

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON PERCEIVED ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL  
FACTORS THAT ATTRIBUTE TO THE COLLEGIATE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF  
LOW-INCOME, FIRST-GENERATION BLACK MALES

by

Tre' Antonio Finklea

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2023

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON PERCEIVED ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL  
FACTORS THAT ATTRIBUTE TO THE COLLEGIATE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF  
LOW-INCOME, FIRST-GENERATION BLACK MALES

Tre' Antonio Finklea

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2023

APPROVED BY:

Patricia Ferrin, Ed. D., Committee Chair

Kimberly Whaley, Ed. D., Committee Member

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to analyze and discover the factors that contributed to the success or failure of first-generation Black male collegiates at four-year institutions and effectively provide an in-depth understanding of these issues. The theory guiding this study was Tinto's theory of integration, which focuses on the norms of academic and social integration. Related to this theory was a series of studies that presented the idea that students' involvement in the social environment and educational setups were critical to their success and retention in college. Participants completed a questionnaire to determine their eligibility for the study. I collected the data from the study for the ten individuals that met the criteria to be participants in this study. A questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups provided the data for this study. The data yielded five themes: community mentors, engagement, self-motivation, college preparedness, and support. Several sub-themes were identified from each theme: mentors, financial and emotional support, and academic and social integration.

*Keywords:* black male, resilience, first-generation, low-income, integration, social, academic

**Copyright 2022, Tre' Finklea**

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to every young male of color with aspirations of inspiring the next generation of leaders. Additionally, I dedicate this dissertation to my ancestors, whose shoulders I stand on. To my wife, Jessica, thanks for believing in me and encouraging me through this process. I appreciate and am indebted to you for all you have done to make this dream a reality. To my son, Houston, this is to let you know that you can reach the highest mountain top, walk through the deepest valley, and come out a winner. To Mrs. Crishan, thank you so much for always believing in me and encouraging me to keep going regardless of how hard the journey became. Thanks to my family and friends for understanding and encouraging me. I dedicate this dissertation to my father, who instilled education into us from a young age. Everything I have done in my educational journey was to honor your legacy and the lessons you instilled in us during our short time together. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to every student I have encountered. Let this serve as a testament that hard work pays off and that you can always determine where you will finish regardless of where you start.

## Acknowledgments

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Holy Bible, *New Living Translation [NLT]*, 2015, Proverbs 3:5-6). First, giving honor to God because I would not be who and where I am today without his grace and mercy. Throughout this journey, there have been multiple times I have wanted to throw in the towel and call it quits, but by His unwavering love and kindness, I could persevere and finish. I thank God for revealing himself and his plan for my life and being there with me throughout this journey.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Copyright Page.....	3
Dedication.....	4
Acknowledgments.....	5
List of Tables.....	11
List of Figures.....	12
List of Abbreviations.....	13
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	14
Overview.....	14
Background.....	14
Historical Context.....	16
Social Context.....	18
Theoretical Context.....	20
Problem Statement.....	21
Purpose Statement.....	23
Significance of the Study.....	23
Research Questions.....	26
Central Research Question.....	26
Sub-Question One.....	26
Sub-Question Two.....	27
Sub-Question Three.....	27

Sub-Question Four.....	27
Definitions.....	27
Summary.....	28
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	30
Overview.....	30
Theoretical Framework.....	30
Related Literature.....	33
Summary.....	71
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS.....	73
Overview.....	73
Research Design.....	73
Research Questions.....	75
Central Research Question.....	75
Sub-Question One.....	75
Sub-Question Two.....	76
Sub-Question Three.....	76
Sub-Question Four.....	76
Setting and Participants.....	76
Site.....	76
Participants.....	77
Researcher Position.....	78
Interpretive Framework.....	79
Philosophical Assumptions.....	83



Researcher’s Role.....	86
Procedures.....	87
Permissions.....	88
Recruitment Plan.....	88
Data Collection Plan.....	90
Individual Interviews (Data Collection Approach #1).....	91
Focus Groups (Data Collection Approach #2).....	97
Questionnaires (Data Collection Approach #3).....	105
Data Synthesis.....	109
Trustworthiness.....	111
Credibility.....	111
Transferability.....	111
Dependability.....	112
Confirmability.....	112
Ethical Considerations.....	113
Summary.....	114
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	115
Overview.....	115
Participants.....	115
Results.....	129
Mentors.....	134
Engagement.....	136
Self-Motivation.....	139

Pre-College Experience.....	140
Support.....	142
Outlier Data and Findings.....	144
Research Question Responses.....	146
Central Research Question.....	146
Sub-Question One.....	147
Sub-Question Two.....	148
Sub-Question Three.....	149
Sub-Question Four.....	150
Summary.....	151
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	153
Overview.....	153
Discussion.....	153
Interpretation of Findings.....	153
Implications for Policy or Practice.....	166
Theoretical and Empirical Implications.....	170
Limitations and Delimitations.....	174
Recommendations for Future Research.....	174
Conclusion.....	177
References.....	179
Appendixes.....	231
Participant Recruitment Letter.....	231
Potential Participant Questionnaire.....	232

Informed Consent Form.....	233
Focus Group Questions: College Graduate.....	235
Focus Group Questions: Non-College Graduate.....	238
Individual Interview Questions: Current Students and College Graduates.....	241
Individual Interview Questions: Non-College Graduate.....	243
Inquiry Audit Trail.....	245

**List of Tables**

Table 1. Participant Demographics.....	117
Table 2. Theme Development.....	131
Table 3. Thematic Categories Aligned with Research.....	134
Table 4. Thematic Categories Aligned with Research by Participant.....	135

**List of Figures**

Figure 1. Community Support.....	136
Figure 2. Theme Development.....	140
Figure 3. Self Motivation.....	141
Figure 4. College Preparedness.....	145
Figure 5. Support.....	147

### **List of Abbreviations**

Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR)

American School Counselor Association (ASCA)

Black Male Initiative (BMI)

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

First-Generation Black American Males (FGBAM)

First-Generation College Student (FGCS)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

High-Impact Educational Practices (HIPs)

Historically White Institutions (HWI)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Pre-dominantly Black Institution (PBI)

Pre-dominantly White Institution (PWI)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Teachers College at Columbia University (TCCU)

Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and Talent Search (TRIO)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

In recent years, the number of Black males pursuing a college degree has increased significantly; however, they are among the least of their peers in completing college and receiving their desired degrees (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Reindl et al., 2022). Bäumle et al. (2022) and Harper et al. (2020) recognized the effects of Black American dropouts on communities and investigated educational and social experiences that may lead to these outcomes. Researchers focused on interrelated factors of family, peers, and community neighborhoods that could potentially shape academic perspectives (Bäumle et al., 2022; Harper et al., 2020). Students who successfully integrated into the campus environment academically and socially were likely to complete their studies (Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022; Schaeper, 2020). Research into this topic could further assist higher education stakeholders with retaining Black males.

The aim of this phenomenological study was to discover and interpret the factors attributed to the success and failure of low-income, first-generation Black male students who have graduated or attended a four-year institution. The significance of this study was to clarify internal and external factors that first-generation Black males attribute to their collegiate success using Tinto's theory of integration as the theoretical framework (Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022; Schaeper, 2020). Chapter One presents the background, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, research questions, and definitions.

### **Background**

In the United States, children from low-socioeconomic backgrounds face social and economic adversities that negatively impact their lives (Goldman et al., 2021; Harper et al.,

2020). Pursuing higher education has been a long and contentious battle for Black Americans in America (Freeman et al., 2021; Ma & Shea, 2021). The introduction of the Emancipation Proclamation and the conclusion of the Civil War aided in banning slavery in the United States. Unfortunately, abolishing slavery allowed for educational disparities between Blacks and Whites in the South. There were incremental steps during Reconstruction, but they were slow. By the internalization of thought of suburban schools, Black students from urban schools still seemed inferior. The creation and backing of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), integration of White schools, and execution of government policy regarding minorities in society arrangements assisted with opening the entryway of instruction; nonetheless, these creators highlighted the accompanied causes for the relapse of substantial progress. Separate but equal was the legal doctrine many White lawmakers used to permit Black Americans to go to overwhelmingly White institutions yet restricted admittance to fundamental assets (Ma & Shea, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017).

Neubauer et al. (2019) and Riddle and Sinclair (2019) found that Black males encountered racial bias, negative stereotypes, unfair disciplinary practices, and lower teacher expectations within the classroom. Black American students had more negative relationships with their teachers than positive interactions (Legette et al., 2022; Sun, 2021), which directly impacted student resilience. English et al. (2020) and Sun (2021) found that Black students encountered discrimination five times daily on average. The criminal justice system and public education in the United States disproportionately affected students of color (Dutil, 2020; Neubauer et al., 2019; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Critical race theory (CRT) examined the concept of racism, influence, and policy within the legal field (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021; Lin, 2023); additionally, CRT viewed education as a tool for the oppression of racial minorities and the



maintenance of White supremacy (Colen et al., 2021; Comeaux et al., 2020). According to Byun et al. (2017) and Klein (2019), college attendance among Black American students has decreased by 13.2%. However, many Black families view college degree attainment as an immediate answer for lessening destitution and closing the achievement gap between minorities and Whites in the United States (Assari et al., 2021a). According to Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023) and Hill et al. (2021), due to biased funding disbursement, predominantly White schools received resources that primarily Black schools did not, which led to Black youth not aspiring to careers in STEM. The Jim Crow era ushered in new issues for students of color. Schools designed to educate Black children lacked sufficient funding, placing them disadvantaged, which caused the Black community to suffer (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Klein, 2019). The number of Black American males consistently declined in college access and graduating (Byun et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2020). Additionally, Byun et al. (2017) and Klein (2019) found that only 12.5% of students currently enrolled in postsecondary education identify as Black or African American. Other resources not at their disposal included a lack of family financial aid knowledge, mental and physical support, communication barriers among White educational leaders, and discrimination from leaders (Amerstorfer & Frein von Münster-Kistner, 2021; Denny, 2021). Researchers found that Black males, compared to other ethnic/racial and gender groups, have the lowest degree completion rates at institutions of higher learning (Assari et al., 2021b; Bratton, 2018).

### **Historical Context**

In schools throughout the United States, exclusionary policies disproportionately affected students of color (Assari et al., 2021b; Dutil, 2020). The “school-to-prison pipeline” was a typical term used to describe the fictional pathway from the educational system to the criminal justice system in the United States (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Marcucci, 2020). The pipeline

imposed harsher consequences, such as increased suspensions and expulsions, which significantly decreased students' access to instructional time (Dutil, 2020; Marcucci, 2020). Black American students often received harsher infractions at school than their counterparts; those interactions had been found to distort the perception of school and negatively impacted their academic success, according to Dutil (2020) and Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023). Institutions across the U.S. used exclusionary discipline practices that had become an issue of social justice, which denied minority groups the opportunity to access free public education (Boon et al., 2022; English et al., 2020). Colen et al. (2021) and Reindl et al. (2022) found that 18% of Black boys and 10% of Black girls received one or more out-of-school suspensions each year, compared with only 5% of White boys, 2% of White girls, 7% of Hispanic boys, and 3% of Hispanic girls.

Critical race theory (CRT) examined the concept of racism, influenced, and policy within the legal field (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021; Lin, 2023); additionally, CRT viewed education as a tool for the oppression of racial minorities and the maintenance of White supremacy (Colen et al., 2021; Lin, 2023). College attainment was an immediate solution that reduced poverty and closed wealth gaps between people of color and whites in the United States (Klein, 2019; Ma & Shea, 2021). In addition, many occupations required postsecondary certification with the changing work market and a more globalized economy (Klein, 2019; Ma & Shea, 2021).

