of belonging and retention for African American and other Students of Color.

Culturally sensitive and engaging environments are valuable to Students of Color who frequently enroll into PWIs in higher numbers (Beasley & McClain, 2021; Snyder et al., 2019). Most of the college and universities in America are historically and predominantly White and more accessible, therefore, African Americans and other Students of Color are choosing to attend them more frequently (Parnes et al., 2020; Snyder et al., 2019).

***Negative Stigmas and Microaggression.*** African Americans have had to overcome many adversities before the opportunity of higher education became possible. African Americans experience various forms of racism and discrimination, from interpersonal interactions to discrimination within institutional settings (education, employment, housing, health care) to cultural contexts (the ubiquitous acceptance of negative stereotypes) (Johnson, 2020). After the Civil War, African Americans were still given inferior second-class education all the way into the 20th century and were not afforded universal schooling in the South until 1968 (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the psychological by-product of systemic racism has profoundly impacted the quality of college experiences of African Americans students, including academic progression and achievement (Johnson, 2020). Extensive research discusses the effects of



systemic racism, discrimination, and stereotyping and the deeply rooted consequences placed on the African American community, to include trauma, stress, fear, anger, anxiety, depression, and mental and emotional exhaustion (Brondolo et al., 2018; Johnson, 2020). Brondolo et al. (2018) emphasized that the stress induced by racial discrimination on all levels impedes the schemas and cognitive processes of those of the stigmatized racial group. Brondolo et al. (2018) define schemas as "mental structures composed of networks of linked thoughts, feelings, and attitudes" (p. 222). These schemas are vital components to stereotype threat (Brondolo et al., 2018; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Moreover, in a more recent study Beasley and McClain (2021) emphasized that the implications of these negative psychosocial experiences impede on African American students' academic self-concept, motivation, performance, adjustment, and persistence at PWIs. The result found among African Americans is the elevated awareness of racism, internalized shame, low self-esteem (Johnson, 2020), low self-efficacy and low academic morale (Beasley & McClain, 2021). Additionally, these psychological challenges also impede on African American students socially, cultivating a sense of social isolation, disconnectedness, lack of sense of belonging and the supportive community they seek (Bowman et al., 2019; Chavous et al., 2018; Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Jeffords et al., 2020; Johnson, 2020; McDougal et al., 2018). These feelings reduce feelings of comfort and amplify the sense of caution and mistrust making it difficult to integrate and persist (Campbell et al., 2019). Although the student body of American higher education institutions today are a reflection of the multiracial nation of America, researchers have highlighted how racial stratification has produced an educational system of inequality, teacher bias, and negative stereotyping about the intellectual abilities of African Americans college students (Beasley & McClain, 2021; Chavous et al., 2018; Johnson, 2020; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Whaley, 2020) and social and psychological implications that continue

to affect their persistence and retention (Beasley & McClain, 2021; McCall & Castles, 2020; Whaley, 2020)

***Stereotype Threat.*** Beasley and McClain (2021) focused their research on the psychological (academic self-concept, engagement, and achievement), the social (perceptions of others), and the cultural (racial identification and cognizance of campus climate) effects on African American college students and found a correlation between stereotype threat and poor academic performance. In analyzing both the social-psychological factors (social integration, belonging, self-efficacy) and the cognitive factors (academic integration and performance), the conceptualization of how these influences affect African American first-year college students' persistence is brought to surface. Stereotype threat is understood to be a situational threat that derives from negative stereotypes about one's ethnic or social group that hinder individual(s) of that group from intellectual performance in fear of confirming or self-fulfilling the negative stereotypes (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Whaley, 2020). As a social-psychological phenomenon, stereotype threat is often associated with ethnically stigmatized and marginalized groups (Craemer & Orey, 2017). Steele and Aronson (1995) suggest that stereotype threat can be experienced by any individual whose group is stereotyped based on pre-assumption and judgments. Stereotypes can affect social groups such as persons with disabilities, religious groups, ethnic groups, the military personnel, etc., as well as personal characteristics such as age and gender (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele et al., 2002). Stereotype threat is a term that emerged after research on how individuals of disparaged minority groups are likely to underperform academically due to the unconscious fear of succumbing to negative stereotypes of their group regarding their intellectual abilities (Steele & Aronson, 1995). When the fear of becoming a stereotype is substantial enough, Steele & Aronson (1995) assert that these students

are affected by the negative assumptions made about their social and ethnic groups (Craemer & Orey, 2017).

***Academic Self-Concept.*** Academic self-concept is a psychological factor commonly associated with self-perception, student motivation, persistence, and linked to student retention (Haktanir et al., 2020). It is broadly defined as a student's personal feelings, attitudes, and ideas about their intellectual or academic ability, specifically when compared to their peers (Cokley, 2000; Haktanir et al., 2020; Preckel et al., 2017). Unlike stereotype threat which bares more of the stereotypical labels placed on a social or ethnic group by society itself (Steele & Aronson, 1995), academic self-concept refers to a student's direct perception of themselves through the lenses of certain academic or intellectual standards (Cokley, 2000; Haktanir et al., 2020). In examining the academic self-concept and achievement of African American first-year college students through their experiences at PWIs, Beasley and McClain (2021) found that the perception of negative stigmas embedded in the institutional climate can activate the threat and, in turn, compromise African American collegian's academic performance and achievement. Ulviye et al. (2018) emphasize this same concept confirming college students of racially stigmatized groups who have a heightened awareness of the racial stigmas that are associated with their group have demonstrated a decline in academic motivation and persistence despite being academically prepared.

***Sense of Belonging and Well-Being.*** Researchers have asserted that throughout their adjustment to college, first-year students struggle with overwhelming feelings of isolation, separation, anxiety, and can socially and academically withdraw from the experience of college, leading to institutional departure (Bowman et al., 2019; Jeffords et al., 2020; Rankin et al., 2018). These types of feelings and emotions Rankin et al. (2018) asserts, can cause students to

demonstrate pre-dropout behaviors such as gradual reduction in interest, absenteeism, and withdrawal from classes. Rankin et al. (2018) continues to assert that these psychosocial effects are due to the lack of student involvement (Astin, 1999; McCall & Castles, 2020) and social integration (Beasley & McClain, 2021; Tinto, 1975; van Rooij et al., 2018). First-year college students are challenged with emotional well-being which generally declines during the first year (Bowman et al., 2019). Students entering their second year have demonstrated challenges with balance and institutional support (Gooldlad et al., 2019; Lee & Ahn, 2020; Shcheglova et al., 2020). Support from their institutional community becomes a vital contributor to the social validation that stimulates social integration in students (Means & Pyne, 2017). For first-year college Students of Color, a sense of belonging is pivotal to their adjustment and social integration into PWCCs and determines whether they feel included and a part of that social community (Means & Pyne, 2017; Museus et al., 2017).

***Self-Efficacy and Motivation.*** Studies show that academically motivated students have high self-efficacy (Ayllon et al., 2019; Baier et al., 2016; Bandura, 1993; Beasley & McClain, 2021; Jeffords et al., 2020). According to Bandura (1993), student motivation to learn can be correlated with a student's academic self-concept or self-efficacy. When emphasizing the outcomes of self-efficacious students, Bandura (1993) posits that the role of self-efficacy has positive impacts on the individual's effort to invest in specific learning activities, and demonstrating perseverance when confronted with obstacles, challenges, and disappointments. However, research has shown how dangerous stereotype threat is to the self-efficacy, esteem, and academic performance of African American first-year college students (Chavous et al., 2018; Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Jeffords et al., 2020; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele et al., 2002; Ulviye et al., 2018). In a more recent study, Ulviye et al. (2018) found that the fear of negative public

regard puts the students at risk of underperforming because of undue stress and pressure and that these emotional obstacles contribute to the academic achievement and self-efficacy of ethnic minority students. Ulviye et al. (2018) also emphasize how stereotype threat can inhibit these factors affecting an individual's intrinsic motivation and persistence by decreasing essential feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

### **Institutional Characteristics**

As emphasized in Tinto's (1993) study, through their policies, practices, and environment, higher education institutions play an integral role in persistence and retention of first-year college students. More students have access to higher education through matriculation into community colleges (impacted by open enrollment policies), and community colleges serve approximately 9 million students across the U. S. (National Education Statistics, 2021). When it comes to community colleges, the student population is increasingly becoming more diverse, with Students of Color and other marginalized groups representing 50% of enrolled students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016; Beasley & McClain, 2021; Snyder et al., 2019). However, regardless of efforts previously implemented in retaining African American students, institutional policies and practices have been counterproductive in retaining the African American population (Ribera et al., 2017). Research shows, despite the growth in African American students (Snyder et al., 2019) and other underrepresented groups enrolling at two-year public community colleges, a significant number of students are not achieving success and withdrawing at alarming rates (National Education Statistics, 2021). African American community college students lead in high attrition among the student population with the lowest persistence rates of 55.3% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019) and are the most likely to withdraw within their first year (Hanson, 2022; Beasley & McClain, 2021;

Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2016; Snyder et al., 2019), and those numbers continue to rise. In efforts to understand this phenomenon, it is important to explore the initial first-year experiences of African American students attending PWCCs and the impacts institutional characteristics have on their social integration and adjustment to college.

***Campus Environment.*** Previous studies have demonstrated that first-year college students who view their institution in a positive light, successfully adjust to college and positively associate those experiences with their intent to persist through to degree completion (Bowman et al., 2019; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017). By attaching institutional climate to those experiences, African American first-year college students are likely to develop certain perceptions about their institution, and their own sense of value and belonging which has shown to impact college adjustment and social integration (Beasley & McClain, 2021; Secore, 2018). Unlike the term campus environment which is more about physical campus surroundings (e.g., campus appearance), or as Secore (2018) describes "the connection between one's literal surroundings and one's interactions with it" (p.19), institutional climate consists of a combination of the attitudes and internal characteristics of a postsecondary institution that influence the perceptions and behaviors of the institution's members (Campbell et al., 2019). Secore (2018) explains that members of the campus environment or institution include faculty, staff, administration, and the students themselves. The campus environment is the dimension of which interactions that students encounter take place (Secore, 2018), but the campus climate influences their beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes (Campbell et al., 2019). The questions posed to education practitioners and administrators have focused on cultivating campus environments and institutional climate that foster student persistence and are student-centered (Brouwer et al., 2019). Though institutions cannot control pre-college experiences both academically and socially

that students' experience before stepping foot onto their campuses, they do have the responsibility, resources, and ability to provide campus environments and institutional climates that foster students' sense of belonging, acceptance, and support regardless of their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or physical/learning disability (Chavous et al., 2017; Fleming et al., 2017; Grier-Reed et al., 2016).

***Institutional Climate.*** Campbell et al. (2019) posit that institutional climate is examined through perspectives of individuals of different racial or ethnic backgrounds as well as marginalized groups. As the minority on PWCC campuses, African American students value institutional climate as it plays a pivotal role in their decision-making process (Secore, 2019). The decision to stay or withdraw for African American students is often influenced by their perceptions about institutional climate, campus environment, and cultural sensitivity (Campbell et al., 2019; Secore, 2018; Uvlyie et al., 2018). With studies confirming that African American first-year students are more likely to choose to attend PWCCs (Moss & Slate, 2019; Parnes et al., 2020), educational leaders of these PWCCs must bend their ears and hear the voices of their most vulnerable demographic regarding the institutional climate and environmental challenges African American students face on their campuses, the experiences and challenges that affect both their matriculation and retention. Recent studies (Beasley & McClain, 2021; Griffith et al., 2019; Leath & Chavous, 2018; Lewis et al., 2019), continue to confirm the actuality of negative experiences of African American students and the detriment these experiences during their first year have on their adjustment, sense of belonging, persistence, and retention. Additionally, African American students have expressed that these common themes have derived from race-related occurrences and the social and racial climate of the institutions. Sinanan (2016) highlights “The psychosocial climate of a university setting has been found to have a tremendous effect on

student perceptions and outcomes, especially those from culturally diverse backgrounds (Shocket, 1985; Sodano & Baler, 1983)” (p. 155). This point demonstrates that African American students’ perceptions about PWCCs climate is a variable that needs further consideration when understanding how institutional climate affects student outcomes and retention. When perceptions about an institution are favorable, the more likely students are to socially integrate (Beasley, 2020) and their academic self-efficacy increases. The idea is that in dealing less with the nuances and stress of racial and cultural experiences, African American students can focus more on positive experiences at PWIs (Beasley & McClain, 2020). Moreover, it is in the hands of leadership expedite the necessary changes, develop proactive strategies, and implement initiatives that produce positive social impacts on African American first-year student retention.