According to Boon et al. (2022) and Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023), the educational achievement gap in the United States was evident inside and outside the class. It was a direct reflection of the earliest years of education. Early childhood education was pertinent to the American way of life, foretelling future schooling, career, work options, socioeconomic status, health, and social opportunities (Cappelen et al., 2020; Denny, 2021). The achievement gap created a problem for the Black community and stagnated the entire country's growth and

well-being (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Wang & Geng, 2019). These gaps showed that actual racial value in advanced education implied more than getting students to and through school; it instead meant giving balance to the projects of study that were accessible and welcoming to them (Cappelen et al., 2020; Klein, 2019). However, achievement gaps were eliminated through solid mentorship and policy implementation. Today, over 60 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, a solid contention was made that educational systems in the United States were isolated and inconsistent (Callahan et al., 2019; Kotlikoff et al., 2022). Young men and men of color are over-disciplined compared to their counterparts in the general school setting (Callahan et al., 2019; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Black American students were less academically prepared for challenging school courses and had restricted resources available during enrollment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Sun, 2021).

### **Social Context**

Earning admission to a student's dream school was an undeniable feat (Black & Bimper, 2020; Ma & Shea, 2021). However, researchers had discovered that many Black students, regardless of their high school grade point average and socioeconomic status, faced challenges far beyond academic preparation and the ability to successfully matriculate to college (Black & Bimper, 2020; Ma & Shea, 2021). For example, many Black American students who pursue a college education encountered a contention between the school climate and their personal beliefs (French, 2017; Maxwell et al., 2017). In addition, Black American students enrolled in unfamiliar environments with their culturally based ways of doing, seeing, and knowing. However, teachers responsible for educating diverse populations struggled with connecting the influence that culture, race, and ethnicity had on the academic, social, emotional, and

psychological development of minority groups (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021; Nevarez et al., 2019).

Creating spaces for students to feel connected to the college environment allowed students to connect with the new environment. Allowing students the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging enabled a student's persistence and heavily influenced their transition into the new space (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Casanova et al., 2022). Amerstorfer and Freiin von Münster-Kistner (2021) and Smith et al. (2019) believed that to meet the needs of Black males; teachers needed to exhibit an ethos of care toward minority students that was culturally appropriate and authentic. Since having a place, industriousness, progress, and a racial atmosphere were critical to understudy change in school settings, it was significant for colleges and universities to focus on ways to help integrate first-generation Black Americans into the college environment (Colen et al., 2021; Comeaux et al., 2020). McLeay et al. (2017) and Reindl et al. (2022) classified social support into three levels: “(1) providing information to students, making them feel loved and cared for; (2) sharing information with students to suggest they are valued and esteemed; and (3) providing information to individuals to indicate that they are a network and community” (p. 323). An ethos of care was cultivated by practicing culturally responsive pedagogy, rethinking how we approached teaching to where it empowers students by incorporating cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021; Cameron & McCall, 2020). Studies showed that when students create relationships with teachers and school staff and have strong family involvement, social capital provided access to knowledge and resources to enhance their educational achievement (Harper et al., 2020; Nevarez et al., 2019).

### **Theoretical Context**

Tinto's (1975, 2017) theory of integration was the theoretical framework in this study, which involved analyzing Black American males' academic and social integration norms on college campuses. Tinto defined academic integration as based on students' educational achievement, ability to develop intellectually, and engagement in positive experiences in academic settings (Tinto, 1975, 2017). Social integration referred to a students' ability to engage in extracurricular activities and build healthy relationships with their peers and faculty. He identified the factors attributed to first-generation, low-income Black males' persistence concerning a student's commitment to the institution or outside efforts (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2020). Tinto believed that once students became a part of their campus academically and socially, they were more inclined to stay and graduate (Tinto, 1975, 2017).

Tinto's (2017) theory of integration allowed researchers to cover the social and academic integration of low-income, first-generation Black American males at four-year institutions. Tinto identified three central norms regarding student motivation: self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived curriculum value (Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022; Tinto, 2017). Self-efficacy was a person's belief in their ability to succeed or become successful (Peiffer et al., 2020; Zander et al., 2018). Self-efficacy influenced how a person viewed challenges and addressed tasks and goals. Students with a strong sense of self-efficacy were more goal-oriented. These students tended to engage in a job actively, put forth more effort, and persisted in completing a task (Tinto, 2017; Zander et al., 2018). A student's sense of belonging was their ability to achieve a particular course of action, though essential to persistence, which did not ensure persistence (Reindl et al., 2022; Tinto, 2017). Students had to adapt to the new environment and become community members, alongside faculty, staff, and their peers. Students who established familial ties with the community were more likely to persist, leading to an enhanced motivation and a willingness to

engage others to continue further (Tinto, 2017; Wang, 2021). Perceptions of the quality and relevance of the curriculum reflected a complex variety of issues, including faculty teaching methods, institutional quality, and student learning preferences and values (Tinto, 2017; Wang, 2021). Although what constituted quality and relevance was far from simple, the main issue was students felt the material was pertinent to their lives and beneficial to their future endeavors.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem was that colleges had not identified the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males and why these students graduated significantly less than their peers (Ma & Shea, 2021; Reed et al., 2019). Researchers had found that students with at least one college-educated parent are 70% more likely to graduate than first-generation college students. Unfortunately, studies showed that only 26% of first-generation college students graduate (Martin et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2019). Academic and social factors were not single constructs but consisted of various constructs such as self-concepts, task values, goals, and achievement motives (Lakhal et al., 2020; Steinmayr et al., 2019). Researchers had conducted investigations into the different motivational constructs. Bi et al. (2021) and Goldman et al. (2021) found that Black students with a parent who had earned at least a bachelor's degree were much more likely to finish college than Black American adults who did not have a college-educated parent. Categorizing Black and White students into colleges and universities with disparate characteristics and outcomes resulted in racial inequalities at the K-12 level (Byun et al., 2017; Collier, 2017). At the same time, literature has addressed various factors that influenced the attrition of these students (Assari et al., 2021b; Tight, 2020). Ciocca Eller and DiPrete (2018) and Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023) found that the percentage of Black students completing a bachelor's degree compared to White students was low due to the lack of

academic and socio-economic resources. There were several socioeconomic factors facing the Black community. The ability to navigate these socio-economic challenges had, over time, been difficult for the Black community.

These socio-economic challenges significantly impacted how the Black community viewed access to education and enjoyment of other rights. However, researchers had shown that Black American students were more likely to enroll in four-year colleges than White students, given pre-college resources (Ciocca Eller & DiPrete, 2018; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023). Concentrating Black students in institutions with lower resources and graduation rates exacerbates long-standing racial income disparities (Collier, 2017; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). The success of any Black American in overcoming socio-economic and resource-constraint challenges may also contribute to the collegiate success of the first-generation Black American male (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Ma & Shea, 2021).

There were profound disparities even among students who did graduate from college. Recently, the graduation rates between races were 36.9% for Black students, 36.2% for American Indian or Alaska Native students, 53.4% for Asian students, 39.9% for Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students, 50.6% for White students, and 44.2% for Hispanic students (Banks & Dohy, 2019; DeLaney et al., 2022; Huo, 2021). Using Federal data, Assari et al. (2021b) and Boon et al. (2022) found that compared to White students, Black students had a higher rate of attending for-profit colleges and were less likely to have attended four-year public or nonprofit institutions. Due to Black American students generally attending institutions with less money to offer quality education, they were the minority in essential fields such as engineering, education, mathematics, statistics, and physical sciences (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Wang & Geng, 2019).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and interpret the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males who graduated or attended Middle Alabama University. Social integration was how newcomers or minorities integrated into an institution's social hierarchy and integration into their academic studies. By implementing a qualitative phenomenology that viewed participants' lived experiences as contributing to their success or failure, this study produced tangible evidence that supported academic resilience in first-generation Black American male students. Education allowed individuals to eliminate bias and break down barriers (Wang & Geng, 2019). The importance of education did not only enable individuals the opportunity to learn more but the ability to create a better quality of life by finding employment with higher paying jobs. Applying this approach to the community created educational pathways allowing students to give back to their community.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study reviewed factors attributed to the success and failures of low-income, first-generation Black American male students graduating from a four-year institution. The study implemented a qualitative phenomenological approach based on lived experiences that explored the contributing norms to the failure and success of these students and their ideas on expectations of educational management and leadership platforms.

### **Theoretical Significance**

On a theoretical level, Tinto's (2006, 2017) theory of integration analyzed the norms of academic and social integration, where students' involvement in the social environment and educational setups were critical to their success and retention in college. Researchers had



discovered that students that became integrated into the college campus by developing relationships with their peers, faculty, and staff, who became members of clubs and organizations, and engaged in academic activities, were more than likely to graduate from their respective institutions (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Flenbaugh et al., 2017). By listening to and sharing the narratives of successful low-income, first-generation Black American males, the perseverance and strength of this minority group were brought to the forefront (DeLaney et al., 2022; Leath et al., 2019). This study contributed to the scarce resources on Black males using an asset-based framework that focused on their academic persistence and achievement.

### **Empirical Significance**

There was an unprecedented crisis for Blacks' lack of seeking higher education. The achievement gap affected the Black community and the nation's well-being (Assari et al., 2021b; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023). Black first-generation college students likely arrived at a university campus unknowledgeable about their status as a first-generation student, one not typically addressed outside of the university context (Flenbaugh et al., 2017; Liversage et al., 2018). Black first-generation college students encountered institutionalized racism and microaggressions pursued a college degree (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Martin et al., 2020).

Studies on the resilience of first-generation Black American males in higher education were scarce (Goralnik & Marcus, 2020; Reed et al., 2019). Researchers had discovered that most first-generation students had to be more prepared regarding university assimilation, self-efficacy, course rigor, and grading scale. The journey from high school to college varied from student to student. It relied on internal and external factors such as interest, social network, academic preparedness, and family educational history (Pires & Chapin, 2022; Wai et al., 2018). Various researchers had identified barriers to first-generation Black American males, such as being less

knowledgeable of institutions of higher learning, having a shared sense of belonging, low academic resilience, and lower college completion rates (Luzecky et al., 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2019). When stakeholders identified pertinent factors that first-generation Black males labeled as barriers during matriculation, educational stakeholders could transform learning environments committed to helping Black youth activate their resilience (James et al., 2022; Liew et al., 2018).

### **Practical Significance**

According to data, 34% of Black males graduated from four-year higher education institutions over six years (Hill et al., 2021; Klein, 2019). On a practical level, this study was significant to administrators, community leaders, educators, parents, policymakers, and students because it expanded the small amount of literature about the resilience and academic success of low-income, first-generation Black American male students. This study challenged various stakeholders in higher education to understand how some Black males succeed academically. As a result, educational officials implemented strategies focused on assisting Black American male students (Irvine, 2019; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Many researchers had identified one significant detriment of low-income, first-generation Black American males as campus climate (Havlik et al., 2020; Oikonomidoy et al., 2021; Pratt et al., 2019). By having a more cognitive comprehension of low-income, first-generation Black American males, higher education institutions could even more satisfactorily address the issues of these students. This research increased the knowledge of barriers that low-income, first-generation Black American males encountered throughout their enrollment and how they overcame those difficulties by being resilient.

## **Research Questions**

This study focused on better understanding the academic and social factors contributing to the success and failures of first-generation Black males in higher education. The study has one central question and four sub-questions. Creswell and Poth (2018) and Neubauer et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study, which focused on lived and personal experiences and understanding the meaning of their stories. Past studies had focused on student, family, and community deficiencies (Harper et al., 2020; Klein, 2019). Understanding the discrepancies in minority students' instruction during their adolescent years provided a foundation for intervention strategies that yield more college-ready students from various backgrounds (Harper et al., 2020; Klein, 2019). This study had a central question and four sub-questions:

### **Central Research Question**

What academic and social factors presented challenges to low-income, first-generation Black American males, and how did they overcome them?