*Institutional Social Support Services and Initiatives.* During the first-year college experience, programs and initiatives that support students' academic success, assimilation, and social engagement are significant to novice students' sense of belonging, combating feelings of social isolation and loneliness (Bowman et al., 2019; Means & Pyne, 2017; Ribera et al., 2017). Successful social interaction within a new social and educational environment for African American first-year college students and other Students of Color will help to gauge whether these students are satisfied with their first-year student experiences (Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017). These successful social interactions include institutional support services exhibited through positive student-faculty interactions, mentorship, and guidance (Baier et al., 2017). Diversity in student support staff and faculty on campus (McDougal et al., 2018) and the services themselves strengthens self-confidence and fosters collaborative learning environments (Means & Pyne, 2017). Social support during first-year experiences have been linked to successful first-



year transition and adjustment (Baker, 2013; Garcia-Ros et al., 2018; Haktanir et al., 2020; Maymon et al., 2019). All playing a role in helping first-year college students adjust, college counselors, advisors, student affairs personnel, and faculty can positively impact student retention helping students to work through mental health challenges and issues with academic and social dilemmas (Haktanir et al., 2020).

Means and Pyne (2017) add that African American college students and other Students of Color would benefit from PWIs that provide academic and social support and that are racially and ethnically sensitive and create spaces on campus for multicultural student needs. Astin (1999) posits that socially integrated students are more likely to persist to completion if they engage in a supportive community. As a result of social integration, Ulviye et al. (2018) posit that African American first-year college students' sense of belonging and support plays a key role in overcoming negative stigmas and stereotypes, strengthening their academic integration and achievement. McCall and Castles (2020) emphasized this need to provide insight on the importance of establishing departments centered around diversity and inclusivity. Though these types of offices are becoming more prevalent on college campuses nationwide, programs and services within these departments are limited and are offered to all ethnic groups thus, not fully focusing on the African American student population who are the most at risk for institutional departure (McCall & Castles, 2020). The lack of attention to the needs of African American students adds to their reserved feelings of being undervalued and underserved as a collective racial group (Caldwell, 2017).

***Faculty Support.*** Another element of the characteristics of a postsecondary institution is their institutional members (e.g., faculty and staff). Most recent research provides support in the claim that first-year college students are influenced through their interactions with their

professors (Parnes et al., 2020). Additionally, recent studies have demonstrated that these interactions are influential to enhancing and sustaining student persistence (Parnes et al., 2020). New knowledge on student-faculty interactions has disclosed multifaceted ways to enhance student motivation through faculty support. Ayllon et al. (2019) stated that need-supportive teaching (NST) supports the self-determination construct in that faculty provide "autonomy support, structure (support of competence), and involvement (support of relatedness)" which results of this practice has shown that need-support teaching builds self-efficacy, confidence, and motivation within students (p.1). Schunk (2016) states, "teacher support affects classroom climate; for example, teachers who are warm, learner-centered, and democratic create a positive atmosphere for learning" (p. 448).

***Faculty Rapport.*** Faculty and staff who develop a rapport with their students may unknowingly influence their academic self-concept and, in turn, their motivation to learn and persistence in college (Parnes et al., 2020). It is believed that faculty at PWIs who exhibit empathy, understanding, and interest in their African American students and other Students of Color, promote prosocial behavior in class (Ayllon et al., 2019) and strengthen student institutional commitment and persistence (Gipson et al., 2018). As a result, African American students perceive faculty who demonstrate those characteristics as committed to their learning and success, boosting their self-efficacy and sense of belonging (Ayllon et al., 2019; Parnes et al., 2020; Roska & Whitely, 2017). Bonner (2001) asserted that faculty are an extension of the institution and are a representation of the commitment and values the institution has regarding student success (Roska & Whitely, 2017). Faculty carry the social responsibility to model the attributes students need to succeed in college, including responsibility, accountability, and respect for diversity and inclusivity (Ayllon et al., 2019; McCalls & Castles, 2020). In modeling

these attributes, faculty have the platform to influence and impact students' learning, academic performance, perseverance, and overall college adjustment (Ayllon et al., 2019; Parnes et al., 2020). They also reinforce the institutions' commitment to the welfare of their all of their students and promote student success (Bonner, 2001; Roska & Whitley, 2017).

***Faculty Interactions and Representation.*** For African American students, faculty ethnic representation matters (Roska & Whitley, 2017). Ethnic representation on campus in addition to all the characteristics first-year college students deem as influential in their adjustment to college has also been associated with African American students' decision to persist (McDougal et al., 2018). However, Roska and Whitley (2017) assert that African American students are the most likely to experience negative racial environments and challenges with matriculating and adjusting to college. Due to these experiences and challenges, African American students often seek social networks on campus that strengthen their confidence, sense of identity, and belonging (Roska & Whitley, 2017). African American students in McDougal et al. (2018) study described their experiences with African American faculty as "being a support system that was like another family for them" (p. 205). They described those interactions as "key sources of guidance, motivation, and sense of family on campus" (McDougal et al., 2018, p. 205). These meaningful relationships built between African American students and faculty impact students' adjustment to college and subsequent outcomes (Roska & Whitley, 2017) while helping to buffer many of the challenges they face integrating into PWIs. Representation of faculty of color at PWCCs and other PWIs demonstrates these institutions' commitment to diversity, inclusion, and a sense of belonging for African American students (McDougal et al., 2018). The presence of African American faculty on PWI campuses give African American students a validation that they too belong and can thrive at their institution (McDougal et al., 2018).

## Summary

Upon reviewing the literature, Tinto's (1975, 1993) institutional departure theory provides meaningful insight into the relevancy of college adjustment experiences of African American first-year college students and their persistence beyond their first year. Through the constructs of social integration and the institutional attributes that interplay into the first-year experience of newly matriculated students, the theory provides the framework to understand how those experiences can play a role in the persistence of African American students attending predominately White community colleges. The literature acknowledges that African American students are overrepresented in student attrition rates of undergraduates in higher education and that they are also overrepresented in attrition rates of first year college students (Hanson, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). There has been literature regarding the non-cognitive factors that have shown to impede on the persistence of African American students in higher education to include demographics, socioeconomic status, disparities in secondary school quality, funding, and college readiness initiatives (Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Stewart et al, 2019; Ulviye et al., 2019). In addition, various institutional social support services that would help African American students increase their sense of belonging have been discussed. However, there is a gap in literature aiming to understand the psychological (attitudes, self-beliefs, esteem & identity) and social (culture, relationship, community, sense of belonging) aspects of their dropout behaviors (Beasley & McClain, 2021; Jeffords et al., 2020; Means & Pyne, 2017). This study, however, focuses specifically on the social integration and institutional characteristics constructs of Tinto's (1975, 1993) institutional departure theory and the college adjustment experiences of African American first-year students attending predominantly White community colleges. Through their voices, understanding the social challenges to integrate,

adjust, and persist and the psychological experiences that affect behaviors and impede on success, will be vital to understanding their experiences while adding to the body of knowledge on the persistence and retention of African American students beyond their first year to graduation.

The literature review provides validity of the significance of the gap in current literature regarding the psychosocial factors of institutional departure theory (Tinto, 1975, 1993) and the importance of understanding the lived experiences of African American first-year students more deeply. Though institutions cannot control experiences that have taken place prior to enrollment, this literature discusses the role community college leadership have in helping African American students socially, emotionally, and academically adjust to their new higher education learning community.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore African American community college students' first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college. This chapter opens with a description of the qualitative research design used for this study. Additionally, the first section includes the rationale behind the choice of qualitative design and how the phenomenological approach was most appropriate for this study. Subsequently, the next section provides the central research question and subordinate questions that were drawn from the research problem and purpose statement which were vital to understanding the contents of this study. Furthermore, the next section discusses the characteristics of the two-year community college that was selected for this research study and the rationale for why it was chosen. In addition, a description of the setting has been included and supported by rationale. Additionally, the participant section includes a discussion of the unique characteristics and criteria of the students who were selected to participate as research participants. The following section provides insight into the researcher's motivation for conducting this study and the interpretive framework and philosophical assumptions that supported the study. Lastly, this chapter includes a discussion regarding the researcher's role, the procedures used to conduct the study such as permissions, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and how participants were solicited have been provided in detail. The strategy for data collection and analysis, an explanation of how this research study accomplished triangulation and the trustworthiness, and ethical considerations of this phenomenological qualitative research study are thoroughly discussed.

## Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore African American first-year community college students' experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a two-year, predominantly White community college. This study was conducted using methods of qualitative research. A qualitative study is appropriate when seeking to understand a complex social or human problem through a methodological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, qualitative research allows for the perspectives and experiences of the participants to be discussed, sharing their voice (Creswell, 2013), their way. Quantitative research uses statistical and numerical data to analyze relationships among variables while using surveys and experiments to answer hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In contrast, qualitative studies rely on texts and the inquiry process is interpretive in nature, which involves documenting the views of the participants and conducting research in the natural setting where participants experience the problem of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method allows for concepts to develop that aid in better understanding social phenomena that exist within participants' natural setting (Mason, 2017). A qualitative study was appropriate for this research because the aim was to understand the adjustment experiences of African American first-year college students attending community colleges. Through "the voices of the participants" (Creswell 2013, p. 44) the perspectives of their first-year experiences with college adjustment revealed the essence of the phenomenon. The rationale behind choosing a qualitative, phenomenological design was because it is the appropriate approach as the researcher relied on exploration of the lived experiences of the participants and described the common phenomena that emerged through their shared experiences as African Americans students who attended a

predominantly White community college during their first year. The pseudonym State Community College was used when addressing the community college used in this study.

Data was organized inductively and deductively, identifying common themes, patterns, and categories that emerged from gathering multiple forms of data to include statements, quotes, and sentences from “clusters of meaning,” into themes (Moustakas, 1994). The core components of other qualitative research designs, for example, case studies, focus on current, real-life cases in real-time and can consist of multiple case studies or a single case study (Yin, 2014).

Additionally, case studies are purposed to thoroughly understand a case (Stake, 1995), whereas phenomenology seeks to understand the phenomena that emerges through the lived experience of multiple individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Grounded theory and ethnography are also designs that are not appropriate for this study as ground theory seeks to develop a theory that emerges out of the data from the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Ethnography seeks to identify patterns in a cultural group within the context of their natural environment and focuses on intricate details of culture-sharing groups (Harris, 1968). Essentially, since this study focused on African American college students’ perceptions and experiences with adjustment to college during their first year and the phenomena that emerged from those experiences, the choice of a phenomenological design was thought to be the most appropriate qualitative design method to conduct this study.

Two approaches commonly used in phenomenology designs are hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990, 2014) and transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). The type of design that was used in this study was the transcendental phenomenology design. Concentrating on the interpretation of a phenomenon rather than what Dowling (2005) calls the pure description, hermeneutic phenomenology “involves the reading of text so that the



intention and meaning behind the appearances are fully understood” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 9).

The hermeneutic differs from transcendental phenomenology in that the transcendental approach centers around the description of the experiences of participants and less on the researcher’s interpretation, allowing for fresh perspectives (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). The lived experiences or what Moustakas (1994) refers to as noema, is the essence of the research design as it provides intuitive insight into the experiences of individuals. For example, the topic of this research focused on African American student’s lived experiences with adjusting to college during their first year at two-year, predominantly White community college. Only students who identify as Black/African American, who have attended a predominantly White community college during their first year could establish the essence of the noema or the phenomenon that this study examined. In transcendental phenomenology, Moustakas (1994) emphasized the critical step of epoche, also referred to as bracketing, which requires that the researcher first remove their preconceived opinions and set aside their own personal experiences so that the examination of the phenomenon is perceived through fresh lenses, “...as if it were for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34).

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore African American community college students' experiences with college adjustment during their first year and to understand how their experiences played role in their persistence beyond their first year. The following questions provided structure and guidance to this research:

#### **Central Research Question**

How do African American students describe their first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college?

**Sub-Question One**

How do African American community college students describe their expectation and experiences with the transition, enrollment, and adjustment to college during their first year at a predominantly White community college?

**Sub-Question Two**

How do African American community college students describe their experiences with social integration during their first year at a predominantly White community college?

**Sub-Question Three**

How do African American students describe the impacts of institutional culture and diversity on their college adjustment, integration, and persistence at a predominantly White community college?

**Setting and Participants**

The purpose of this section was to discuss the characteristics of the community college that was selected as the research site and the rationale for why it was selected. In addition, a description of the setting is included and supported by rationale. The second section discusses the unique characteristics and criteria of the students who were selected to participate as research participants.