### **Sub-Question One**

What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success?

### **Sub-Question Two**

What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success?

### **Sub-Question Three**

What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure?

### **Sub-Question Four**

What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure?

### **Definitions**

1. *Academic Performance* - A scope of understanding that a student displays in a learning environment; it includes grading, standard test scores, and honors attained (Ma & Shea, 2021).
2. *Attrition* - The reduction in a learning education student population due to dropping out and transfers (Nemtcan et al., 2020).
3. *Black* - An identity term for Black-African origins born in the U.S. (Kalunta-Crumpton, 2020).
4. *First-Generation College Student* - A student whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree, or in the case of students who live with and receive support from only one parent, a student whose only such parent did not complete a bachelor's degree (Romanelli, 2020).
5. *Historically Black College and University (HBCU)* – A postsecondary education system with the historical and current mission of training Blacks (Britton et al., 2023).
6. *Low Income* - A multidimensional concept that refers to a family's subjective sense of overall welfare, considering family members' physical and emotional health and interconnectedness, resulting in family stability (Sano et al., 2021).
7. *Low-Income Students* - Students from low-income families (Sano et al., 2021).
8. *Phenomenology* - A form of qualitative research that focuses on studying an individual's lived experiences within the world (Neubauer et al., 2019).

9. *Predominantly White Institutions* - Higher learning institutions in which 50% or more of the student enrollment is Whites (Baker et al., 2018).
10. *Retention Barriers* - Challenges that directly and indirectly affect students' motivation and persistence in the post-higher education system (Floyd et al., 2021)
11. *Retention Strategies* - Methods put into place by postsecondary education systems to influence African American persistence positively (Pratt et al., 2019).

### **Summary**

The aim of this phenomenological study was to discover and interpret the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males who graduated or attended a four-year institution and effectively provide a solution to these issues. Researchers had found that social and academic factors affected the academic success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American students. Black males were entering school and enduring graduation at similar rates as their companions. However, the problem was that institutions of higher learning had not identified the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males who graduated or attended the institution and why those students graduated significantly less than their peers (Ma & Shea, 2021; Reed et al., 2019). This study aimed to clarify internal and external factors that first-generation Black American males attributed to their collegiate success or failure by using Tinto's theory of integration as the theoretical framework (Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022; Schaeper, 2020). The number of Black males attending institutions of higher learning continued to increase, given the unwavering desire to achieve a better quality of life and create generational wealth. Understanding what caused them to prevail rather than what only added to their disappointment was critical in building these help measures. I addressed the

mystery in comprehension by inspecting the encounters often low-income, first-generation Black American males faced during their journey to degree attainment.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

A thorough review of the research identified factors that characterize low-income, first-generation Black American males (FGBAM) university achievement and failure. Evaluating how some Black males succeeded scholastically and socially may help instruct authorities about how to battle Black male students (Irvine, 2019; Whaley et al., 2019). Most recently, many institutions of higher learning are enrolling more racial and ethnically diverse students. This literature review will review research regarding factors contributing to the collegiate success and failure of FGBAM. This chapter focuses on the literature surrounding student's college preparedness, Black male's pursuit of higher education, the achievement gap, the importance of academic and social integration into higher education, the resiliency of Black American males, internal and external factors associated with collegiate success, and the culture of Black males. Tinto's (2006, 2017) theory of integration revolves around positive factor components that help defeat negative encounters and how FGBAM utilized negative external factors to compel them to aspire for collegiate success.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study's theory is Tinto's student integration model (1975, 2017). Tinto's theory presents the norms of academic and social integration, precisely the unifying theme for a series of studies that perceive the idea that students' involvement in the social environment and educational setups are critical to their success and retention in college. Hadjar et al. (2022) and French (2017) described that Tinto's model of integration (1975, 2017) focuses on the academic and social integration of students and presumes there is a correlation specific to commitment toward students' academic and social environment in educational institutions, as well as

association with university dropout as a negative outcome. This model also distinguishes between social and intellectual integration and posits that the decision to drop out results from a low level of integration into higher education, especially a low level of educational integration. Additionally, French (2017) and Stadtfeld et al. (2019) identified two core principles of Tinto's theory: academic integration and social integration, which are interrelated and have reciprocal effects concerning student persistence. However, Haas and Hadjar (2020) and Hayter and Parker (2019) showed that many students base their decisions on personal interpretation and are deeply embedded and specific to their plight. For example, a student's academic performance, measured by grades, is most beneficial when reviewing how well students have adopted and integrated the institution's academic norms. Researchers have found that successful social integration leads to students feeling rewarded and experiencing a sense of affirmation (French, 2017; Tinto, 2006). Tinto's (1975) model focused on three main components: First, students enter college with different levels of academic preparation and characteristics. Secondly, they develop different levels of integration into an institution's educational and social system. Lastly, they produce different levels of integration into an institution's social system, including establishing different levels of interaction with their peers (p. 2). For example, Tinto's model has been applied to several studies in the past to explain the transitional period of students leaving secondary schools to attend postsecondary institutions. Tinto (1975, 2017) listed six characteristics that impede a student's ability to persist through college or leave prematurely. Those characteristics are pre-entry attributes, objective and initial commitments, experience with the university system, integration, objective, and emerging responsibilities.

The transition to university can be a tumultuous time for many students. During these transitions, students begin to feel out of control or experience feelings of helplessness, which can



become normative when dealing with the many changes that accompany this life transition (Dunkley et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2018). Specifically, I will use this theory to observe an individual's biological vulnerabilities, or predispositions, to particular psychological disorders which stressful events can trigger. In addition, it explains how individuals who experience the same external factors can react dramatically and differ from those factors depending on their upbringing (Dunkley et al., 2016; Ramli et al., 2018). Thus, low-income first-generation Black American males are considered resilient or "statistical elite" once completing college compared to their counterparts who failed to complete their degrees. However, academic resilience is not an individual trait of specific students but a process that includes multiple variables and instances over time (Romano et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021). Therefore, resilience has conceptualized an individual's characteristics, and the term resiliency refers to sound, stable, and consistent under challenging conditions (de los Reyes et al., 2022; Ye et al., 2021).

Indeed, Tinto's (1975, 2017) theory of integration is pertinent to this study because it will assist in analyzing the lived experiences of Black male students. Tinto's integration model argues that academic and social factors impact a student's decision to graduate or drop out (Bäulke et al., 2022; Manyanga et al., 2017). However, researchers have found that students previously exposed to college are likelier to enroll and complete their goal of graduating (Byun et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). For instance, Goralnik and Marcus (2020) and Ye et al. (2021) defined resiliency as positive adaptations despite adversity. However, much earlier work on resilience looked at resilience from an individual perspective, unlike today's researchers, who review resilience as a feature of the whole community. Therefore, the problem is that studies on the retention of Black males disproportionately focus on inadequate adjustments to environmental changes, institutional access, racism, stereotypes, and attrition rates (Banks &

Dohy, 2019; Prather et al., 2016). FGBAM must understand the pertinence of academic and social integration, precisely the unifying theme for a series of studies that perceive students' involvement in the social environment and educational setups as critical to their success and retention in college.

Subsequently, in research on students' transition into higher education, clear patterns express different conceptualizations of students' transition (Denny, 2021; Schaeper, 2020). Researchers have shown that for students to integrate into a college successfully, a certain level of adjustment to the new setting is required (Denny, 2021; Schaeper, 2020). Understanding first-generation students' initial integration into higher education is pertinent if institutions of higher learning aim to increase the number of Black American males graduating from their institutions. Thus, by strategically implementing the concept of integration at the center of attention and taking the role of the student and the social climate, we respond to the call for "moving beyond the individual student" (Wai et al., 2018, p. 313).

### **Related Literature**

Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023) believed resiliency to be a method of "bouncing back," even from a lifetime of "risk factors" or severe trauma or tragedy. Concerning education, resilient students are students who, despite the adverse conditions they may face, are successful in school (de los Reyes et al., 2022; Goralnik & Marcus, 2020). In like manner, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological System Theory (1977) hypothesis is related to developmental changes that occur through exceptional relations between a person's current condition, family, relationships with peers, schools, organizations, network settings, and social structures. This theory is beneficial and contributes to the study by allowing a deeper understanding of how human development is influenced by internal and external factors that directly affect and build the socioecological

environment around education (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Dubois et al., 2019). Bioecological systems provide a practical, theoretical framework for understanding students' characteristics in higher education (Dubois et al., 2019). Conversely, students factors such as students' level of maturation, career interest, health conditions, disability, major life events, ability, sex, religion, and learning styles are all intricate in understanding if a student can complete college (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Qaqish et al., 2020).

To further understand how an individual creates, it is essential to comprehend the targets' properties just as they are in their climate (Dubois et al., 2019; Theories of Early Childhood Education, 2017). Higher education ecological systems such as the campus climate, teacher-student relationship, technology, leadership styles, political decisions, educational resources, and the like also seem not well-considered (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Dubois et al., 2019). Studies have found that experiences have impacted black males' social personalities throughout history (Abu Saa et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). Nevertheless, researchers Smith et al. (2019) and Tamis-LeMonda et al. (2007) noted that aspects of instilled cultural value could be conflicting, additive both goals are endorsed, or functional purposes of each value orientation may facilitate each other (p.6). Black males participating in more thorough scholarly secondary school educational programs accomplish higher student achievement (Levine et al., 2020; Simonsmeier et al., 2020). Furthermore, providing a consistent and academically challenging testing environment is crucial for insightful accomplishments; external reasons such as extracurricular activities, family support, financial standing, and social integration add to students' success (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Ramli et al., 2018). Scholastically, successful students have found internal and external factors, such as flexibility, a merry soul, and a strong sense of self-sufficiency (Dubois et al., 2019; Simonsmeier et al., 2020).

### **K-12 Schools' Impact on the Collegiate Success of Black American Males**

When researchers consider the prominent narrative, racial and educational disparities result from students' lack of engagement. Regardless of academic level (i.e., elementary, secondary, or postsecondary), Black males do not attain the same level of achievement as their counterparts (Bonilla et al., 2021; Hines et al., 2020). Nevertheless, an increase in Black youth institutions of higher education has shown that academic success is pertinent, among other competing factors (Kromydas, 2017; Rust, 2019). The U.S. education system sets school zones based on residential location. As a result, residential neighborhoods affect the value of the property (wealth) and the racial and socioeconomic population of schools. Despite the recent increase in diversity in residential areas, Black students remain concentrated in racially segregated public schools in urban zones where a higher percentage is from families with low socioeconomic status (Bi et al., 2021; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Hines et al., 2020). Unfortunately, many Black students are not afforded opportunities for various educational pursuits, nor have they been in classrooms that always acknowledge their brilliance and ability to investigate STEM-related phenomena at the K–12 level (Martin et al., 2020; Suárez & Beatty, 2022). The socioeconomic status of the community a student belongs to is a pivotal predictor in determining a student's GPA for more than sex, race, and intellectual resources (Denny, 2021; Li et al., 2017). Researchers also have found that students from low socioeconomic status experience a chronic form of lower academic performance (Denny, 2021; Li et al., 2017). Notably, during adolescence and emerging adulthood, the impact of low socioeconomic status on the student's academic performance is more likely severe and associated with recurrent episodes of stress and depression (Mondi et al., 2017). The macrosystem's role in higher education is understanding students' academic issues. Therefore, a specialist can implement interventions

according to a student's needs (Babik & Gardner, 2021; McIsaac et al., 2016). The impact of macrosystem-level variables affects not only a student but also students of a particular generation or social class. However, further research has found that elements at this level that could affect students' academic pursuits are the curricula, economic status, cultural values, political systems, economic status, technological backgrounds, and childcare systems (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Kromydas, 2017).