**Setting**

State Community College is a public, non-religious institution, located in southeastern United States. The pseudonym State Community College was used when addressing the community college used in this study. First a junior college, State Community College has grown from one to four campus locations in the central region of its state. State Community College is regionally accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Accreditation of Colleges

and Schools and as of 2009, awards bachelor's degrees in addition to the standard two-year associate degrees, technical workforce certificates, and provides direct, guaranteed transfer admission into four-year state universities. State Community College offers over 30 undergraduate degrees and over 20 majors within 12 areas of study offering online, in-person, and mixed mode course modalities. State Community College's leadership consists of a Board of Trustees, Board of Directors, President, Campus Presidents, and Vice Presidents, Executive and Academic Deans, and several types of Chief Officers (College Factual, 2021).

State Community College was selected as the site for this research study due to its reputation and high ranking of community colleges in its state according to College Factual (2021). Additionally, State Community College has low tuition and an open admissions policy which guarantees admission for all qualifying students and does not consist of any additional qualifications or performance benchmarks such as standardized test (SAT or ACT) outside of basic admission requirements (Best College, 2021). Instead, State Community College relies on placement tests to measure student capabilities upon entry. Low retention and completion rates of African American students at State Community College is another cause for selecting this institution. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019), African American student population has a high attrition of 33.8%, which is high for only representing 12.5% of the college student population in the country (Hanson, 2022). Additionally, State Community College according to (Baber, 2012) is a predominantly White community college, as the majority of its members (46.3% students, 76.8% faculty) identify as White, Caucasian, or European. Their Black or African American faculty is 15.4% and student population is 15.3% (College Factual, 2021). Other reasons for selecting State Community College were that 62.2% of students who attend are between the ages of 18 and 24, slightly above the national average of

60% (College Factual, 2021). Additionally, 42.51 % of State Community College's first- and second-year students are between 18 to 21 years of age (College Factual, 2021), making this the ideal age group for this study. Lastly, 13.8% of State Community College's African American students are undergraduates (College Factual, 2021).

### **Participants**

The selection of participants should be carefully considered as the participants should all have experienced the phenomenon studied, helping the researcher to establish a general understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants in this study were students who identify as African American or Black and were enrolled either in their second semester or second year at State Community College. Prior to their second year of enrollment, participants had attended their first year at a predominantly White community college. Additionally, participants had been enrolled in at least one course meeting in-person on one of State Community College's four campus locations. Participants were enrolled as degree-seeking students, having completed a minimum of 6 credit hours and were between 18 to 21 years of age at the of the study. There were no restrictions regarding gender as both male and female participants were welcomed to participate. The number of participants recruited for this study ranged between 10 to 15 and they all self-reported to fit the criteria. In conducting phenomenological research, sample sizes range between five to 25 participants (Moustakas, 1994). Purposeful sampling of the participant involves the selecting of participants who meet the preferred criteria and is the most ideal way to highlight the problem, research questions, and the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

### **Researcher Positionality**

As the researcher, my motivation for conducting this phenomenological study derived from the interpretive framework of social constructivism. My motivation was to understand, through the examination of the perspectives of African American college students enrolled at a predominantly White community college, how their first-year experiences impacted their college adjustment and motivation to persist.

### **Interpretive Framework**

The aim of this research was to lean and depend as much as possible on the perceptions of the participants' experiences which was done through the lenses of social constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructivism or interpretivism, is described by Lincoln and Guba (2013), as a paradigm that seeks to answer the research question that begins "with the presupposition that social reality is relative to the individuals involved and to the particular context in which they find themselves" (p.39). Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that the goal should be for participants to understand the meaning of a situation, which is done predominantly through interactions and discussion with others. This concept leaned into Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach emphasizing the importance of researcher's bracketing any preconceived ideas, interpretations or personal experiences with the phenomena and focusing as much as possible on describing the experiences of the participants.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions are important to qualitative research as they are the beliefs that guide a researcher's study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The assumptions of one's philosophical viewpoint are ingrained views that even without awareness of them, are woven into the fabric of a research study. Assumptions are frequently practiced using interpretative frameworks which

consist of paradigms or what Guba (1990) posits are beliefs that guide individuals' actions and manifest as an individual's worldview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The following section briefly addresses the four philosophical assumptions in qualitative research and mentions the characteristics that guide a researcher's approach, methodology, and several other components of a qualitative study. Particularly, my choice in philosophical worldview surfaced, giving a clearer understanding to the views that were the guide to this research study.

### ***Ontological Assumption***

When a researcher inquiry about the nature of reality and views an issue or problem through the lenses of their being multiple realities, this researcher's qualitative research was framed using methods that reflect the ontological assumption (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), an example of a practical implication would be the researcher reporting several perspectives into themes or clusters of meaning developed within the fabric of the research findings. The relative element of ontological presumptions, Lincoln and Guba (2013) expressed, include respecting multiple realities, exhibiting etic and emic viewpoints, but also avoiding generalization and statements or implications that lean towards cause-effect. The reporting of several perspectives is commonly found in phenomenological qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and was the foundation to my research study. This assumption was appropriate for this study because the purpose of this study was to gain insight into the lived experiences of African American students' adjustment at a predominantly White community college and their perspectives of their first-year experience.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

Researchers who are guided by epistemological assumptions seek to gain understanding through the means of closeness with participants in efforts to collect subjective evidence and

experiences of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lincoln and Guba (2013) stated that “rather than the objective facts that are measured by the researcher, interpretivist epistemology seeks out subjective beliefs that are co-created between the researcher and the researched, where the knower and the known are interactive, inseparable” (p. 88). This assumption aligns most with the transformative interpretive framework. Transformative researchers are collaborators with their participants to collect subjective evidence in efforts to aid the “voice” of participants whose voices may have gone unheard. This requires researchers to spend a significant amount of time in the field which is commonly done in ethnographic qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### ***Axiological Assumption***

Researchers with axiological philosophical assumptions are those whose values are important; their values guide the construction of the research and the nature of information collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This philosophical belief is commonly found in hermeneutic phenomenology because it involves the researcher giving their interpretation on the process of the research making it difficult to view the data with a fresh perspective as Moustakas (1994) emphasizes. In qualitative studies, it is important that axiological researchers not only convey their values and position in relation to the setting and context of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but also to be conscious of the biases that may arise and effectively bracket those in efforts to pursue truth (Moustakas, 1994). The values and beliefs of an axiological researcher guide their actions, and their assumptions help to form and shape the problem and research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers with axiological assumptions candidly discuss the values that shape the research to include their own interpretation in connection with their participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **Researcher's Role**

My role as a researcher consisted of being an African American woman, doctoral student at Liberty University, a youth mentor and novice part-time educator at a large, metropolitan community college. Prior to my position as part-time faculty, my career in higher education spanned 16 years at the same institution in student support service roles in enrollment services, admissions, and later program development and management. Though I currently instruct, teaching first-year college students, I did not and have not had any authority over the participants of this study during this research process. Instead, another community college was intentionally chosen for which I was not employed.

The bias that I brought to the research came from observation through my professional experience teaching first-year students but also my own personal experience as an African American who graduated from a predominantly White community college, a mother and an aunt to several nephews and nieces who will one day be graduating from high school and pursuing their college education. Lastly, I was alarmed by national attrition rates of Black and African American college students. As a Black, African American woman with a graduate degree in pursuit of another, I understand how vital a college education is to economic stability within the African American community as well as the impact on the national economy and labor force. The attrition rates that I have researched were the numerical data of what I, as an educator, have seen consistently throughout my four years of teaching at the postsecondary level. I often wondered what motivates dropout behaviors aside from financial hardship, familial responsibility, and other external factors and what could be done to meet these students' needs so they might persevere even through adversity. I believe there is a phenomenon that lies within both secondary and postsecondary education regarding college readiness and adjustment for



Students of Color, African Americans in particular. I believe that though there are studies that provide insight into this phenomenon, there was a gap in literature regarding how dropout behaviors (outside of financial and familial obligations) can derive from social and psychological experiences of African American students attending predominately White community colleges. I believe that institutional responsibility to provide adequate support to Students of Color at the postsecondary level should be a priority since graduation rates of the African American student are low (Hanson, 2022) and bring down the overall graduation numbers of those institutions.

Considering the phenomenological research design, it was imperative for me to understand what individuals experience and how they perceive the world or reality around them (Patton, 2002). This can only be done with true integrity and with the removal of self, and personal biases towards the topic of study. As the researcher, who has had some previous experiences that may be similar to that of the participants, my goal was to not infringe my prior experiences and perceptions into this research study, but to understand participants experiences, objectively, with a fresh perspective in efforts to accurately describe the experiences of other's phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Through bracketing my own experience with the phenomenon by way of reflexive journaling, I was able to set aside my own personal experience and focus entirely on the experiences of the participants.

### **Procedures**

The following section discusses the procedures that were conducted for the collection of data. The research procedures included first acquiring approval from Liberty University, securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), permission from the research site, recruiting participants, informed consent procedures, collecting and analyzing data, and providing an account of how triangulation was achieved.

## **Permissions**

This study was conducted upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from Liberty University (see Appendix A) and IRB approval from State Community College (see Appendix B). All methods of obtaining participants aligned with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) to ensure the protection of State Community College policy violation and to protect student participants' information.

## **Recruitment Plan**

After IRB approval was received potential participants were solicited through various approaches to include campus bulletins on all State Community College campuses. The bulletins and posts (see Appendix C) informed individuals about the study and asked individuals who meet the criterion and were interested in participating to respond via email or by contacting the number provided on the flyer. In addition to campus bulletin posts, participants were recruited on campus by face-to-face recruitment by the researcher. All interested individuals were contacted and given the purpose of the research, procedures, and were vetted after self-reporting that they met the criteria. After a detailed explanation and purpose of the study was discussed in-person, over the phone, or via email, the individuals who were still interested were emailed a recruitment letter (See Appendix D) followed by the consent form (See Appendix E) to sign using the DocuSign program allowing participants to sign electronically and securely. The electronic informed consent form provided additional details about the study, its purpose, benefits, disclosure about minimal risks, a disclosure about their role being voluntary, withdrawal steps, an agenda of the interview and focus group processes, and details about data protection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The sample pool of Black, African American students at State Community College was

3,091. When conducting a phenomenological study, the required number of participants should range from five to 25 participants (Moustakas, 1994). From the sample pool, a total of 10 to 15 participants were selected using a combination of purposeful and inclusion criterion sampling procedures. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained how it is essential to a phenomenological study that all participants involved experience the phenomenon. Both purposeful sampling and inclusion criterion sampling strategies produce information-rich participants who are directly related to the research problem and purposefully inform an understanding of the key phenomenon of the study (Patton, 2015). The goal of inclusion criterion sampling, according to Creswell and Creswell (2018) is to “recruit a sample to who share specific characteristics and to do so by stating specific inclusions and exclusion study criteria upfront.” These types of sampling procedures are the most ideal forms of sampling for this phenomenological qualitative study.

### **Data Collection Plan**

This qualitative study utilized the transcendental phenomenological research design to gain insight and describe the lived experiences of African American students’ college adjustment and their perspectives of their first-year experiences at a predominantly White community college. The data that was collected for this research was collected through individual interviews, a focus group, and a writing prompt.

#### **Individual Interviews (Data Collection Plan)**

For this transcendental phenomenological study, the first method of data collection was individual, one-on-one, in-depth interviews with each participant. An important aim of individual interviews was to give a description of the meaning of the phenomenon experienced by a small group of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Individual one-on-one interviews took place either

at State Community College's campus or through the use of the virtual video platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom for a duration of 1 hour. It was necessary for interviewees to be in a quiet, private space, providing a safe space for the participants to share their experiences without being overheard or identified. At the start of the interview, I introduced myself and restated the purpose of the study, their purpose and rights as a participant, that the interview would be audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription, and the privacy and protection strategies that were in place to protect their identity. As the researcher, I documented their responses; however, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using recording software. Organization and storage of the interview data took place using the Microsoft Excel program which allows researchers to store and organize text, graphic, audio, and video sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This tool was most effective in organizing and storing data making locating and sorting data seamless and efficient.

### ***Individual Interview Questions***

1. Please tell me about yourself. How would your close family and friends describe you as a person?
2. What kind of advice were you given by family, friends, teachers, high school counselors, etc., about preparing yourself for college?
3. How would you describe your transition from high school to college? SQ1
4. Describe your expectations about college when you enrolled. SQ1
5. Please tell me about your initial enrollment experience at State Community College. SQ1
6. What influenced your decision to attend a community college? SQ1
7. How would you describe your first-year experience with adjusting to college? SQ1

8. How would you describe your experiences socially during your first year at State Community College? SQ2
9. How would you describe your experiences academically during your first year at State Community College? SQ2
10. What are your thoughts regarding challenges with persistence and retention of African American students attending predominantly White community colleges? SQ3
11. What are your thoughts regarding the diversity in the student population of State Community College? SQ3
12. What are your thoughts regarding the diversity of faculty and staff at State Community College? SQ3
13. How important is diversity and representation in the college setting to you? Please explain. SQ3
14. What life experiences as an African American student have contributed to you wanting to attend and graduate from college? CRQ
15. How has your life experience as an African American student influenced your persistence in your studies? CRQ

The first two interview questions were grand tour questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2015) or knowledge questions (Patton, 2015), were intended to break the ice and create an environment that was non-threatening, positive, and free of judgement. Though knowledge questions provide an opportunity to build a positive, non-threatening environment, they also fostered a space for understanding the situation of each participant as movement toward discussion about their adjustment to becoming a college student began. Questions three through seven were broad general questions that were a foundational to the textual and structural descriptions of the

participants' lived experience with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, those four questions were generated from the central research question (CRQ) as well as sub-question one (SQ1). Interview questions eight and nine were related to the purpose of the research and sought to acknowledge the participants' experiences with college adjustment and social and academic integration at a predominantly White community college which derived from the second sub-question (SQ2). Questions 10 through 11 were related to cultural diversity at the site of the phenomenon. Lastly, interview questions 12 through 15 were related to the experience through the ethnic lenses of the participants showing a relationship to the central research question, purpose, and research problem.

Each of the interview questions were open-ended allowing the opportunity for participants to elaborate and give "thoughtful explanations to their answers" (Claxton & Michael, 2020, p. 56). This technique in interview choice helped to bring to surface the common experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The list of interview questions and rationale for each question were sent to my committee members for review and feedback prior to implementation.

### ***Individual Interviews (Data Analysis Plan)***

Prior to starting data analysis in phenomenological research, the researcher engaged in the process of bracketing personal experiences. Creswell & Poth (2018) described Moustakas' (1994) position on the importance of bracketing or "setting aside their experiences" in efforts to analyze the data through clear lenses and with a fresh perspective (p.78). As the researcher, my role was to bracket out my personal experiences with the phenomenon and my personal view to focus on the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing took place prior to

engaging in interviews and analyzing data by method of keeping a reflexive journal of my past experiences.

After bracketing took place, the first step in the data analysis of individual interviews was to develop a textural description of the lived experiences expressed by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After data was collected, the horizontalization was conducted for all 11 participants interview transcripts which were read and reviewed multiple times. It involved highlighting significant statements that were relevant to the study and depicted the participant's individual experience with college adjustment as a first-year community college student. Throughout this process, the researcher carefully read through each participants' transcript, being sure to bracket out preconceptions or biases related to the phenomenon. Participant responses were collated into a description of experiences and articulated into a textural-structural description of meaning (Moustaska, 1994) with the aim to articulate the general essence of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Significant statements and common mentions were compiled, organized, and categorized into themes or clusters of meaning after the other forms of data collection had taken place. The condensing of the themes and clusters of meaning that emerge were coded and presented in tables and discussed (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Focus Group (Data Collection Plan)**

Focus groups are a method of interviewing multiple individuals at one time. Providing the opportunity for interaction between the participants, focus groups are an opportune way for a researcher to interview a group of individuals with similar experiences (Gall et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). This method of data collection is beneficial to a phenomenological study because within the group interaction, participants can "springboard off each other's responses which can trigger new trains of thought" (Claxton & Michael, 2020, p. 54). This outcome is inevitably going to

produce information-rich data (Creswell, 2013). The focus group session was semi-structured in that a preset of questions were developed before the session; however, the interviewer had the “freedom to follow up with unstructured questions that may seek clarification” (Claxton & Michael, 2020, p. 55).

The focus group was scheduled around the availability of the participants and took place in-person at the research site and the request (site approval) to use a classroom at State Community College was made. Due to scheduling conflicts, participants were able to attend virtually via Google Meet, to ensure their participation. Using this method allowed participants to increase their availability to attend and participate without geographical restrictions and scheduling logistics. Similarly, to the start of the individual interviews, a recollection of the purpose of the study, participant role in the study, instructions on how the focus group was to be conducted, and other important information was mentioned in the opening statement by me, the researcher. As the researcher and interviewer, my role involved asking the interview questions and taking notes, though audio-recording was an instrument used in documenting the whole focus group session.

### ***Focus Group Questions***

1. Please introduce yourself to the group and share a little bit about your background.
2. What was your motivation for enrolling in a community college versus a university?
3. What challenges have you experienced in your adjustment to community college? SQ2
4. What obstacles are you currently facing that may affect your perseverance? SQ3
5. What is your perception about challenges with persistence and retention of African American students attending predominantly White community colleges? SQ3
6. What social challenges are you currently facing that may affect your perseverance? SQ3



7. Describe the college's campus environment. How does it influence your sense of belonging? SQ4
8. What support and resources do you know about that will help you as an African American first-year student throughout your time at State Community College? SQ4
9. How can predominantly White community colleges better support African American college students during their first year? SQ4
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your first-year experience?

The focus group questions were designed to align with the central research questions and coincided with the individual interview questions to expand the discussion in order to obtain further data that could have been initially unvoiced. Similarly, to the first two individual interview questions, the first focus group question was a grand tour question (Marshall & Rossman, 2015), intended as an icebreaker to create a non-threatening, positive, and free of judgement environment (Patton, 2015). The second question sought to understand the reasons for selecting a two-year, predominantly White community college over a four-year university, hence related to the research study. Questions three, four, and five were relevant to the research problem and purpose which was to explore the influences that could incite temptation to withdrawal or tempt dropout behaviors. Question six through nine were relative to the theoretical framework of social integration (Spady, 1970) with ties to college transition and a sense of belonging (Schlossberg, 2011). Lastly, question ten was designed as a closing question, where participants mentioned any last thoughts or unvoiced statements that were missed during the discussion.

***Focus Group (Data Analysis Plan)***

Similarly, to the data analysis plan for individual interview and following the data

analysis guidelines of Moustakas (1994), bracketing was the first procedure that took place in focus group data analysis which was done through reflexive documenting by me, the researcher (Ahern, 1999). The next step was to transcribe the focus group session using software that transcribes video and audio data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From there, the next step involved highlighting significant statements, and collating them into a description of experiences and articulating them into a textural-structural description of meaning (Moustaska, 1994). This consisted of reviewing the transcript thoroughly several times to be able to identify significant statements and similar mentions. Through memoing, these statements were compiled and organized then categorized into themes or clusters of meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Letter-Writing (Data Collection Plan)**

The letter-writing data collection approach provides insightful perspectives of participants. The letter-writing prompt was provided via email to be completed towards the end of the focus group interview and act as a conclusion to data collection, as it was a reflective tool. The prompt simply asked the participant to reflect on their experience and share with their younger self any advice regarding adjusting and adapting to college as a Black student. The letter-writing prompt took participants 15-20 minutes to complete and return.

### ***Letter-Writing (Data Analysis Plan)***

The highlighting of significant statements with statements collated during the individual interview and focus group were conducted since all three forms of data collection were completed at that point. Significant statements relative to the research were compiled and organized to be categorized into themes or clusters of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). After the focus group was complete, the process of data analysis followed and included first bracketing out preconception or biases related to the phenomenon through

journaling or memoing. Next horizontalization was practiced, which involved reading the participants letters several times, with an open and clear mind. Similar to the data analysis of the individual interviews and the focus group, the letters were thoroughly read, and significant statements were documented in efforts to identify clusters of meaning.

### **Data Synthesis**

In transcendental phenomenological studies, data analysis is a multilevel process. The first step begins bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, describing my own experience with the phenomenon first by way of reflexive journaling, assisted me in setting to the side my own personal experience and focus entirely on the experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). After performing both data collection procedures of individual interviews and a focus group session, the next step involved transcribing the interviews using transcribing software. Transcribing the interviews allowed me to clearly read over all of the data and take the next step of classifying or finding significant statements that emerged from the interviews more organized. This process allowed me to use horizontalization to list the statements while treating each significant statement equal to the next (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was beneficial to “winnow” the data (Guest et al., 2012) which involved focusing only on the data that is relative to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This process helped in aggregating data into small meaning units or themes removing repetitive, overlapping statements (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Next step was to read over all the data, take notes, and draft both a description of the “what” and the “how” of the participants' experiences. This process is called textural-structural description (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This involved a detailed interpretation of the essence experience of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). That step then led to the

process of composing a description of the phenomenon and writing a narrative of the “findings” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Trustworthiness**

A fundamental component of validity in a qualitative research study is establishing trustworthiness by ensuring the study consists of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Validity encompasses determining accuracy of the research finding through the lenses of all individuals involved in the research process, to include the research, participants, and the readers (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This section describes the components of validity and the measures that were taken to ensure trustworthiness and validation of the findings.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility derives from the usage of multiple forms of data collection and verification methods to establish accuracy in the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, these methods determine whether there is transferability between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Credibility is also established through prolonged, sufficient engagement with participants. In this research study, this was accomplished through triangulation, peer debriefing, thick description, and member checking.

#### ***Triangulation***

Triangulation involves the usage of multiple sources of data collection by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process includes collating evidence from various sources to bring to the forefront themes or perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The multiple sources of data collection I used in this research study were individual interviews with participants, a focus group, and letter-writing. Transcendental phenomenological studies seek to

describe participants' experience with a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The use of triangulation strengthens credibility and validity of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### ***Peer Debriefing***

Peer debriefing or reviews is another verification method that strengthens credibility of the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that peer debriefing ensures that the correct use of the research method and processes were conducted and that the findings are authentic and accurate interpretations of the participants' experiences. The role of the peer debriefer includes asking difficult questions and making inquiries regarding methods, meaning, and interpretations. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this research study, this technique provided me as the researcher with the opportunity to debrief and share my findings with individuals (e.g., my committee chair and members) who provided feedback on my analysis.

### ***Member Checking***

Described with lenses of Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is the most reliable approach to establishing credibility. It involves members of the study reviewing rough drafts of my research and examining the language used to articulate interpretations (Stake, 1995). Additionally, the "writ large" approach will be used to thoroughly examine the accuracy and credibility of participant responses (Creswell & Poth, 2019). Participants of this study had access to review data, analyses, interpretations, rough drafts, and conclusions of the research for any discrepancies in its content or interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As part of this group of items to review I included the transcription of the interviews and focus group to ensure accuracy of participant responses prior to classifying or finding significant statements that emerged from the interviews to conduct horizontalization.

**Transferability**

Transferability occurs when thick, rich descriptions of the findings are present (Creswell, 2013). It consists of the findings being transferable between the researcher and the participants in that in other contexts, the findings of the research can be applied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I will give a clear, detailed description of the setting of which this research was conducted, the participants, and the methods of the study. As a result, readers have adequate information regarding the findings to determine how applicable the research is across a broad spectrum (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Dependability**

Lincoln and Guba's (1984) criteria for establishing dependability involves the findings to be consistent, coherent, and consists of thick, rich descriptions of the methodology and procedures used in the research study. My aim in meeting this standard was to ensure that my descriptions are comprehensive and that my research can be replicated. Dependability is achieved through an inquiry audit that will take place at Liberty University. The inquiry audit consists of a thorough review of the process and the products of the research by the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director.

**Confirmability**

To establish confirmability of the research data, Lincoln and Guba (1984) posit that both confirmability and dependability are established through external auditing of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I accomplished this by employing triangulation, peer debriefing procedures, member checking, and reflexivity. Reflexive journaling was a process that I used throughout the research process and used to bracket previous experiences to ensure that the research was conducted with a fresh perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, providing

essential information about my role as the researcher assisted in confirmability through elicitation of reflexivity in my bias, values, and background as it relates to the research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Multiple ethical considerations were involved throughout the course of this research study. First, to conduct research, permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) per Liberty University, and IRB approval from State Community College were sought. Additionally, a thorough explanation of the purpose of the research was discussed with participants at multiple stages of the research process to include the recruitment phase and data collection phase (interviews and focus group session). Prior to the start of data collection, obtaining informed consent from participants informing them of the voluntary nature of their role in the study and their personal right to withdraw from the study at any point, was expressed during several stages of the research study. All methods of obtaining participants aligned with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) to ensure protection from policy violations and to protect student participant information. Clarity was given regarding confidentiality of the research site and participants using pseudonyms, and the secure measures that were employed for electronic storage of data to include password protected files (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All data has been securely stored for approximately three years after the study, and then destroyed.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore African American community college students' first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college. Despite the existence of literature that provides insight into retention challenges amongst Black, African American students, there

was limited literature describing the student perspectives regarding their college adjustment and first-year experience with social integration. This chapter included details involving the research design and methodology, research questions, the role of the researcher, procedures, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. The aim of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to uncover the essence of the lived experiences of participants in terms of college adjustment.



## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore African American community college students' first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college. The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings discovered through data collection and analysis, and the study's results. This chapter includes participant demographics, the thematic categories that emerged, and identifying themes and subthemes through narrative responses and tables. From the data collected, themes emerged answering the central research question of this study, and the data analysis provided the following three themes: *college transition and support, sense of community and belonging, and institutional culture and environment*. Through the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences during their first year in college, themes emerged, and their responses answered the research questions of this study. Lastly, this chapter concludes with the answers to research questions and a summary of the chapter.

### Participants

The participants of this study were recruited from State Community College (SCC), a large, public community college located in the southeastern region of the United States. State Community College was selected based on their African American students' low retention and completion rate. Other reasons for choosing State Community College are that 62.2% of students who attend are between the ages of 18 and 24, slightly above the national average of 60% (College Factual, 2021). Additionally, 42.51 % of SCC's first and second-year students are between 18 to 21 years of age (College Factual, 2021), which is the traditional age range, making this the ideal age group for this study. Lastly, 13.8% of SCC's African American students are undergraduates (College Factual, 2021).

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnic Identification</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Status</b>
Aaliyah	Female	19	Black	Criminal Justice	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Bria	Female	19	African American	Business	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Daisha	Female	21	Black	Computer Science	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Daunte	Male	22	African American	Political Science	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Ebony	Female	19	Black	Nursing	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Kareem	Male	20	Black	Information Technology	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Kevin	Male	22	Black	Construction Management	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Laurence	Male	20	African American	Architectural Engineering	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Malcolm	Male	20	African American	Social Science Education	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Nick	Male	20	African American	Information Technology	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Taryn	Female	21	Black	Nursing	2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Travis	Male	21	African American	Construction Engineering	2 <sup>nd</sup> year

Fifteen participants were recruited to complete all study components, including a one-on-one interview with the researcher, a focus group interview, and a reflective letter-writing prompt. Four participants did not complete all the components of the study and were not included; however, the remaining eleven participants completed all components of the study requirements. All participants lived off campus; of the eleven, six identified as male, while the other five identified as female. All participants self-reported to meet the criteria at the time of the study. Due to cultural perceptions, some participants ethically identified themselves as African American, while others identified as Black. Due to the self-reported ethnic identifications of the participants, the terms African American and Black have been used interchangeably throughout this section. Despite the informal nature of the responses, all quotes given by the participants

remained intact to the responses given during the interviews, focus group, and reflective letter-writing prompt. Realistic pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, using culturally relevant names to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants.

## Results

This section presents the three main themes and eight subthemes that emerged from this study. Each of the three themes were established by organizing the research by thematic categories that developed through analysis of the participants' quotes, establishing the narrative of the results. The themes of *college transition and support*, *sense of community and belonging*, and *institutional culture and environment* were established after carefully transcribing, evaluating, and analyzing the data. Additionally, the essence of the social phenomenon was discovered by identifying the commonalities of the participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Lastly, this section describes all the themes and subthemes in narrative form.

**Table 2**

*Main Thematic Categories, Themes, and Sub-Themes of First-Year Experiences of AACCSs*

Thematic Categories	Themes	Subthemes
Preparedness Support Balance	<b>College Transition and Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of college preparedness</li> <li>• Support in navigating college systems and processes.</li> <li>• Balancing school with personal responsibilities and obligations</li> </ul>
Expectations Relationships Belonging	<b>Sense of Belonging and Community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations of a new environment</li> <li>• Community through supportive relationships</li> <li>• Sense of belonging through supportive spaces</li> </ul>
Cultural Awareness Representation	<b>Institutional Culture and Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culturally awareness and sensitivity</li> <li>• Ethnic representation</li> </ul>

## College Transition and Support

*College transition and support* was noted throughout the individual participant interviews, focus group, and reflective letter writing prompt and is the first theme of this study to emerge. Often mentioned among participants were how feeling unprepared for college and the sense of feeling lost in the enrollment process affected their college transition experience. The following subthemes emerged from participants' responses, *lack of college preparedness, support in navigating college systems and processes, and balancing school with personal responsibilities and obligations*. The essence of the college transition and support theme rests in the thematic categories of preparedness, support, and balance shown in Table 3. These categories derived from the participants' feelings about their level of understanding of the enrollment process and lacking transition knowledge and skills (postsecondary awareness, costs, matriculation) necessary to develop self-advocacy and time management which research shows relates to college success. Only a few of the participants felt their enrollment and transition were seamless and that they were prepared for the college experience. For example, Kareem expresses how his transition experience was "Somewhat straightforward. Of course, there were some things that I obviously needed to learn cause I've never done it before, but it was pretty good." Travis stated, "The experience I had with them, like, it was very helpful, very easy."

**Table 3**

### *Theme 1- College Transition and Support*

Thematic Categories	Theme	Subthemes
Preparedness Support Balance	<b>College Transition and Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of college preparedness</li> <li>• Support in navigating college systems and processes.</li> <li>• Balancing school with personal responsibilities and obligations</li> </ul>

### *Lack of College Preparedness*

The first subtheme of *lack of college preparedness* emerged when the participants were asked during interviews and the focus group about their pre-college readiness experiences. Many participants expressed the realization of their lack of college preparedness when finding a college, financing college, and engaging in the enrollment process. The college preparation process includes learning and developing skills, strategies, and prior knowledge of the matriculation process before registering for classes (college academic access requirements, college finance, deadlines, and registration). The essence of the *lack of college preparedness* subtheme rests in the thematic category of *preparedness*, which derived from participants' responses to interview questions regarding their pre-college readiness experiences in high school and advice given to them specifically from family regarding college.

Several participants disclosed that they are first-generation students and felt that neither high school nor family adequately prepared them for college, affecting their overall college transition. For example, when reflecting on his experiences with being ready for college through his reflective letter, Laurence stated, "I don't think my high school did enough to get me ready for college." Aaliyah stated, "I should've gone to college when I felt ready to go to college. I didn't really want to go to college, but I did it for my parents." When describing parental assistance with college preparation, Bria stated, "My parents couldn't really help prepare me. Having never went to college themselves, we were figuring it out together which was stressful." Similarly, Ebony stated, "To be completely honest, I had to do it by myself, everything, because I'm a first-generation going to college. Both of my parents have their high school diploma. So, I had to do everything myself." For Malcolm, despite being a dual enrollment student during his first year, he stated, "I'm a first-generation college student, so nobody in my family really prepared me." Taryn stated, "Its like you have to of figure things out for yourself along the way."

### ***Support in Navigating the College Systems and Processes***

The second subtheme of *support in navigating college systems and processes* emerged when participants were interviewed, asking about their initial enrollment experiences and expectations. The essence of this subtheme of understanding of the college's resources derived from the thematic category of *support*. Half of the participants reported that they expected more guidance and support than they had received. They believed it caused challenges with navigating the college systems that support their matriculation process. For example, Ebony stated, "I got more help from researching on my own. I had to do, like, 90% of the work myself." Even after seeking help, Aaliyah stated, "I get talking to counselors, I talked to like one, but it wasn't much help. I mean it was helpful, but all they did was send me an email with information I needed to know." When it came to communication with advisors, Daisha stated,

A lot of things were communicated primarily via email or through phone calls. There was a lot of back and forth I just think because there were a lot of system issues. There was a mix up with my profile, and yeah, it definitely felt like in terms of assistance, it took a while to get the assistance I needed.

Despite half of the participants feeling that the support they received was inadequate, the other half felt that they received adequate support when it came to the enrollment process. For example, Nick stated, "It went fine. I enrolled online, then went to the orientation on campus. They told me about FASFA which I did before I enrolled. From there they helped me pick my classes based on the timeline for my major."

### ***Balancing School with Personal Responsibilities and Obligations***

The third subtheme of *balancing school with personal responsibilities and obligations* emerged when participants were asked during their interview, focus group, and reflective letter about their experience transitioning and adjusting to college life. Almost every participant

discussed balancing their time between work, school, family, and their personal lives. The essence of this subtheme derived from the thematic category of *balance*. Many participants work and expressed their concern about being responsible for their weekly assignments, studying, and other responsibilities as college students. The participants emphasized their struggles with time management as it relates to their overall college transition and adjustment. For example, Kareem through his reflective letter stated, “I have to improve so much in terms of managing time.

Always have that same power and ambition and don’t leave things for the last minute.”

Regarding balance, Daisha recalled, “If I wasn’t doing school, I was at work.” She explained further, “I still have work, and I’m still in school. I mean, I’m still doing some classes on campus and other ones online, so it’s just trying to find the balance.” Travis described school and work balance, he stated, “I used to work overnight at Walmart. As soon as I leave from overnight at Walmart, I go in my uniform straight to school. I’ve gotta help my mom pay rent.” Kevin discussed balancing his schoolwork load and stated, “There’s been times I’ve been stressed out with schoolwork. It’s just the load of the work, rather than the difficulty of the actual work itself.” Malcolm discussed fulfilling family obligations as a college student. He stated,

I grew up in a single parent household because my dad passed away. So, it’s my mom taking on the load and she doesn’t drive because of health issues. So, sometimes, in between classes, I have to drop her off at work. I even had family members in hospice care my first semester. I had to notice certain things that were happening in my first year, it was mainly family obligations. I had to make sure all my assignments were on point.”

Lastly, Laurence stated, “Where does all the time go? I mean, I feel like I have no time for anything besides school and work.”

## Sense of Community and Belonging

The theme *sense of community and belonging* was noted throughout the individual participant interviews and the focus group and is the second to emerge in this study. When asked about their first-year experiences with social integration during both their interview and the focus group, participants expressed their feelings about their expectations of entering a new education environment. Additionally, when sharing their experiences, many expressed their newfound awareness of the reality they experienced versus their initial expectations regarding college adjustment, specifically at a predominantly White community college (PWCC). Therefore, through those lenses, participants responded to the questions by describing their personal experiences and perceptions of their reality as Black students attending a PWCC. For example, Kevin stated, “It was a bit of a culture shock.” The essence of the theme *sense of community and belonging* rests in the thematic categories of expectations, relationships, and belonging. The subthemes of *expectation about a new environment, community through supportive relationships, and sense of belonging through supportive spaces*, shown in Table 4, emerged from the participants’ interviews and focus group responses.

**Table 4**

### *Theme 2 – Sense of Community and Belonging*

Thematic Categories	Theme	Subthemes
Expectations Relationships Belonging	<b>Sense of Community and Belonging</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations about a new environment</li> <li>• Community through supportive relationships</li> <li>• Sense of belonging through supportive spaces</li> </ul>

### *Expectations About a New Environment*

The first subtheme, *expectation about a new environment*, emerged when the participants were asked during the interviews and focus group about their social experiences during their first year. Participants also discussed their expectations about college through a reflective letter-



writing prompt. The essence of this subtheme, *expectations of a new environment* derived from the thematic category of *expectation*. First, participants described their expectations about how they thought college to be. For example, Kevin recalled his expectations about college life as seen in the media. He stated,

I wanted the whole college experience, you know the parties, the school, going to class and being in dorms. But then I got here and noticed that this is not the type of environment I thought. You just come in and go out.

After understanding the differences between a four-year university and going to community college, Ebony discussed how she expected larger class sizes and how overwhelmed she would be by the student-to-faculty ratio. Ebony expressed, “I expected that there were gonna be too many kids in a class, but I went to Campus C first and the class sizes there were smaller, maybe about 20 to 25 students, which was pretty fair.” When reflecting on his initial expectations, Kareem stated through his reflective letter,

I would have told my younger self to expect the same treatment from your teachers in college as in high school. That treatment being that they will only care about your performance for as long as you care about your performance. I would've also told myself that being a Black student going to a PWI means that I will see less of people my color and that's something that I should be prepared to see in my life going forward.

### ***Community through Supportive Relationships***

The second subtheme of *community through supportive relationships* emerged when participants were asked during the interviews and focus group about what social encounters during their first year contribute to their sense of community and belonging as Black students. Based on the participants’ responses, the essence of this subtheme derived from the thematic category of *relationships*. Participants discussed the importance of establishing community

through supportive relationships on campus, such as supportive faculty, counselors, administration, and other college personnel. For example, Malcolm said,

Having people there to support you and having that one on one with people who have been in your shoes like a faculty member or an admin for that support. I think that faculty that really vouch for, you know, historically excluded groups, and actively make it their priority to check their biases and stuff, really contributes to the sense of inclusion.