In addition, urban schools provide less rigorous coursework because of fewer resources, leading to lower academic achievement among students. However, the Black-White achievement gap remains significant beyond controlling for school location as a covariate (Assari et al., 2021a; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023). Current studies conducted by Assari et al. (2021a) identified a 17% deficiency in educational attainment between Black (30.7%) and White adults (47.1%). Unfortunately, past studies have focused on "effective" or promising literacy practices for students in the K-12 school system, not identifying the nuances and significance of being a Black male in the educational context (Harper et al., 2020; Levine et al., 2020). As a result, educators are implementing strategies that build resilience and promote academic success (Goldman et al., 2021; Shay & Pohan, 2021; Wang, 2021). Researchers Assari et al. (2021b) and Leath et al. (2019) found that Black males from urban school districts were prone to experiencing adverse outcomes that impeded their academic success. Today's Black youth face many challenges that negatively impact their academic success (Goldman et al., 2021; Leath et al., 2019; Wang, 2021). While many statistics and figures on Black educational attainment and opportunities, insignificant studies focus on student experiences regarding their K-12 educational journey.

However, students who are academically successful in school are more likely to gain higher salaries, become active citizens, experience higher socioeconomic status, and avoid high-risk and criminal behaviors during adulthood (Ma & Shea, 2021; Mizani et al., 2022). Educational attainment provides opportunities for all individuals regardless of their demographic or socioeconomic background. Likewise, Ma and Shea (2021) and Muskens et al. (2019) reported that an individual with a college degree could make over one million dollars over a lifetime salary than someone with a high school diploma. Unfortunately, there is an enduring crisis for Black students in the U.S. educational system (Assari et al., 2021a; Rust, 2019). Most recently, ACGR reported that 80% of Black students in public high schools were below the U.S. average of 86%, while 89% of White students were above the U.S. average (Hill et al., 2021). These statistics urge the need for academic intervention to assist Black males in adapting and successfully matriculating (Bratton, 2018; Harper et al., 2020). College readiness is the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed in a credit-bearing course at a postsecondary institution without remediation (Hill et al., 2021; Huo, 2021). In addition, research has suggested “that college readiness should start early with the country’s most vulnerable youth (Black males)” (Akaba et al., 2020; Sun, 2021). To succeed in a college course, Black males must possess the knowledge, skills, and behaviors to reach it (Hines et al., 2020; Horrillo et al., 2021). Black youth aspire to succeed and are positively impacted by having friendly relationships and supportive mentorings (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021; Fruht & Chan, 2018).

In contrast, students that shared experiences of negative interactions with their teachers noted significant problems that affected their learning ability (Agyekum, 2019; Lodge et al., 2018). Subsequently, a mere student-teacher relationship will allow students to begin creating a balance between their social and academic life, allowing them to adapt to various circumstances

upon graduation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Levine et al., 2020). The help of an academic mentor for Black males can increase their academic persistence (Cook et al., 2019; Fruht & Chan, 2018). Perhaps this is why Amerstorfer and Frein von Münster-Kistner (2021) and Pychyl et al. (2022) stated that good teachers and their teaching matter. Teachers' classroom behaviors can meaningfully affect students' learning and emotional well-being (Dubois et al., 2019; Sun, 2021). However, school counselors are ideal mentors to prepare Black males with opportunities after secondary graduation, especially attaining a postsecondary degree (Abu Saa et al., 2019; Hines et al., 2020; Lehtinen et al., 2019). School counselors undergo training to assist students in academic achievement, college and career readiness, and social/emotional development (Abu Saa et al., 2019; Hines et al., 2020; Lehtinen et al., 2019). School counselors can identify students' needs based on their beliefs and biases and use data to identify college attendance rates and bridge opportunity gaps for their Black male student population (Abu Saa et al., 2019; Hines et al., 2020; Lehtinen et al., 2019).

### **History of Black American Males Seeking Higher Education**

According to Johnson et al. (2020) and Ma and Shea (2021), obtaining a college degree is a goal for many minorities. Many Black communities see higher education degrees as contributing to the success of their communities. The educational journey of achieving a college degree heavily influences future investment (Serdyukov, 2017), including more wealth (Klein, 2019), better employment opportunities (Huo, 2021), and enhanced quality of life (Phyo et al., 2020). However, pursuing higher education has been a long and contentious battle for Blacks in America (Freeman et al., 2021; McElderry, 2022). However, the establishment of Harvard University denoted higher education (Levy, 2019; Purcell & Lumbreras, 2021), and oppressed

people only accessed training in the Reconstruction period. Preceding the Civil War, many White southerners believed that disorder and disobedience would arise if Black Americans were allowed to become educated, and disruption and disobedience would occur (Levy, 2019; Lewis & James-Gallaway, 2022). By preventing the education of Black Americans, White Southerners were able to suppress the Black population (Johnson et al., 2020; Walsemann et al., 2022). Then, the Civil War happened, with more than three million oppressed Black Americans gaining freedom (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Levy, 2019; Lewis & James-Gallaway, 2022). The war began at another stage for the freed people; in any case, they were largely ignorant and without the fundamental aptitudes expected to help themselves. Enslaved people looked for instruction to accomplish uniformity, autonomy, and flourishing. The United States Congress implemented the Freedmen's Bureau to educate Blacks despite the South's disdain (Johnson et al., 2020; Walsemann et al., 2022). The main goal of the Bureau was to organize and manage an education initiative across the Southern states. The Bureau provided Black students with primary, secondary, and postsecondary education (Huo, 2021; Walsemann et al., 2022). Members of the American Missionary Association (Bausell et al., 2020; Lewis & James-Gallaway, 2022) taught at the Bureau, educating newly freed men and women. Many Blacks across the South sought education, and the Quakers, Presbyterians, and the Freedmen's Bureau answered the call. However, due to the increase of Blacks seeking education, the establishment of Historically Black Universities and Colleges (HBCUs), with numerous still standing today (Alase, 2017; McElderry, 2022; Walsemann et al., 2022). The Plessy v. Ferguson United States Supreme Court case ruled "separate but equal" about racial segregation laws (Alase, 2017; Amaral, 2022). The



belief is that if a group of people had access to legal rights, services, and opportunities, they could be treated differently (Amaral, 2022; Walsemann et al., 2022). Following this decision, many questioned the existence of predominantly Black schools, while funding remained disproportionate compared to primarily White schools (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2020). However, despite expanded access to Historically White Institutions (HWI) for Black American students, structural disadvantages and systematic racism continue to limit college opportunities (Freeman et al., 2021; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023). There are negative conversations regarding Black boys in societal or educational settings (Freeman et al., 2021; Goings, 2018). For years, Black male students have not received the resources or further assistance to promote academic success among Black American males (Qaqish et al., 2020; Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). While schools and colleges have furnished racial minorities with more prominent admittance to institutions of higher learning, there is a critical distinction in the graduation rates of racial minorities and white students.

However, in the mid-60s and early 70s, Black American students across the United States began confronting racism by organizing protests and demanding institutional societal changes (Banaji et al., 2021; Malaney-Brown, 2022). Additionally, *Adams v. Richardson* concluded that Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Florida, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Maryland, and Virginia refused to desegregate higher education institutions. The court ordered the states to submit desegregation plans, but many failed to submit plans, facing little to no consequence. Recently, students protested across 90 campuses, drawing national attention to the hostile racial climates, continued racism, and inequality many Black American students

attending HWIs experienced (Freeman et al., 2021; Malaney-Brown, 2022). According to McLeay et al. (2017), Black American students make up 13% of current college students, while in the past, they constituted nine percent (Malaney-Brown, 2022; Sablan, 2019). Despite the advantages of higher education, the U.S. legal and judicial system has systematically limited Black American attendance in public institutions (Freeman et al., 2021; Sablan, 2019). One way institutions have been able to limit the number of Black American students is by implementing intelligence test requirements (DeLaney et al., 2022; Kanaya, 2019). Intelligence tests have been a part of the recruitment process since the First World War, when the U.S. Army administered intelligence tests to recruits, sorting, selecting, and placing people based on their test scores. Higher education institutions have since become heavily dependent upon standardized intellectual tests for determining students (Teltemann & Schunck, 2020; Wai et al., 2018). Despite the importance of human attributes, tests and assessments are still pertinent when deciding which students receive the opportunity for higher-status education and employment. In addition to individual academic achievement, the measurement of merit today also entails the test and assessment performance of population groups (race/ethnicity, class, and sex) and educational institutions (schools, colleges, and universities) in addition to individuals (Andrade, 2019; Wai et al., 2018).

However, the issue with this practice is that individual merit and societal expectations are linked to specific ethnic groups at colleges and universities (Andrade, 2019; Teltemann & Schunck, 2020). Because there are discrepancies in the score performance of students of different races/ethnic groups, there are separate merit scholarship programs for people of various

racess/ethnic groups (Jonsson et al., 2021; Wai et al., 2018). Ricci et al. (2019) report that Black students earned 10% of college and graduate degrees, and 7% were doctoral. Researchers have also noted that Black students in grades K-12 experience the same issues as Black students transitioning into higher education (Assari et al., 2021b; Wai et al., 2018). To increase the number of Black male students obtaining college degrees, equal access to affordable and quality education must be obtainable for all (Boon et al., 2022; Ma & Shea, 2021).

Furthermore, Assari et al. (2021a) and Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023) stated six explanations behind low scholastic accomplishment levels for some Black males: turbulent home environment, impoverished neighborhoods, physical/mental abuse during adolescence, low socioeconomic status, single-parent family, and absence of positive male role models. Students' prior experiences and preparation for college-level work affect their ability to complete a college degree (Bettencourt et al., 2022; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023). Various schools and universities see growing amounts of underprepared students for college-level coursework. I identified statements that members distinguished themselves as persuasive in their scholarly achievement; family support, perception of others, strict and profound confidence, consolation from educators, tutors, and friends, versatility, solid, hard-working attitude, and preliminaries (Irvine, 2019; Malaney-Brown, 2022).

### **First-Generation College Students and the Achievement Gap**

Higher education stakeholders do not use one definition of first-generation college students. These definitions can range from "students whose parents do not have any postsecondary experience" (Reed et al., 2019, p. 2) to being broader "students whose parents

have not received a bachelor's degree" (McLeay et al., 2017, p. 1). The academic achievement gap in the United States education system persists despite significant investments and efforts to correct it (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2021). The achievement gap describes the difference in academic performance or educational outcomes among student demographic groups (gender, income level, disabilities, English language learners, among others). It is often defined as a significant difference in the low academic performance of Black and Hispanic students versus the higher academic performance of their White and Asian peers in the kindergarten (K) through the 12th-grade education system (Bi et al., 2021; Klein, 2019). Higher education scholars, teachers, and practitioners are responsible for understanding these students as learners, given that a central purpose of higher education is learning. Failing to understand these students as learners may lead scholars, teachers, and practitioners to overlook fundamental ways to support them in their academic pursuits (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020, p. 140). The educational attainment gap between Black and White students can be observed at seven and the end of compulsory education.

Additionally, aspirations to earn a college degree among Black American students have been connected to academic achievement, so much so that educational aspirations decline when they reach the end of their matriculation (Ma & Shea, 2021; Rutkowski et al., 2018). Moreover, researchers believe equity is an issue when understanding first-generation college students as academic learners. Researchers have identified this as an equity issue because a significant portion of the group is from a heterogeneous population composed of racially marginalized groups (Reed et al., 2019; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Bensimon (2018) and Cabrera et al. (2016) found that higher education institutions have deeply embedded whiteness, creating significant disadvantages for racially minoritized groups. Thus, by studying and identifying first-generation

college students as academic learners, access to educational experiences and better outcomes for minoritized students in higher education will increase (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2019). Black American first-generation college students experience a myriad of negative factors. In addition to the racial tension and unacceptance from college campuses, they arrive on campus without the knowledge to successfully and effectively navigate and graduate from institutions of higher learning (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Cabrera et al., 2016).

According to Freeman et al. (2021) and Harper et al. (2020), in the United States, first-generation college students encompass one-third of students attending college. Yet, only 56% earn a degree within six years compared to students with a parent who graduated from college. With an increasing interest surrounding Black Americans in higher education, many of these studies include first-generation college populations. Indeed, Black students offer multiple assets and benefits to college campuses; several factors can help intersect identities worthy of further research, including gender, sexuality, and social class. However, faculty and staff assume that Black students live or attend primarily urban school systems, making it difficult for students from rural and suburban backgrounds (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Lodge et al., 2018). Higher education stakeholders expect students to benefit society through their knowledge, increase their depth of knowledge, develop leaders, and increase cultural and economic development (Chankseliani et al., 2021; Romano et al., 2021). Due to this research, first-generation college students (FGCS) must be more adequately studied and presented with impactful information. Thus, an intentional focus on the experiences of FGCS will continue to add more depth of knowledge about this population of individuals (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Harper et al., 2020). FGCS seems simple enough, but issues continually arise when defining this population of students (Harper et al., 2020; Liversage et al., 2018). FGCS are students whose parents did not

attend a post-secondary institution (Harper et al., 2020; Liversage et al., 2018). Characteristics of first-generation college students include low socioeconomic status, inadequate exposure to the collegiate environment, and the lack of academic college preparation (Harper et al., 2020; Ma & Shea, 2021).

Namely, the expressions to Johansson (2021) and Wigg and Ehrlin (2021), first-year students are in an ‘unsure’ liminal space when they leave secondary school and enter an altogether different organization. Moreover, many first-generation students, that is, students who come from backgrounds where there is a negligible or non-existent connection with advanced education or the aspiration of receiving a college education (Rust, 2019; Wigg & Ehrlin, 2021). However, many of these FGCS arrive at their respective campuses uninformed of their status as FGCS and how to successfully navigate the college climate (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Wigg & Ehrlin, 2021). Consequently, Black American male students entering schools and colleges may require broad help in the events and execution of their professional goals due to their lack of exposure to educational opportunities (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Kromydas, 2017).

Moreover, due to Black American males’ lack of academic success, many students leave high school before earning their high school diploma (Harper et al., 2020; Stanisławski, 2019). If not eradicated soon, this problem will continue to grow, leaving many Black American students underprepared for college and the workforce (Hines et al., 2020; Ma & Shea, 2021). Academic learners are students engaged in sociocultural processes involving disciplinary knowledge acquisition, production, and application. Sociocultural and critical learning science approaches largely shape our view of academic learning (Lodge et al., 2018; Power and Privilege in the Learning Sciences, 2016). Engaging a sociocultural and essential learning approach to first-generation college students’ lives will allow the context of students’ lives to be

implemented in creating strategies for working with students with multiple intersecting identities marginalized in higher education (Park et al., 2019; Power and Privilege in the Learning Sciences, 2016).

Nonetheless, informing and training faculty, staff, and administrators about the importance and differences of the culture and social experiences of Black FGCS will allow stakeholders to identify the strengths and needs of these students (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Wigg & Ehrlin, 2021). Researchers Son et al. (2020) and Wigg and Ehrlin (2021) accepted that the liminal period is the limit of college life, and youthful adulthood characterizes their future in many ways. Numerous obstructions influence the student's enlistment and graduation rate. For example, first-generation students are more likely to leave school within the first three years (33%) than students whose guardians have a four-year certification (14%), per the NCES. Just 48% of first-generation students are on target to graduate three years after enlistment (Martin et al., 2020). However, Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020) and Knaggs et al. (2015) researched challenges and systemic barriers that impede first-generation students' ability to access, navigate, and persist in college. Their research discovered that many institutions have noted that FGCS are statistically likely to be low-income, non-native English speakers. They have racially minoritized identities, which can correlate with adverse outcomes for academic performance and degree completion (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Ma & Shea, 2021). Considering that racial underrepresentation, low scholastic confidence, and trouble acclimating to school can show while enrolled, which adds to a quieter pace of school consummation than that for students who have one parent with a four-year degree (Collier, 2017; Jury et al., 2017). Snags like an absence of school status, domestic help, and financial strength plague first-generation students as they

register and hinder them from reaching their fullest potential of being academically successful (Goward, 2018; Jury et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, cities across the United States are plagued with disadvantaged urban communities beset with unemployment, leading to many issues such as broken homes, troubled behavior, limited resources, and a lack of self-control (Bonilla et al., 2021; Velásquez-Rojas et al., 2022). Bartscher et al. (2020) and Camasso and Jagannathan (2018) shared that minimal academic opportunities, unqualified teachers, a lack of educational resources, and neighborhood support plague urban school districts. Local, state, and national assessment data show that Black American students, on average, enter kindergarten one year behind their White peers and fall further behind as they progress through school (Bartscher et al., 2020; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023). Likewise, the low educational outcomes and attendance support this statement in postsecondary institutions for Black American males (Assari et al., 2021a; Bonilla et al., 2021). Bartscher et al. (2020) and Camasso and Jagannathan (2018) characterize school preparation as scholarly and down-to-earth information that should be fruitful in higher education. However, school status is the blend of center scholastic information, abilities, and propensities that should be effective in a postsecondary setting without healing coursework or preparing (Nusbaum et al., 2020). School and resource availability for secondary school students is a significant focal point of instruction change development (Reindl et al., 2022; Velásquez-Rojas et al., 2022). Many first-generation undergraduates are from low-income families and low-performing K-12 educational systems (Bartscher et al., 2020; Ma & Shea, 2021).

Additionally, Cappelen et al. (2020) and Theories of Early Childhood Education (2017) note that first-generation student guardians' come up short on the significance of a thorough educational plan in secondary school and how it identifies with school planning and availability.



As a result, they cannot sufficiently help their children effectively in school (Bartscher et al., 2020; Nusbaum et al., 2020). Another barrier that some first-generation Black American males experience is having monetary restrictions and the absence of financial help. Subsequently, Bi et al. (2021) and Kakar et al. (2019) found that Black students are disproportionately more impacted by student debt than other ethnic groups.

Moreover, Martin et al. (2020) reports that about 90% of low-income, first-generation students do not graduate within six years. These students generally come from lower-income foundations and frequently work over 20 hours weekly to fund their schooling (Broton et al., 2016; Denny, 2021). With many first-generation students coming from low-financial homes, students need the financial information and assets that numerous students with parents have attended college (Cappelen et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2020). It is common for first-generation students to work all day while going to school to have the option to counterbalance educational costs and other expenses while attending college (Bi et al., 2021; Romanelli, 2020).

Summarizing this information, first-generation students are in greater danger of building student loan obligation troubles that surpass the public normal (Franklin et al., 2018; Harper et al., 2020). Indeed, first-generation undergraduate students may feel intimidated by the university climate when initially showing up on school grounds. However, self-isolation from the campus community causes academic and social trouble in acclimatizing to the school setting.

Subsequently, changing the way of life on a school campus can be overwhelming and frightening for some first-generation students as they will probably be from underrepresented minorities (Checkoway, 2018; Harper et al., 2020). FGCS must discover their place in the campus climate, build relationships, or give up and return home (Havlik et al., 2020; Pratt et al., 2019).

The absence of family support is another issue for some FGCS; lack of support prompts the lack of degrees of enthusiastic help or limited comprehension of the responsibility important for a student to flourish in school (Havlik et al., 2020; Snodgrass Rangel et al., 2020). However, social support from guardians and friends is identified with the capacity of ethnic minority students to conform to school life (Bi et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2020). An apparent absence of friend support strongly correlates to helpless school results for minority first-generation students (Marcucci, 2020; Snodgrass Rangel et al., 2020). Just 25% of school graduates revealed having a tutor who urged them to accomplish their objectives, as indicated by the Strada-Gallup Alumni Survey (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Snodgrass Rangel et al., 2020). Likewise, 64% of members demonstrated that their tutor was an educator. However, many first-generation and minority students are less inclined to distinguish an educator as their guide; 72% of White students recognized their coaches as teachers, contrasted with 61% of first-generation students and 47% of minority students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Huo, 2021). Brooms and Davis (2017) and Rust (2019) revealed that four-year college education fulfillment expanded from 9.5% to 15.3% for Black Americans in the United States. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) and Levine et al. (2020) contended that individuals have various sorts and levels of inspiration. Improving educational systems and early mediation projects will decrease some of these dangerous factors.

Furthermore, persuasive scholars guarantee that an individual's decision, industriousness, and execution clarify the degree of accomplishment they experience (Edgar et al., 2019; Wu, 2019). Giving more tasks to low-income networks will permit guardians to set out better open doors for their families (Cappelen et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2021). The achievement gap has consistently been an issue for the education system in the United States. This system involves complex stakeholder interactions (Johnson et al., 2020; Lehtinen et al., 2019).

## **The Importance of Successful Academic Integration into Higher Education**

The initial study phase is pivotal in students' ability to integrate academically, make sound educational decisions, and progress successfully (Levine et al., 2020; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). Students must successfully manage their transition into the new environment (Levine et al., 2020; Schaeper, 2020). Research acknowledges that first-year students' experiences are pertinent to student outcomes, such as academic and social well-being (Bonilla et al., 2021; Hassel & Ridout, 2018). Coertjens et al. (2017) defined transition as a shift between contexts and a change in role requirements. To successfully transition, students must have a certain degree of adjustment and integration into the new setting (Schaeper, 2020; Stadtfeld et al., 2019). For academic developers, fostering the integration of research and practice is strategic and assists with long-term and systematic change (Smith & Wilkins, 2018; Stadtfeld et al., 2019). Integration into college is pertinent to Tinto's (2006, 2017) integration theory. The importance of education in Black American families has grown astronomically due to the opportunity to compete for better opportunities globally; however, many FGCS do not apply to college due to their lack of knowledge of the resources available to them (Fruht & Chan, 2018; Ma & Shea, 2021).

Nevertheless, to better serve the students at various institutions, some are incorporating formal programs to support students in need (DuBois et al., 2002; Fruht & Chan, 2018; Sterrett et al., 2011; Wang, 2021). The support that young people receive before college impacts a student's motivation to attend college and gives them the skills and capital to be successful once they enroll. Moreover, many educational stakeholders are pushing the importance of role models to assist students with successfully maneuvering through the academic pipeline (Fruht & Chan,

2018; Kearney & Levine, 2020). Upon enrolling, FGCS are unprepared for college and need more family support and financial stability. Likewise, Gadosey et al. (2022) and Havlik et al. (2020) found that FGC students perceive their instructors as less concerned about students and are generally less satisfied with their academic and social experiences on campus. Therefore, when institutions implement learning communities and set aside a dedicated space, they will see increased student learning and retention.