Ebony expressed a similar thought and stated, “Having teachers and guidance counselors who are welcoming and show that they really have our concerns in mind is necessary.”

Additionally, some participants discussed how important ethnic representation and opportunities to establish relationships through mentorship are crucial to establishing a sense of community and belonging for Black students at PWCCs. Laurence stated, “Having Black faculty mentors or just Black mentors in general would be good because a lot of us need those kinds of supportive relationships.” Daisha touched on how having representation on campus helps first-generation college students who do not have the example of seeing family members going to college. She stated,

There are also some outside factors as well. As Black students, not many of us take the route of going straight to work. And then of course watching family members or friends who don't go to college, don't go to school, but in some way, shape or form, they're still making it.

Travis commented, “It’s important to have community and I think Black students need that on campus.”

### *Sense of Belonging through Supportive Spaces*

The third subtheme of a *sense of belonging through supportive spaces* emerged when participants responded to interview and focus group questions regarding their social experiences during their first year and any current challenges they face that may influence their motivation and persistence. The essence of this subtheme *sense of belonging through supportive spaces*, derived from the thematic category of *belonging*. Social integration consists of students socially adjusting in a new education environment (Tinto, 1975), which gives them the confidence that they belong and can thrive there. Participants talked about how establishing spaces for them on campus, the overall campus environment, and opportunities to get involved on campus contribute to their sense of community and belonging. For example, Malcolm stated, “I definitely think having an established space on campus for us to share our true authentic selves, because sometimes there are not any programs that are often geared towards us.” Nick stated, “If I didn’t feel like I belonged in a place, I’d probably react and feel nervous and I’d probably would want to leave and wouldn’t want to be there.” Bria stated, “If I don’t feel welcomed, I won’t hang around too much. I personally, don’t feel a connection to this college as a Black student.” Daunte stated, “I have a schedule that I go through throughout the day, often times I think I would stay on campus if I had more stuff to do.” Kevin expressed his desire to see more social activities that are culturally engaging on campus. He stated, “Activities. I like more activities that involve Black students and our culture.” Daisha talked about having support groups and outlets for Black students, and stated,

I would say another thing would be more support groups overall, like, something like this. Where we could all meet once a week or twice a week or so and talk about things. Talk about our experiences and share those experiences with people who are familiar with and understand your situation as well.

## **Institutional Culture and Environment**

The *institutional culture and environment* theme was noted throughout the individual participant interviews and the focus group and is the third and final theme to emerge from this study. The following subthemes emerged from participants' responses, *cultural awareness and sensitivity*, and *ethnic representation*. The essence of institutional culture and environment theme rests in the thematic categories of *cultural awareness* and *representation* shown in Table 5.

These thematic categories emerged from participants' responses when asked about the impacts of the culture and environment at PWCCs on the adjustment and persistence of Black students. For example, Bria stated, "I believe it really impacts us collectively and kind of determines how we interact on campus." Daisha stated, "Seeing more people who look like us win accolades and awards, because of course representation really matters." Daunte added, "It's not always about being the only Black person in the room, it's beyond that. It's about comfortability, it's about the atmosphere, the environment."

**Table 5**

### *Theme 3 – Institutional Culture and Environment*

<b>Thematic Categories</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Cultural Awareness Representation	<b>Institutional Culture and Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural awareness and sensitivity</li> <li>• Ethnic representation</li> </ul>

### ***Cultural awareness and sensitivity***

The first subtheme emerged when the participants were asked during the interviews and the focus group about how PWCCs like State Community College can better support their African American student population in their transition, adjustment, and persistence. The essence of this subtheme, *cultural awareness and sensitivity* derived from the thematic category of *cultural awareness*. First, participants described their perceptions about the impacts of an

institution's cultural competence and how institutional culture impacts their college adjustment and persistence. For example, when asked about what contributes to Black students' not feeling a sense of belonging at predominantly White campuses, participants discussed a lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity. Additionally, they described perceptions regarding the level of genuineness shown through PWCC's actions when demonstrating their support to the Black students. Malcolm gave his personal perception and stated, "It needs to be natural. And I think also the other thing is like having a club or organization to spotlight our culture and getting to an authentic place." Bria stated, "It's seems like supporting our culture is trendy." Daunte added,

You know, it needs to feel more natural the same way everyone else feels natural on the campus we want to feel natural. We don't want to turn down the hall and see Black Lives Matter on the wall. I don't want that cause it doesn't feel authentic. It doesn't really feel like they care about me or my people you know. So why would I want to see these exaggerated forms of inclusion around the school.

Laurance stated, "There is an appreciation of the effort I personally see when it comes to acknowledging Black people, but there's a lack of consistency, and that can come off as insincere."

### ***Ethnic representation***

The second subtheme of *ethnic representation* emerged when the participants were asked during the interviews and focus group about how PWCCs can assist in strengthening the college adjustment and persistence of their Black, African American students. Some participants also provided their perceptions through their reflective letter. The essence of this subtheme derived from the thematic category of *representation*. Many participants expounded on the importance of diversity and representation on PWCC campuses. Representation for the participants included an increase in Black faculty, counselors, support staff, students. Additionally, representation for

them also involves having various Black led clubs, organizations, marketing campaigns and by displaying accomplishments of Black college leaders on campus grounds.

When asked about representation, Taryn shared what she would like to see more and stated, “Having more Black people on campus.” Aaliyah stated, “There’s not enough role models that look like us that can really show us the experience of college.” Laurence stated, “It would be hard for any ethnic group to adjust to a setting when there is little to no one around that looks like them.” When asked about how important diversity and representation was to him, Kevin stated, “Extremely. If there was more diversity here, I’d feel more comfortable.” Kareem, gave a similar response and stated, “I do feel like it’s very important, I would definitely be very comfortable.” Nick expounded on his perception of belonging and representation, and stated, “I think if schools want Black students to feel more belonged or feel like they belong there, then they need to have more Black professors and support staff.” Ebony stated,

If colleges are not gonna employ a Black teacher, then how would they take me, a Black student to be of any importance? If they are not employing Black faculty and counselors and you know, higher-ups in the organization, how are they expecting Black people to come and enroll in their colleges?

Daisha stated, “Seeing more people who look like us win accolades and awards, because of course representation really matters.” Malcolm suggested in his reflective letter that Black students should, “Seek those who understand where you are coming from and that have your best interest in mind. As Black people, sometimes we are all we got.”

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

This section reveals the outlier data and findings of this study. The outlier theme of *College choice* emerged during interviews with participants, as they described what influenced

their decision to attend a predominantly White community college (PWCC) over a large university, or an Historically Black College or University (HBCU). For example, five of the participants expressed their initial desire to attend an HBCU, but certain circumstances made it difficult. Another four participants wanted to attend a four-year university regardless of whether it was an HBCU. Lastly, for the remaining three, neither mattered. The first nine participants all mentioned wanting the experience of living on campus, in dorms, which is not a characteristic of the college of which they choose to attend. For example, Daisha stated, “I would have liked the experience of going to college, you know, being on a dorm, meeting several people, and just like the stuff you see in movies.” The three subthemes of *affordability of tuition, proximity to home and work*, and the *variety of course modalities* offered were established based on the participants’ responses.

**Table 6**

*Outlier Theme – Rationale for College Choice*

Thematic Categories	Theme	Subthemes
Affordability Location Variety	<b>Rationale for College Choice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low tuition costs</li> <li>• Proximity to home and work</li> <li>• Degree offerings and course modalities</li> </ul>

***Low Tuition Costs***

When participants described their choice of attending a two-year PWCC, a reoccurring description of *low tuition costs* emerged as an influence in their decision to enroll at State Community College. The participants unanimously discussed the cost of tuition and affordability as the rationale for their college choice. Financial hardship not only affects students’ enrollment, but it also affects whether they return semester after semester (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). For Daisha, her decision to attend a community college was influenced by the cost of tuition. Daisha

indicated that her reason was “Primarily because I grew up in a low-income household and I couldn’t afford to go to a university.” She further states, “I would have liked to go to an HBCU, but my family just couldn’t afford it.” Likewise, Taryn, a young mother, was also influenced by the cost of tuition, she stated, “An influence for me was the price. Yeah, I would mainly say price.” Kareem discussed how paying a lower tuition rate at a community college and transferring to a university as a junior made more sense financially for him. He stated, “I would be basically getting the same education here and paying for less, rather than going there and paying more.” Lastly, Travis also discussed not being able to finance going to his dream HBCU. He stated, “I went to this institution because of finances.” He continued to say, “My parents, they were not financially there, and the grants, the federal aid programs and stuff, could cover what I needed.”

### ***Proximity to Home and Work***

When participants discussed their choice of attending State Community College, a two-year, PWCC, they expressed the importance of the college’s proximity to home and work. Research suggests that Students of Color often take on more familial responsibilities such as working to financially assist their household while trying to also balance school (Ulviye et al. 2018). Several participants mentioned that they are either financially responsible for or must contribute to family household expenses. For example, as stated earlier, Travis mentioned having to help his mother pay rent. Likewise, Malcolm mentioned how he’s responsible for his mother’s commuting due to her health challenges. Malcolm also mentioned the fact that State Community College has multiple locations throughout the city. He said, “The four convenient locations really influenced me to attend here. I mean gas is not cheap.” For Nick, staying close to home was also top of his list. He stated, “The biggest influence was distance. I didn’t want to go anywhere that was too far from home. College is only 15 minutes away from me.” For students like Kevin, who



works on campus, he stated how having “easy access” helps save on time and commuting costs. Bria stated, “I needed to attend a community college because I have to work and pay some of my own tuition, so I need to be able to get to work from school and vice versa.” Also, Laurence rides the city bus, and stated, “By not really having my own car, and traveling by bus, being close to home is important for me.”

### ***Degree Offerings and Course Modalities***

When participants described their choice in attending a two-year, PWCC, descriptions during the interviews and the focus group included the importance of knowing whether their college of choice has their *degree program and multiple course modalities*. For example, Kareem said, “I applied to a university first and didn’t get in. I learned that State Community College had my major and they may offer the four-year degree here.” Bria discussed how she did not do well in a required course and liked that she could retake that course at another community college nearby as a transient and return to State Community College to finish the rest of her associate degree. She stated, “I’ve not done so well in my college algebra course and had to retake it elsewhere, I don’t think I could have done that at a university.” Taryn heard about how good her desired degree program at State Community College was and stated, “I heard they have a great nursing program.” Taryn also indicated the convenience of the various types of ways courses are offered. For example, she stated, “Being able to take both online and in-person classes, like it’s so convenient for me with my schedule and my daughter.” Lastly, when it comes to other various course modalities, Laurence talked about his ability to take half-term courses. He stated, “I like that I can take courses during the summer that are shorter than normal, getting them out the way fast.”

## Research Question Responses

This section answers the research questions used to guide this research study. First, this section will provide narrative responses to the central research question and sub-questions describing African American students' first year experiences at a predominantly White community college. Additionally, connections between the responses provided by the participants and the primary themes developed over the course of this study will be included in this section.

### Central Research Question

How do African American students describe their first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college? The participants described their first-year experiences with college adjustment highlighting the first theme of *college transition and support*. Most frequent descriptions emerged from the subtheme *balancing school with personal responsibilities and obligations*. Participants associated their first-year experiences with college adjustment with maintaining a balance between work, school, and home. These challenges with balance and time management impact how they adjust to college life. For example, Laurence stated, "Where does all the time go? I mean, I feel like I have no time for anything besides school and work." Kevin stated, "There's been times I've been stressed out with schoolwork. It's just the load of the work, rather than the difficulty of the actual work itself." Coinciding with balancing their responsibilities, the participants described their first-year experiences by also highlighting the second theme of *sense of community and belonging*. The participants indicated through their responses how vital community and belonging are to their overall adjustment to college and their experiences as Black students at a PWCC. Moreover, through the subtheme of *sense of community through supportive relationships* participants

described how engagement with Black faculty, counselors, and other student boosts their sense of community and supports the social and psychological well-being of Black students on campus. Bria said, "I think having Black counselors would help us, having someone to talk to about our experiences who looks like us. That would be helpful."