Additionally, studies have shown that Black male college students can increase college persistence with the support of an academic mentor (Cook et al., 2019; Marsh et al., 2018). However, with little to no dominant male presence in their lives, many students must realize their ability to enhance their educational goals (Cook et al., 2019; Ma & Shea, 2021). Following this distinction and acknowledging the more significant impact of academic integration, we focus on academic integration as a central challenge for first-year students and an important outcome variable of the initial phase of higher education (Schaeper, 2020, p. 96). College is pertinent and, in most cases, instrumental in building strong leaders; however, it is when students face many challenges and changes. In the past few decades, there has been an increased interest in students transitioning from high school to their first year of college. Research acknowledges that first-year students' experiences are pertinent to student outcomes, such as academic and social well-being (Bonilla et al., 2021; Hassel & Ridout, 2018).

This transition can have students move away from close family and friends and forge new friendships. Indeed, it is a time for students to implement life lessons and skills taught by their immediate families because college life allows students more opportunities to experiment with different levels of responsibility and independence. As a result of this transition, students begin to undergo an identity transformation, where they determine their own decisions and actions.

Specifically, Bittmann (2021) and Ye et al. (2021) found a correlation between students' learning styles, resiliency, and ability to be academically successful. Mainly, test scores on assertiveness, conscientiousness, and emotionality are related to a student's grades. Researchers have found that a cognitively activating learning environment increases students' academic integration, while direct instruction harms academic integration (Schaeper, 2020; Stadtfeld et al., 2019). Students' interpretation of their learning experience can ultimately lead to different educational outcomes (Cachia et al., 2018; Denny, 2021). Therefore, university stakeholders must implement interventions and strategies to serve students during this transformative process better (Cook et al., 2019; Lehtinen et al., 2019). Academic success is typically associated with attaining summative assessments to show students' learning outcomes (Cachia et al., 2018; Denny, 2021). However, grade point average (GPA) determines academic success at postsecondary institutions, knowledge acquisition and ability, and overall satisfaction. Each conceptualization predicts a student's capabilities (perceived academic ability and drive to achieve) and experiences (academic and social integration). Notably, researchers found that perceived academic ability positively affected grade point average and acquisition of knowledge and skills but not satisfaction (Cachia et al., 2018; Denny, 2021). Lakhal et al. (2020) agreed with Piepenburg and Beckmann (2022) and conceptualized social and academic integration as students' commitment to building social and intellectual relationships with their peers. Sánchez et al. (2009) and Zander et al. (2018) proposed academic self-efficacy and growth mindsets as being able to explain students' desire for others' learning and thus create a pathway for students to integrate into these supportive networks. Honicke and Broadbent (2016) and Zander et al. (2018) found that students with solid academic self-efficacy beliefs are more willing to overcome barriers and academic goals in an educational setting.

In contrast, the drive had no direct relationship with the outcomes. According to Tinto's (2006, 2017) Integration Theory, a lack of theoretical clarity has led to a variety of operational definitions of academic integration, which reflect researchers' various interpretations of the construct: managing the time spent in activities; students' perceptions, reported behaviors, and participation in specific activities; students' satisfaction with aspects of the academic environment; objective performance criteria; or a combination of these measures (p. 326). While academic success can correlate to the mastery of concepts through scholastic assessment grades, it can also refer to the ability of a graduate to secure a professional career related to their degree (Cachia et al., 2018; Farrell et al., 2018). Academic success is essential as employers look for individuals with postsecondary education. Although, there are many critical indicators of success besides grades. Researchers have found that psychological factors beyond intellectual ability impact academic achievement (Palomar-Lever & Victorio-Estrada, 2019; Shi & Qu, 2021). Sánchez et al. (2009) and Zander et al. (2018) examined the correlation between social and educational integration as prior characteristics needed to integrate successfully into the college campus. Researchers have explained the academic success of students and the impact of internal and external factors (Denny, 2021; Stadtfeld et al., 2019). Zander et al. (2018) defined academic self-efficacy as a person's belief that they will accomplish a specific task or domain. However, there is no consistent definition of academic success. Some researchers suggest that the term is a catch-all phrase for many student outcomes (Andrade, 2019; Denny, 2021), including grades, GPA, satisfaction, and learning and developing knowledge.

Additionally, Cachia et al. (2018) and Denny (2021) argued that the meaning of this term is debatable as it has an "amorphous" identity, depending on varying subjective perspectives. After analyzing the literature on the use of this terminology in different subject fields, Alyahyan

and Düştegör (2020) and Marsh et al. (2018) identified six elements that define it, namely: academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills, and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance. Higher education institutions must determine how best to support their students to succeed academically. To provide support, stakeholders must primarily understand the different cultures of students arriving on campus, their goals and beliefs, their perception of the campus environment, academic and social integration, and students' self-efficacy (Kakar et al., 2019; Lehtinen et al., 2019). Academic integration can also include students' time in the library, class, faculty, and peer interactions (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Harper et al., 2020)). Students' lack of academic integration can result in lower grades and test scores, ultimately requiring the student to leave the institution (Farrell et al., 2018; Tinto, 1975; Wai et al., 2018).

Furthermore, researchers have shown that students with high levels of self-efficacy are more prone to believe they can be academically successful (Neroni et al., 2022; Zander et al., 2018). Since these students see themselves as academically successful, they can assist their peers and expect them to seek their assistance (Neroni et al., 2022; Zander et al., 2018). Students' self-efficacy can be related to a student's college preparedness and assist with academic transitions, and it closely correlates to a student's ability to succeed academically (Brouwer et al., 2018; Detgen et al., 2021). French (2017) and Manfra (2019) identified three tensions regarding how students conceptualize integration and practice. Hassel and Ridout (2018) and Schaeper (2020) identified opportunities to identify issues and find ways to alleviate those issues. Next, researchers identified concerns of engagement for different individuals. By increasing engagement in learning and development, stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, and leaders)

improve students' academic integration with their campus. Finally, the adaptation and level of individuality in competency development to achieve an intellectual result can be a contentious battle for some students (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Schaeper, 2020).

### **The Importance of Successful Social Integration into Higher Education**

Social integration in higher education is often studied individually (Álvarez-Rivadulla et al., 2022; Lakhal et al., 2020). In addition, students who integrate into the college campus by developing relationships with their peers, faculty, and staff, becoming members of clubs and organizations, and engaging in academic activities, are more than likely to graduate from their respective institutions. Likewise, Farrell et al. (2018) found that students who successfully adapt to their college environment by developing relationships with their peers, joining organizations, or engaging in academic activities, are more likely to persist to graduation. However, researchers have defined academic success as attaining knowledge through scholastic assessments linked to college graduates' possibility of receiving a professional role related to their degree (Cachia et al., 2018; Cappelen et al., 2020). Notably, academic integration occurs when students become involved with the academic side of college life, while social integration occurs when students create relationships and connections outside the classroom. Although these concepts are entirely different and unrelated, they interact and enhance (Denny, 2021; Farrell et al., 2018). Institutions of higher education are learning that, despite the rigor of a course, the teacher-student ratio in classrooms, or the basis of the system, learning communities or study groups are vital to student academic success (Schmidt, 2020; Stadtfeld et al., 2019). Researchers Brorsson et al. (2017) and Chrysikos et al. (2017) found that engagement in learning communities is pertinent to students' connection to their campus. These researchers identified learning communities as groups of students usually in the same major program or having similar academic interests.



Similarly, researchers Abu Saa et al. (2019) and Harper et al. (2020) sought to measure three dynamics of student relations: positive interaction, friendship, and studying together. Harper et al. (2020) and Schmidt (2020) reported that, most often, informal relationships lead to friendships, and the more time students spend together and offer support, friendships ultimately lead to forming study groups. Piepenburg and Beckmann (2022) and Reindl et al. (2022) define social integration as the quantity and quality of students' interactions with faculty and other students. Piepenburg and Beckmann (2022) and Álvarez-Rivadulla et al. (2022) also noted that institutions could measure a student's social integration into a campus environment in several ways, from personal belonging to the institution to self-reporting college engagement in formal and informal activities. Tinto's (1975, 2017) study focused on several predictors of student retention and college success. Academic and social preparation during adolescent years and adapting to college are more likely to give accurate predictions of students dropping out of college during their first year (Cook et al., 2019; Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022). Lakhali et al. (2020) and Álvarez-Rivadulla et al. (2022) found social integration to be decisive for students' performance and well-being in college. According to research, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are far less likely to integrate onto a college campus (Álvarez-Rivadulla et al., 2022; Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022). However, earlier research on student retention focused on theories with high academic and social engagement or integration levels and the correlation between the two and student retention (Harper et al., 2020; Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022).

In comparison, social factors seldom predict a student's ability to start college successfully. However, researchers have found that most students living in the worst conditions can develop positive coping mechanisms to deal with and overcome opposing life challenges and

secure a decent living (Bernaras et al., 2019; Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022). Tinto (2017) argued that stakeholders should consider psychological skills, family background, secondary schooling, impacts on student goals, and resilience before students enter college. Students' goals influence their collegiate experience. The bridge to establishing equal opportunities will surface by promoting high-quality postsecondary education for diversified populations. Billingham (2018) and Ma and Shea (2021) shared that access to higher education is pertinent for students to improve their quality of life. Likewise, Duchek (2020) and Piepenburg and Beckmann (2022) defined the ability or capacity to overcome adversity and lead a healthy life as resilience. Social factors are solid predictors of how students persevere, navigate rigorous coursework, and meet the expectations of their faculty and institution (Chen & Wang, 2021; Reindl et al., 2022). Institutions of higher education are steadily increasing campus diversity, partly due to institutions' focus on improving the enrollment of minority students (Álvarez-Rivadulla et al., 2022; Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022). However, students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds struggle with becoming integrated on a college campus compared to middle-class students (Jury et al., 2017; Park et al., 2019).

Social integration is a student's ability to build personal and professional relationships with peers and faculty (Chen & Wang, 2021; Tinto, 1975). Hayter and Parker (2019) and Stadtfeld et al. (2019) researched and found that students who experience incongruity in their expectations of social integration compared with their personal experiences were likelier to depart. While non-academic factors include students' confidence, self-motivation, finances, social support, and family support, some researchers say social integration is the most critical non-academic factor (Bernaras et al., 2019; Reindl et al., 2022). Tinto (1975, 2017) found that successful social integration and college support are directly related to a student's endurance.

Although institutions are steadily increasing the socioeconomic status diversity among their students, this does not guarantee cross-class interaction (Álvarez-Rivadulla et al., 2022; Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds can benefit from building relationships with students from different backgrounds (Alyahyan & Düştögör, 2020; Silverman et al., 2023). By expanding their social circle, students increase their knowledge to thrive socially and academically and improve their academic performance (Andrade, 2019; Denny, 2021). However, students leave institutions due to failure to integrate into campus life. As a result, students become distant and uninterested in college life expectancies and isolated further from their peers and faculty (Denny, 2021; Reindl et al., 2022). However, researchers have reported that less than 25% of students who leave higher education institutions are related to academic problems (Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022; Reindl et al., 2022). Casanova et al. (2022) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) found five areas in the literature significant to social and educational integration: faculty-student contact, peer interactions, experiences with diversity, co-curricular activities, and student satisfaction.

Moreover, researchers use the Beginning Postsecondary Student (BPS) survey to provide social and academic integration (Carroll et al., 2020; Stadtfeld et al., 2019). The index for social integration into higher education is student participation in (1) campus clubs, organizations, or groups; (2) campus drama performances or art; and (3) participation in sports (Carroll et al., 2020; Stadtfeld et al., 2019). Higher education institutions consider social integration a student's ability to connect with peers, get involved through organizations and sports, and build rapport with faculty and staff (Carroll et al., 2020; Stadtfeld et al., 2019; Tinto, 1975). Notably, researchers have found that these practices reduce the opportunity for students to feel isolated or lonely, two main reasons for dropping out of college (Bäulke et al., 2022; Leath et al., 2019).

Edgar et al. (2019) and Spight (2020) found that in addition to impacting the first-year outcomes significantly, stakeholders must influence the persistence of students rather than just academic integration. Additionally, Spight's findings supported Tinto's (1975) argument that social and educational integration influence persistence.

Similarly, Chen and Wang (2021) and Lakhal et al. (2020) concluded from their study that social and academic integration impact the academic success of college students. Additionally, Lakhal et al. (2020) and Son et al. (2020) found that students who reported high levels of academic integration persisted at 80.7%, while those who reported high levels of social engagement persisted at 95.6%. Hu categorized persistence into low, medium, and increased social or academic integration levels. Namely, social integration significantly influences students' continuation, while there was no correlation between students who reported high or medium levels of intellectual engagement. However, Chrysikos et al. (2017) and Stadtfeld et al. (2019) found that social integration can encompass peer and faculty interactions or extracurricular activities. When students cannot socially integrate, they can become isolated and disconnected, increasing their chances of leaving the institution (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Stadtfeld et al., 2019; Tinto, 1975).

### **The Resilience of African American Males Pursuing College Degrees**

Researchers has conducted extensive and thorough studies on resilience-related negative life factors such as poverty, abuse, and violence (Gartland et al., 2019; Yang & Wang, 2022). James et al. (2022) and Lehtinen et al. (2019) suggest that higher education requires a thorough understanding and constant review of complex settings in which students learn. The lack of theoretical transparency has led to various functional definitions of academic integration. Researchers have examined how students navigate through negative experiences associated with

poverty and how they can overcome their circumstances and succeed in school. While pursuing a college degree, several microsystem-level factors potentially affect students' learning outcomes, including peers, educational and supportive resources, teacher-student relations, leisure time, teaching methods, and community influence (Dubois et al., 2019; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020). These factors substantially impact students' emotional state, cognitive ability, and health behaviors, which can directly influence a student's ability to be academically successful (Chen & Wang, 2021; Duijster et al., 2017). Additionally, microsystem elements such as instruction, teaching-learning approaches, teacher-student relationships, and academic resources can drastically impact a student's learning (Geven et al., 2017; Ma & Shea, 2021). Instructors can also assist students with comprehension by understanding current situations students could face, familiar language, relating the content to real-life experiences, diverse assessment methods, diversifying academic resources, and building healthy relationships with students (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Harper et al., 2020).

Similarly, Fruht and Chan (2018) and Schaeper (2020) conceptualized academic integration as encompassing four dimensions: (1) structural dimension, which refers to an individual's self-perception of successfully integrating onto the campus and meeting the standards of the institution; (2) normative dimension, which refers to a student's identification of the academic system; (3) social, academic dimensions, which refers to the social integration of students; and (4) motivational academic dimension, refers to an individual's commitment and enjoyment of studying. However, Liew et al. (2018) and Ye et al. (2021) defined academic resilience as the possibility of academic success in school and personal success despite negative factors experienced during childhood. However, Bingham et al. (2017) and Yang and Wang (2022) described academic resilience as the process an individual must undergo to be successful

academically, despite past negative factors that prevent most of their peers from the same socioeconomic level from failing. Likewise, researchers Bittmann (2021) and Romano et al. (2021) identified factors through the academic resilience framework, i.e., valuing school, study management, engagement in school, class participation, and school enjoyment, common among academically resilient students. By setting high standards, instructors can improve the student's ability to reach academic success (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2020; Wang, 2021). Studies on academic resilience have examined three strategies that have increased resilience in Black American males. Those strategies include providing caring and support, setting and communicating high expectations, and offering meaningful participation opportunities that researchers suggest impact academic achievement (Bittmann, 2021; Romano et al., 2021; Wang, 2021).

Additionally, researchers (Edgar et al., 2019; Gartland et al., 2019) found that factors such as high expectations and caring relationships decrease the opportunity to endure negative aspects and promote academic resilience within the academic realm. Researchers also noted that studying factors that encourage students is a more profound study pertinent to building intellectual strength in students who have undergone negative aspects and face academic failure (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; French, 2017). Likewise, adults can help children build resilience throughout their pre-adolescent years by creating long-term opportunities, focusing on students' strengths rather than their deficits, and implementing systems and strategies. However, building academic resilience requires long-term expectations that allow students to develop social competence, problem-solving skills, and self-esteem (Bittmann, 2021; Edgar et al., 2019; Gartland et al., 2019). Additionally, schools can develop academically resilient students by creating and implementing high scholastic standards, providing constructive feedback, and

celebrating and acknowledging academic accomplishments (Bittmann, 2021; Gartland et al., 2019).

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological System Theory (1977) mainly focuses on human development as the complex system in which a person grows and how their environment impacts their overall well-being. Bronfenbrenner characterized human development as the ability of an individual to experience and manage their current circumstance. This theory has contemporary speculations that commonly tested the traditional discussions over the essential significance of nature versus nurture (Goldman et al., 2021; Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022). According to this theory, the child's characters have a bearing on the proximal interactions within the socio-ecological systems in which a person grows (Denny, 2021; Wang & Geng, 2019). Likewise, Ma and Shea (2021) and Turner (2017) shared that extrinsic and intrinsic motivations influence personal success or failure. Similarly, Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) and Stanisławski (2019) found that extrinsic and intrinsic motivators affect one's development in five ways: (a) controlling one's behavior, (b) coping successfully under stress, (c) acquiring knowledge and skill, (d) establishing and maintaining mutually rewarding relationships, and modifying and constructing one's physical, social, and symbolic environment.

Researchers Levine et al. (2020) and Ye et al. (2021) identified three models of resilience: compensatory, protective, and challenge. Additionally, each model considers internal promotive factors as assets and external factors as resources. Earlier researchers found that many students who have endured extreme adversity could live successful lives despite their adolescent experiences (Goldman et al., 2021; Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022). Internal factors are traits adapted to a person's positive or challenging life experiences to survive and thrive and are assets compared to physical and emotional safety and support as resources, including family, school,

and the community. Researchers for years have urged institutions to improve student involvement as a retention tool. Bond et al. (2020) and Deutschlander (2019) defined student engagement as students' persistence and participation on campus among their peers, faculty, and staff. According to Banaji et al. (2021) and Denny (2021), Black American students leave institutions due to lacking support and involvement in their campus community. Likewise, researchers have shown that parental consent and involvement significantly boost morale and persistence (Goldman et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2020). Additionally, researchers suggest household conditions predict student retention, supporting research on students being more likely to pursue their educational goals with parental support (Harper et al., 2020; Marcucci, 2020). Students from households actively engaged with K-12 schools by verifying homework completion, in-home testing, and discussing school issues prone to academic success (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Marsh et al., 2018).

### ***Internal and External Factors Contributing to the Success of Black American Males***

College years are instrumental in developing a student's character. Therefore, when evaluating learners' academic performance, researchers must consider the socioeconomic status and psychological and environmental factors influencing learning (Denny, 2021; Wang & Geng, 2019). Socioeconomic status is a student's parental education, occupation, income, and assets used by the individual (Denny, 2021; Wang & Geng, 2019). Parental involvement and family socioeconomic status positively correlate with the student's quality of achievement (Denny, 2021; Wang & Geng, 2019). For example, Banks and Dohy (2019) conducted 40 semi-structured, open-ended interviews with Black males, 36 of whom attended "at-risk" schools, regarding Black Male Initiative Programs. Results from the program included a heightened sense of belonging, increased self-awareness, and increased access to resources and



capital through interactions with mentors and institutional stakeholders. Moreover, Black males countering prejudice and social, individual, and cultural hindrances in life have acknowledged strength as a factor of enduring (Liao et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2019). Additionally, researchers, Liversage et al. (2018) and Irvine (2019) found that flexibility was a contributing component to the educational achievement of Black students.

To recruit and retain more minority students at colleges and universities, analyzing and studying the characteristics of successful underrepresented students can aid in providing high-quality experiences for them (Edgar et al., 2019; Estrada et al., 2016; Levine et al., 2020). For example, Denny (2021) researched contributors to success for Black American males, examining internal, external, and environmental factors. Specifically, seeing how some Black American males prosper scholastically can potentially assist schools and colleges with making systems and programs to help retain Black Americans and equip them with needed resources. Students should engage in academic and extracurricular activities for a successful college experience. Students can engage in various activities, thus increasing the development of educational efficacy, despite the activities not being directly correlated to an academic subject (Denny, 2021; Edgar et al., 2019). Extracurricular activities will increase students' drive, focus, and passion and create opportunities to communicate their ideas and voice their opinions effectively (Edgar et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2021).

Researchers have found that a student's ability to be academically successful is directly related to the beliefs and values instilled in their adolescent years. School stakeholders and community members also provide additional support and assistance to improve their academic performance (Daniel et al., 2019; Ma & Shea., 2021). Black males' achievement in school has been connected to numerous associates, from scholastic arrangement to inclusion and social help

(Ames et al., 2019; Wai et al., 2018). Similarly, some broad techniques instituted to hold Black American male students incorporate workforce/student coaching meetings, academic support, and student commitment through co-curricular projects helping students investigate viable vocation alternatives (Bonilla et al., 2021; Fruht & Chan, 2018 ).

In their investigation, Denny (2021) and Irvine (2019) noted that seven important topics arose from members as influential on their educational excursion. They are family support, perception of others, strict and otherworldly confidence, consolation from educators, coaches, and friends, strength, solid, hard-working attitude, and preliminaries or hindrances (p. 207). Additionally, Denny (2021) and Hassel and Ridout (2018) noted five belief domains during students' college enrollment: trust, safety, power, esteem, and intimacy, which students experience as either positive or negative during their college years. This research is pertinent because it will identify the most influential factors on students' academic performance. Furthermore, this research will assist in discovering problems that are responsible for students' inelastic behavior toward study, along with identifying those factors which fundamentally help students learn, recognize and address their weaknesses and overcome academic barriers (Denny, 2021; Jury et al., 2017). Finally, Leath et al. (2019) led a subjective report analyzing practices outside homeroom for 25 Black American males. He found that rigid inclusion and cooperation gave students a sense of connection and a place.

Additionally, researchers noted that students felt that having contact with the Black American workforce, staff, and directors fortified Black American presence on the grounds (Chankseliani et al., 2021; Leath et al., 2019). Likewise, Bonilla et al. (2021) and Ibrahim and El Zaatari (2020) found that students participating in cliques and ethnic/social associations positively related to social and educational coordination for Black American males. Family

support is a critical factor in the academic achievement of Black American males. In addition, studies have shown that family support helps direct students toward scholarly achievement (Harper et al., 2020; LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021). Also, family support benefits Black American males during their collegiate matriculation; students noticed that their academic achievement would have been frustrated without it.

Moreover, consolation and backing from instructors, coaches, and friends are also pivotal in students' success. Having tutors urges them to set educational objectives and help them reach their goals, not permitting them to surrender or stop. Companions impacted students by empowering them and having friendly rivalries; for example, higher grades and better investigation propensities (Harper et al., 2020; Irvine, 2019). Additionally, flexibility is critical in how members bear the difficult times, empower themselves, and continue to reach their objectives. Edgar et al. (2019) and Saleh et al. (2017) noticed that versatile people manage their way when introduced to issues. Interestingly, these students capitalize on the problem, having established profound confidence in an arrangement of self-change; and methods for dealing with stress to manage pressure, trust, and having a relationship with God (Edgar et al., 2019; Saleh et al., 2017).