### **Sub-Question One**

How do African American community college students describe their expectations and experiences with the transition, enrollment, and adjustment to college during their first year at a predominantly White community college? The participants described their first-year experiences with the transition, enrollment, and adjustment to college by also highlighting the first theme of *college transition and support*. Most frequent descriptions emerged from the subtheme *support with navigating college systems and processes*. Some participants described less favorable college transition and enrollment experiences, for example, Bria stated, "feeling unprepared also made me feel lost and anxious." Daisha discussed her experience with support with navigating the college systems and stated,

A lot of things were communicated primarily via email or through phone calls. There was a lot of back and forth I just think because there were a lot of system issues." There was a mix up with my profile and yeah it definitely felt like in terms of assistance, it took a while to get the assistance I needed.

Others like Aaliyah described the newness of the college experience and enrollment process. She stated,

Everything was pretty new to me. Everything happened pretty fast. It was obviously bumpy, because it's different. I was introduced to a whole lot of things, like doing applications, calling different colleges, trying to pick which one I think is best for me.

In contrast, Daunte and Kevin both veterans, described their transition and enrollment experiences with the help of support from the Veteran's Affairs office. Daunte stated, "At State Community College, I got immediate acceptance, and everything was really smooth getting all my information there. They were just willing to help me out, so it was a lot easier than I expected." Kevin stated, "It took me like a week. They called me one evening, and he helped me through everything."

### **Sub-Question Two**

How do African American community college students describe their experiences with social integration during their first year at a predominantly White community college? The primary theme of *sense of community and belonging* is highlighted through participants' responses regarding their first-year experiences with social integration at a PWCC. Specifically, participants' experiences highlighted the *sense of belonging through supportive spaces* subtheme as they frequently expressed the scarcity of social clubs and organizations that share and showcase Black culture and are led by Black students. For example, when asked about how Black students can establish community and a sense of belonging at PWCCs, Malcolm stated, "I definitely think having an established space on campus for us to share like our true authentic selves because sometimes there are not any programs that are like are often geared towards us."

Participants also mentioned how establishing supportive relationships would help build a sense of community and belonging for Black students at PWCCs and positively impact their social integration. Specifically, participants highlighted the subtheme of *community through supportive relationships* and described how vital ethnic representation was to those relationships. Having the opportunities to establish relationships through mentorship is critical to their social integration and establishes belonging and community at PWCCs. Aaliyah stated, "There's not

enough role models that look like us that can really show us the experience of college.” Ebony stated,

That’s something very serious, because I feel like some Black students already have a bad outlook from home. Some kids really come from bad backgrounds and troubled families where some of their parents don’t even take education seriously. So having Black teachers, counselors and leaders that support us is important.

Similarly, Laurence said, “Having Black faculty mentors or just Black mentors in general would be good because a lot of us need those kinds of supportive relationships.”

### **Sub-Question Three**

How do African American students describe the impacts of institutional culture and diversity on their college adjustment, integration, and persistence at a predominantly White community college? The participants described various impacts institutional culture and diversity have on their experiences at PWCCs. The participants highlighted the *institutional culture and environment* theme and the subthemes of *cultural awareness and sensitivity*, and *ethnic representation* through their descriptions of their perceptions and experiences. Specifically, participants discussed how an institution’s approach to cultural awareness and sensitivity can positively or negatively impact Black students’ integration, adjustment, and persistence, especially their feeling of belonging and acceptance. When asked about what institutions can do differently, Daunte stated,

Not being so exaggerated how much they like minorities or how much they love minorities at their school.. You know, it needs to feel more natural the same way everyone else feels natural on the campus we want to feel natural. We don’t want to turn down the hall and see Black Lives Matter on the wall. I don’t want that cause it doesn’t

feel authentic. It doesn't really feel like they care about me or my people you know. So why would I want to see these exaggerated forms of inclusion around the school.

Similarly, ethnic representation was considered by the participants as part of an institution's efforts to increase diversity. Daisha expressed her thoughts and said,

So, like when you walk into college grounds and you look around and you see a lot of the different faces on the wall, it can look like a lot of White people. So, seeing more people who look like us win accolades and awards, because of course representation really matters. I noticed like, there are these sorts of standards for Black students, Black American, or Black people overall. Like there are certain career fields or paths we take that are different from you know, maybe our White counterparts. So, they would be doctors, lawyers, and police officers. Whereas, we can be basketball players, or go into the music or club industry. Things of that nature, that are more urban.

Malcolm added, "Having representation in education allows for students to see themselves in the positions of Black professionals."

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of this qualitative study on the first-year experiences of African American community college students. This chapter included a table providing the participants' demographics, the study's results, the themes, subthemes, outlier findings, and narrative descriptions that answered the central research question and sub-questions, which were the guide and foundation of this study. The themes of *college transition and support*, *sense of community and belonging*, and *institutional culture and environment* described African American community college students' first year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college. A significant finding was that almost

all the participants' initial college transition and adjustment experiences were related to their first-generation student status. Another significant finding was that participants' sense of belonging is strongly influenced by relationships formed on campus and having spaces on campus that cultivate opportunities to connect with other Black students, faculty, mentors. Supportive spaces include clubs, organizations, and associations that meet the social and psychological need for safe spaces to share their experiences and gain support from within the Black community on campus. Support, community, belonging, and cultural awareness were invaluable aspects of the first-year social experiences of African American community college students. Lastly, the cultural awareness and sensitivity of the college were factors to their college adjustment and persistence. Having an educational environment that embraces and upholds diversity through ethnic representation on campus was found to contribute to the sense of community and belonging that impacts their persistence.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to explore African American community college students' first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college. This chapter presents my interpretations of the study through summarizing each of the thematic findings. Additionally, this chapter will expound on the implications for institutional policies and practices, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations, and delimitations, and finally, recommendations for future research.

### Discussion

This section includes a discussion of the findings of the study and how they align with the themes that were developed in Chapter Four. This section will start with a discussion regarding my interpretations of the findings, followed by a discussion regarding implications for policy and practice, theoretical and empirical implications of this study. Finally, this section will conclude a discussion on the limitations, delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

### Interpretation of Findings

This section begins by providing a summary of the thematic findings developed in Chapter Four. The following themes of this study will be discussed; *college transition and support, sense of community and belonging, and institutional culture and environment*. The following is a summary of the thematic findings and my interpretations of the study.

### *Summary of Thematic Findings*

The first theme *college transition and support* addresses how the lack of college preparation impacts the college adjustment of African American college students during their first year. College preparation is part of the transition process and involves learning and



developing skills, strategies, and preparatory knowledge of the matriculation process prior to registering for classes. It also involves students preparing to undergo a new lifestyle change in which they must learn how to balance their class schedule, studying, work, and other responsibilities. The second theme covers the importance of *sense of community and belonging* and how it impacts African American students' social integration at predominantly White community colleges. This theme highlights how students' attribute cultivating supportive relationships and spaces that promote community and involvement among Black students contributing to their sense of community and belonging. The third theme discusses the impacts of *institutional culture and environment* on the adjustment and persistence of Black students at PWCCs. This theme highlights how cultural awareness and sensitivity are vital aspects of Black students feeling understood and accepted. Additionally, ethnic representation of faculty, administration, and support staff are components to the environment and cultural sensitivity of a postsecondary institution.

**College Transition and Support.** Known as a critical period in a college student's life, the transition from high school to college can be a stressful experience. During this timeframe, students experience various changes as they are introduced to new academic and social systems and learn to navigate a new environment, new people, and new challenges. College perception through the lenses of Tinto's (1975) model suggests that students' progress and achievement are at stake as they bring specific pre-existing attitudes and perceptions about college with them and their perceptions about their skills and abilities. Consequently, many students who fail to successfully transition often experience mental and psychological stressors such as anxiety, loneliness, and increased absenteeism could result in withdrawal behavior (Rankin et al., 2018; Tinto, 1975). During this phase, first-year students seek support from teachers, counselors,

advisors, and above all family. I found that several participants of this study attributed their lack of preparedness to not having adequate support during their transition process to include college readiness in high school, internal college support, and their families. Feelings of uncertainty, stress, anxiety, and isolation were emotions expressed by participants when discussing their college transition and adjustment experiences. Internal institutional support, though provided, did not boost new students' confidence in the navigating college systems, leaving several overwhelmed with the process. Similarly, I found that participants who were first-generation had difficulties with the enrollment process and did not exhibit confidence in asking for assistance. Though some participants' families encouraged going to college, they were not knowledgeable of pre and post enrollment processes, financial costs of attendance, or how to navigate college systems, leaving participants to rely significantly on support within the institution. In addition to challenges with receiving adequate support, participants struggled balancing new responsibilities as life changes began to take place.

**Sense of Community and Belonging.** As defined by Hurtado et al. (2015), sense of belonging is the “psychological dimension of student integration” (p.62). This psychological aspect of student integration involves both psychological and social assimilation into a college or university education system. It includes personal involvement within a social system or among a social group where a person feels valued and is an integral part of the group or social system (Anant, 1967). In this study, emphasis on the social construct of Tinto's (1975) institutional departure theory was eminent. Social integration occurs when a student cultivates meaningful social relationships and connections with individuals in the institution and engages in interactions that foster a sense of belonging and community (Tinto, 1975, 1993). As a result,

socially integrated students are likely to demonstrate persistence if they are a part of a community where they feel accepted, supported, and esteemed.

I found that participants attribute their *sense of community and belonging* to having supportive relationships that esteem, encourage, inspire, and motivate them. These types of relationships are valuable to African American students as they seek to be nurtured by individuals who have walked similar paths that have resulted in successful life achievements. Moreover, I found that participants yearned for those relationships with other Black individuals. Having more peers, mentors, faculty, and staff on campus who come from the same ethnic and cultural backgrounds satisfies their need for community and validates their sense of belonging, especially on predominantly White campuses. Additionally, having spaces and extracurricular activities such as clubs, organizations, and events that draws other Black students together was found to be an important aspect of community and belonging for the participants. These types of interactions and peer communities, for Black students, fosters a welcoming campus environment and strengthens their college adjustment and motivation to persist. Additionally, it impacts their need as students to be a meaningful and vital member of the education community. Tinto (1975) makes the connection by theorizing that colleges and universities are the societal systems in which the student seeks integration. This conceptualization then posits that if a student experiences an inadequate amount of interaction, for example, or view themselves as being of trivial value in the social system of a postsecondary institution, the chances of staying committed and being retained by that institution are very low (Tight, 2019).

**Institutional Culture and Environment.** The experiences with college adjustment and persistence have been found to directly link to the culture and environment of a college campus. Participants in this study unanimously discussed how cultural awareness and sensitivity to the

Black community plays a significant role in their personal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that influence their perceptions and interactions on campus. Culturally engaging campus environments incorporate Tinto's (1975) integration concept however, highlights having diverse campus environments that reflect the cultural backgrounds and racial identities of its student body (Museus et al., 2017). I found that at a predominantly White college, Students of Color struggle with belonging and acceptance when there is a lack of representation and sincere knowledge and understanding of their culture and community. A culturally engaging campus environment for Black students consists of visual representation and acknowledgement of their racial community's success in academic and professional pursuits. For instance, visual representation for the participants included seeing Black leaders being recognized throughout campus and marketing efforts that include Black faces. This demonstrates to Black students that they too can thrive and succeed. Concerning representation in the classroom, I found that Black students seek out Black faculty who model the attributes that motivate Black students to succeed in and out of college, strengthening their self-efficacy and confidence. The participants discussed having Black faculty and counselors that possess mentor-like characteristics that positively influence and impact their learning, performance, psychological well-being, perseverance, and college adjustment. Postsecondary institutions that demonstrate their efforts to increase this type of representation on campus, to Black students, exhibits their commitment to the success of their Black student body.

Lastly, in addition to ethnic representation and presence on campus, the importance of cultural sensitivity also was found to impact Black student's experience with adjustment and persistence. Participants expressed how offensive exaggerated forms of support of Black culture can be and how those efforts are sometimes perceived as unnatural and unauthentic. The

participants expressed how they felt their racial community is “on trend” and that institutions only acknowledge African American culture when society does. For example, the participants expressed only during Black History Month and trends like Black Lives Matter is their community acknowledge, devoid of authentically uplifting Black, African American people and truly understanding the essence of their community. I found that these types of perceptions cause Black students to socially withdraw and disengage from the institution. Therefore, this causes a sense of detachment and isolation from the campus environment and a low social morale.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

This section discusses the implications for policy and practice and is supported by literature. This section specifically emphasizes the ways to enhance the social integration of African American students to which impact their college adjustment and persistence. These suggested improvements are focused on improving the transition, matriculation, and adjustment of experiences of African American students at predominantly White community colleges. This section includes suggestions regarding policy and practice for policymakers, leaders, and stakeholders at higher education institutions.

### ***Implications for Policy***

Existing policies that govern higher education institutions, specifically community colleges, that concentrate on the matriculation of marginalized and underrepresented groups are recommended to continue in efforts to maintain high matriculation of Students of Color. For example, U.S. community colleges have an open admissions policy that guarantees admission for all qualifying students (Best Colleges, 2021). The enrollment of Students of Color in community colleges continues to significantly increase with African American students’ enrollment numbers tripling at a 33% increase from 1976 to 2020 (Hanson, 2022). The policies in place that simplify admission requirements and increase accessibility of postsecondary education to marginalized

groups have provided opportunities for many underserved, underrepresented ethnic student populations.

Though there are policies in place that seek to improve enrollment, it may also be effective to mandate policies on college readiness prior to enrollment during the final years of high school. Implementing mandatory curriculum and programs that are geared at preparing students for college would also alleviate many of the challenges first-year college students face that affect their adjustment and persistence. Diversifying college recruitment programs like dual enrollment programs and summer bridge programs will introduce college to African American students early, especially those who are first-generation students. It would take stakeholders and policymakers to allocate state funding to establish these types of pre-college programs and initiatives. It will also take broadening college recruitment to predominantly Black schools, churches, and communities. Lastly, mandating new student success programs to first-year college students will help in applying practical skills, strategies, and preparatory knowledge necessary to develop self-advocacy and time management which is shown to increase college success and persistence.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Implication for practice includes developing initiatives, programs, clubs, and organizations that support African American students in efforts to increase their sense of belonging and community on campus. Recommendations include establishing peer-to-peer and faculty mentorship programs that provide Black students the opportunity to cultivate supportive relationships that encourage persistence and provide social, psychological, and academic support. Additionally, increasing African American faculty, staff and administration will increase diversity and ethnic representation on campus. To establish positive perceptions among African American students about culturally engaging campus environments, it is recommended

to establish spaces and extracurricular activities led by Black students, such as clubs, organizations, and events that will gather Black students together, providing an outlet and opportunities for them to express themselves and form meaningful connections. In addition, these clubs, organizations, associations, and events can provide Black students the opportunity to educate non-Black students, friends, faculty and staff about Black, African American culture, eliminating misunderstandings concerning cultural engagement and acceptance. These types of interactions and opportunities, for Black students, fosters a campus environment that strengthens their sense of belonging, college adjustment, and motivation to persist.

A recommendation of practice in cultural awareness and sensitivity would be for institutions to partner with Black students, faculty, and personnel when it comes to increasing visual representation and marketing efforts throughout the campus. In involving African Americans in the process, predominantly White colleges will better understand how to support the Black community through cultural sensitivity, eliminating racial biases and stereotypes. This strategy will help to eliminate judgments and misconceptions regarding the sincerity of PWI's efforts when it comes to establishing a healthy, culturally engaging campus environment and an institutional climate.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Tinto's (1975, 1993) institutional departure theory relating to predicting dropout behaviors of first-year college students. Aspects of this framework confirmed prior research that demonstrated the connection between social integration experiences of first-year college students and the high attrition rates associated with them. However, Tinto's (1975) framework has some missed opportunities regarding its validity based on the institution type and student population used at that time. According to Braxton et al.

(2004), Tinto's (1975) model did not consider student retention at commuter colleges (Braxton et al., 2004) but solely focused on longitudinal samples that consisted of religiously affiliated residential four-year universities (Baker et al., 2021). Additionally, Tinto did not include the exploration of dropout behaviors first-year college Students of Color in the sample population (Braxton, 2004; Braxton et al., 2014; Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

Furthermore, my study contributes to the body of knowledge regarding college adjustment experiences of African American students and the impact those first-year experiences have on their persistence at a two year, predominantly White community college. Additionally, this study specifically focused on using the social integration and institutional attribute constructs of institutional departure theory to show the relevancy social experiences have to adjustment and persistence. The empirical implication of this study confirms African American first-year college students' feelings about having a sense of belonging, connectedness, and value as attributes that they associate with a healthy, welcoming institutional environment (Lo, 2018; Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2017; Rankin et al., 2018; Ribera et al., 2017).

### ***Limitations and Delimitations***

A qualitative study is appropriate when trying to understand a complex social or human problem through a methodological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, qualitative research allows for the perspectives and experiences of the participants to be discussed, sharing their voice (Creswell, 2013), their way. Some limitations in this study were despite the PWCC having four campus locations and recruitment efforts were made on all campuses, all the participants of the study primarily attend classes on the main campus which limited participant experiences across multiple campus locations. Additionally, the sample size was limited to between 10 and 15 participants, which limits the extensiveness of the study. Another limitation



was that the research was perspective-based, and some experiences described were gender-specific, causing some of the collective experiences of the group to vary, as descriptions of certain experiences were described through those lenses.

The delimitations of this study included my choice to limit the study to participants who identify as African American or Black. Also, the choice in the age range of the participants was intended to reflect authentic experiences of transitional stage first-year college students that reflect the high attrition rates found amongst freshmen (Hanson, 2022; Parker et al., 2021). Lastly, my decision to conduct research on a large, public, predominantly White community college and not a traditional four-year university was intentionally made due to the scarcity of studies that explore the first-year experiences of Black students at PWCCs.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

Future research on this topic may be valuable and helpful in increasing the awareness of social experiences that influence African American students' dropout behaviors, specifically at PWCCs. In consideration of my study's findings, limitations, and the delimitations, my recommendation for future research includes emulating this study to explore, in depth, the first-year experiences of African American students who attend predominantly White community colleges. However, given the small sample size, and that this study was conducted at one community college, I recommend expanding the sample size and the number of PWCCs that are selected as site locations. Additionally, I recommend researchers consider exploring whether experiences and perceptions described by participants are specific to gender. I would also recommend expanding the age range with participants being between the ages of 18 and 24, as it was confirmed in this study that in some cases, there are some Students of Color who begin their first year of college after such cases as joining the military, working to help family, etc. Lastly, I would recommend the use of a mixed-method design, specifically, using the convergent mixed-

method approach. Where qualitative research allows for the perspectives and experiences of the participants to be discussed, sharing their voice (Creswell, 2013), quantitative research uses statistical and numerical data to analyze relationships among variables while using surveys and experiments to answer hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Combining these two methods together using a convergent method approach is recommended in efforts to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). With this design both qualitative and quantitative forms of data are collected by the researcher and then merged in the interpretation of the results. I believe this method will provide a more thorough understanding of the social factors that impact the adjustment and persistence of African American first-year students at predominantly White community colleges.

### **Conclusion**

In using Tinto's (1975) institutional departure theory as the framework for this study, I sought to understand the first-year experiences of African American community college students and their challenges with college adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White community college. Despite the existence of literature that provides insight into retention challenges amongst African American students, there is limited literature describing students' perspectives regarding their college adjustment and first-year experience with social integration at community colleges. My aim was to expand the body of knowledge through my contribution and encourage future research of this topic. Through this study, I was able to uncover the essence of the phenomenon through descriptions of lived experiences of participants concerning their college adjustment and persistence. The analysis revealed three common themes that emerged: *college transition and support, sense of community and belonging, and institutional culture and environment*. These three themes surfaced as social and institutional constructs of Tinto's (1975)

institutional departure theory and provided a glimpse into what contributes to the challenges with college adjustment and persistence of African American community college students. A significant takeaway from this study is that the challenges that African American students face during their first year of college appears to be influenced by psychological, social, and cultural factors more than academic. *A sense of community and belonging* as well as *institutional culture and environment* were emphasized the most through the participants' responses. This thus indicates the need for internal institutional adjustments for practices that better support and address this group's social and cultural needs.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval Letter [Liberty University]

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 11, 2023

Tiffany Baker  
Denise Nixon

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY22-23-513 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY: EXPLORING AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES WITH COLLEGE ADJUSTMENT AND PERSISTENCE

Dear Tiffany Baker, Denise Nixon,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the following date: January 11, 2023. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**

## Appendix B

### IRB Approval Letter [State Community College]

[REDACTED]

January 27, 2023

Dear Ms. Baker,

The Institutional Review Board of [REDACTED] had reviewed your proposal, A Phenomenological Study: Exploring African American Community College Students' First-Year Experiences with College Adjustment and Persistence, and have granted you approval to proceed. Good luck with your research.

 [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
Director, Intuitional Effectiveness and Research  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

## Appendix C

### Recruitment Bulletin

# Research Participants Needed

**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY: EXPLORING AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE STUDENTS' FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES WITH COLLEGE ADJUSTMENT AND  
PERSISTENCE**

**Would you like to be a part of a research study sharing your first-year experiences as a  
Black/African American community college student?**

Do you identify as:

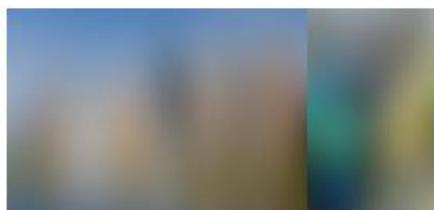
Black/African American

Are you between the ages of 18 to 21-years-old?

Are you in your second year at a predominantly White, two-year community college?

Attended your first year of college at a two-year, predominantly White community college?

If you answered **yes** to all the questions listed above, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.



**The purpose of this research study is to explore Black/African American first-year  
community college students' experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a  
predominantly White, two-year community college.**

Participants will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher, one small focus group with fellow participants, provide a short reflective writing prompt, and review the study findings for accuracy.

**Participants will receive a \$20 Visa gift card as a thank you for participating.**

A consent document will be email to you one week before the interview

Tiffany Baker, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Please contact Tiffany Baker at [REDACTED] for more information.**

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515

## Appendix D

### Potential Participants Email Invitation

Dear Community College Student,

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research study is to describe the college adjustment experiences of African American first students attending community colleges, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

You were selected as a possible participant because someone you know has expressed your qualifications for participating in the study. If you choose to participate in this study, you would be requested to do the following tasks:

- Participate in a one-hour interview with the researcher. The interview will take place in a mutually agreed upon location either face-to-face or using an online format such as Zoom. The interview will be audio recorded.
- Participate in a focus group with the researcher and other study participants. The focus group will take place in either a face-to-face format or a combination of face-to-face and online formats depending on the availability of study participants. The focus group will be audio recorded.
- Write a brief letter related to your first-year experiences in college.
- Participate in the member-checking process to review the findings and conclusions reached by the researcher and to provide feedback on the accuracy of the information you provided.

To participate in this study, please complete and submit the required consent form. If you have any questions regarding the study before signing the form, please do not hesitate to contact me at

[REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Tiffany N. Baker

## Appendix E

### Consent Form

**Title of the Project:** A Phenomenological Study: Exploring African American Community College Students' First Year Experiences with College Adjustment and Persistence

**Principal Investigator:** Tiffany N. Baker, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University School of Education

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must:

- Between the ages of 18 to 21 years old
- Black/African American
- Be currently a second-year student at a predominantly white, two-year community college who attended the same college during their entire first year of college.
- Have previously been a full-time student during your entire first year at a predominantly white, two-year community college.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study is to explore African American community college students' first-year experiences with college adjustment and persistence at a two year, predominantly White community college.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in one focus group session [approximately 1 hour long]. The focus group will be recorded (audio/visual) and transcribed. There may also be an opportunity to conduct a virtual focus group through use of a technology platform, i.e., Zoom, Teams, or Meet. This focus group is established to discuss college adjustment and social integration as it relates to first-year college experiences of African American student participants.
2. Participate in one focus group session [approximately 60-90 minutes long]. The focus group will be recorded (audio/visual) and transcribed. The focus group will be

conducted either in-person or using an online platform such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet.

3. Complete a writing prompt. The prompt will take approximately 15-30 minutes to complete and will be submitted in-person or through email.

### **How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the expansion of literature and knowledge on first-year experiences of African American participants, and their experiences with socially adjusting to postsecondary education. The expansion of literature and knowledge can assist in moving the needle forward in assisting African American community college students to navigate their first-year college transition and adjustment and in efforts to increase retention and persistence.

### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject.

Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews/focus groups will be recorded and transcribed.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with people outside of the group.

### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Upon the completion and submission of the writing prompt, participants will receive a \$20 VISA gift card.



**Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from the focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study Tiffany N. Baker, M.H.Ed. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Denise Nixon, Ph.D., at [REDACTED].

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [REDACTED].

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*The researcher has my permission to audio and video record me as part of my participation in this study.*

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Printed Subject Name

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Signature & Date

**Appendix F**  
**Letter-Writing**

## Letter- Writing Prompt

Participant Name:

Date:

Term:

**Prompt:** As an African-American first-year college student, what would you tell your younger self to better prepare you for your experiences transitioning and adjusting to college?

Please use the space below to write your letter.

Dear Younger Me,

Sincerely,