### **The Importance of First-Generation Black American Males' Culture**

Bratton (2018) and Brooms and Davis (2017) noted that Black American males account for less than 5% of undergraduate degrees, and one-third graduate from four-year colleges over six years. One goal of this study is to change the narrative surrounding Black males' educational experiences and outcomes and highlight factors that impacted their academic success. When studying college education attainment for Black male students, we must review pre-college factors such as socioeconomic status, parental education level, school, and community capital,

and college readiness activities (Castro, 2021; Rust, 2019). Despite the various barriers that Black American males consistently face, such as disproportionate discipline and suspensions (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Wright et al., 2023), integrating into the college campus (French, 2017; Gray et al., 2018), low socioeconomic status and low-income communities (Bi et al., 2021; Minor & Benner, 2018), and being a first-generation college student (Harper et al., 2020; Varner et al., 2018), many of these students successfully transition from secondary education and enroll into institutions of higher education (Levine et al., 2020; Rust, 2019). Research on successful Black American students features astounding contrasts between the natural awards of the collectivist direction of Black culture while living in a climate where even more independently arranged practices are perceived and remunerated by the White culture of PWIs (Cook et al., 2019; Fazekas & Beck-Bíró, 2021). As a result of these positive outcomes, despite the barriers, researchers have noticed the various ways to support the academic efficacy of Black males as they transition from secondary education into postsecondary education (Isik et al., 2018; Neroni et al., 2022). Likewise, high-capacity Black American students in a legitimacy-based program in math, science, and designing at a PWI communicated a disappointment in what they revealed was a “demonstrating measure” (Cook et al., 2019; Fries-Britt & White-Lewis, 2020). However, White students and teachers anticipated demonstrating their knowledge by sharing their evaluations, grades, and the new course content (Fazekas & Beck-Bíró, 2021; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020).

Black American students needed to verify their legitimacy, explaining that they had a place in the college community, with individual data esteemed by more exclusively arranged societies. While continually wanting to substantiate oneself would be baffling, it may be disappointing due to the collectivist estimation of students having a place, which these students

were constantly attempting to accomplish. Students did not reveal their sense of belonging in the program. They faced issues of being viewed as “acting White” or being accused of acting superior to their peers (Fazekas & Beck-Bíró, 2021; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020). As a result, these Black American students isolated themselves from the gathering or, as far as anyone knows, suspected they were above it as people.

However, Crumb et al. (2020) and Farrell et al. (2018) found that many Black American males have high academic goals; however, their lack of college awareness and no assistance or guidance from counselors or teachers does not align with their educational aspirations. Raising and holding high academic expectations for Black males does not exist in a vacuum but must be grounded in appropriate academic rigor, exposure, and strong support networks (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Malaney-Brown, 2022). Several studies have researched the impact of pre-college programs and their relation to the successful matriculation of Black American males into higher education (Awuonda et al., 2021; Kotlikoff et al., 2022). For instance, research has suggested that Black American youth who participated in the GEAR UP pre-college program enrolled in a postsecondary institution at a significantly higher rate than the Black males who did not participate in the program (Awuonda et al., 2021; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Kotlikoff et al., 2022). Upward Bound, Student Support Services, Talent Search, and many other TRIO programs provide exposure to college students and the campus environment. These programs furnish students with necessary academic-oriented experiences that help to increase their awareness of on-campus resources and services and provide them with a social support network. These programs might enhance students’ social, cultural, and aspirational capital for college (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Kotlikoff et al., 2022). Bi et al. (2021) and Marcucci (2020) investigation of Black American students’ connections to home discussed family associations with high-achievers,

low-achievers, and leavers. For example, successful students announced guardians who underlined the significance of their scholarly accomplishment, in any event, boasting about their students' achievements to other people. At the same time, low-achievers and leavers felt pressure from their families to return home frequently, loan support monetarily, and satisfy head of family obligations with kin. The distinctions influenced students' academic accomplishments and persistence in familial qualities – individualistic or mutual - and the help or pressing factor that joined them. In their investigation of successful Black people and low-achievers at predominantly white institutions, Guzmán et al. (2021) and Schnitzler et al. (2021) concluded that low-achievers were more concerned about impressing people in their group over scholarly accomplishments. Including themselves in Black student associations impedes their evaluations.

In addition, Brooms and Davis (2017) and Farrell et al. (2018) noted three important factors Black American males need to promote connectedness to the institution and support their educational aspirations: social, cultural, and human capital resources. These findings suggest that to increase the number of Black American males achieving academically; those students should receive reinforcement of the importance of education throughout their primary and secondary years of schooling (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Farrell et al., 2018). Specifically, schools must create inclusive and collaborative climates that encourage academic engagement, prepare and expose students to higher education, and get the community to support the initiative (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Farrell et al., 2018). Most Black American students take on more maverick qualities to prevail in school, or they should, in any event, figure out how to offset their collectivist direction with their necessities to persevere.

Moreover, students may require spaces where their specific social and social capital is esteemed and remunerated. However, there may be spaces to learn about the social and social

capital expected to explore and prevail nearby. Understanding and recognizing student qualities that might not be the same as generally remunerated qualities of predominant college culture is an extraordinary method to construct these scaffolds with students and one of the most significant reasons for this research. I investigated first-generation, low-income Black American males' perceptions of accomplishments and solidarity to check whether students in this group show individualistic and mutual qualities. I have discovered spots where their orientation is esteemed and compensated. Students procure different types of social capital through home conditions and can likewise accomplish it through their schooling. Students then utilize this learned behavior to explore the school's academic and social circles in higher education. Martin et al. (2020) and Kromydas (2017) looked at social and social capital comparable to undergraduate maintenance. In their work, social capital consisted of the etymological and social understandings and abilities people bring to schools based on their social class area. In addition, social capital includes capabilities and capacities empowering people to act unexpectedly, which associates them with various individuals and organizations on grounds (Kromydas, 2017; Martin et al., 2020). Fundamentally, students need information on how school functions and how to associate with individuals who can help their prosperity. Students identified as first-generation and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds regularly battle to obtain social and social capital in school since their ground culture is not quite the same as theirs. However, these students may not have many connections to people who have the proficiency to help them change. Additionally, Tinto's (1975) maintenance hypothesis through social and social capital's focal points focused on how first-generation Black American students may not precisely fit. While it might appear to be that finishing coursework to acquire an evaluation seems to be a reasonable and direct cycle,

there is considerably busier work when taking a gander at how information and conduct – learned through social and social capital securing – are reimbursed or punished.

Considering Tinto's (1975) conversation about scholarly coordination in school, he noticed that the two evaluations and educational advancement were the prizes given to students who successfully integrated into their school's academic framework, with grades as an outward award and academic improvement as a more significant amount of a natural prize. He clarified that a student's evaluations addressed "an assessment of the student's credits and accomplishments comparable to the framework's qualities and targets" (p. 104). If a student's qualities and goals are unique to the educational framework where he gets himself, his learned conduct in the homeroom may not be perceived as significant and go unrewarded. Investigating students' social and social legislation is essential in understanding what is recognized, esteemed, and compensated inside higher education settings, particularly at PWIs. Suppose students can share social information, abilities, capacities, standards, inclinations, or quirks of the prevailing gathering in return for social rewards like acknowledgment or consideration (Hadjar et al., 2022; Lindfors et al., 2018). In that case, they will be more inclined to graduate from the institution. Social capital procured at home will not be recognized or esteemed in their new climate; this is a significant idea when looking at low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students that may represent the sensation of "vagrancy" (Edgar et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2020).

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the literature that examined and supported this research on the lived experiences of first-generation, low-income Black American males attending four-year institutions. There is a crisis between Black American males and higher education (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Denny, 2021). With this fact in mind, higher education



stakeholders must inform and educate themselves about identifying and working with students that identify as Black and first-generation college students (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Denny, 2021). Tinto's (1975, 2017) integration theory is used as the theoretical framework to examine these experiences. Tinto's (2017) integration theory also analyzes Black American males' academic and social integration norms on college campuses. Therefore, Tinto (2006, 2017) defined academic integration based on students' educational achievement, intellectual ability, and engagement in positive experiences in academic settings.

Additionally, social integration is the students' ability to engage in extracurricular activities and build healthy relationships with their peers and faculty. Therefore, it is pertinent to identify which factors are attributed to first-generation, low-income Black American males' persistence concerning a student's commitment to the institution or outside efforts (Chrysikos et al., 2017; French, 2017). Resilience is an individual's capacity to succeed, notwithstanding conditions, troubles, challenges, and various danger factors, for example, "neediness" (Thomson & Jaque, 2017; Wang, 2021).

Whereas numerous research studies have focused on Black American male drop-out rates, little exploration is accessible on factors that first-generation Black American males add to their university achievement. In this manner, this research seeks to increase and change the narrative of Black American males and education by sharing and inspiring future generations striving to earn a postsecondary education. Additionally, by investigating student qualities, I desire to identify the qualities crucial to the achievement and failure of first-generation, low-income Black American males and how they understand and expand on these qualities in school.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

This phenomenological study aimed to discover and interpret the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males who graduated or attended a four-year institution. I implemented an interview-based phenomenological study approach that identified the factors perceived as contributing to the success and failure of low-income, first-generation Black American male students. Additionally, identifying factors that supported social and academic integration for first-generation Black American male college students was instrumental for higher education stakeholders. Finally, by increasing the literature on the academic achievements of first-generation, low-income Black American males seeking a college degree, there was an increase in students successfully earning college degrees. This chapter thoroughly described the study design, setting, participants, specific procedures, researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations to understand the methods implemented in this study.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative methodology was most valuable and appropriate when conducting this phenomenological study (Busetto et al., 2020; Heath et al., 2018). I used a qualitative method in this study that captured a more detailed and in-depth perspective of low-income, first-generation Black American males' integration and successful completion of a four-year degree program. Although qualitative research was practical whether the topic of study was the individual, family, event, behavior, agency, organization, or culture, all qualitative research yielded descriptive data foremost (Heath et al., 2018; Kozleski, 2017). Aspers and Corte (2019) and Busetto et al. (2020) believed the focus of qualitative research should include understanding and explaining topics

with little analysis. By implementing a qualitative study, I was able to hear firsthand from participants how and why they identified specific success or failure factors, instead of quantitative research that would have investigated what and how often something was taking place (Busetto et al., 2020; Qaqish et al., 2020). Flennaugh et al. (2017) and Liversage et al. (2018) found three broad categories of qualitative research in clinical research: observational studies, interview studies, and documentary/textual analysis of written records. I utilized a qualitative methodology to document human experiences and shared their experiences through descriptive analysis and observable behaviors (Busetto et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2019). A phenomenological approach was used in this study to analyze the collected data. Chrysikos et al. (2017) and Neubauer et al. (2019) found that a phenomenological approach was appropriate for exploring the means and perspectives of research participants. The goal was to develop a composite description of “what” and “how” people experience a particular phenomenon in the context of their everyday lives (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Neubauer et al., 2019). I focused on the lived experiences of Black American males and not my interpretation of their experiences.

A transcendental phenomenological approach was utilized in this study, thus allowing the account for the phenomenon currently being studied directly. Transcendental phenomenology enabled bracketing to decrease the possibility of biases against preconceptions and assumptions to attain direct accounts of their experiences (Alase, 2017; Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). In transcendental phenomenology, the textual descriptions examined the participants’ experiences, and structural reports developed through how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Dörfler & Stierand, 2021). Phenomenology was the research method used for this study because it allowed perspective and insight into a specific phenomenon that was or had been experienced by a select group of individuals (Alase, 2017; Dörfler & Stierand, 2021).

Qualitative researchers used this form of research because the research focused on exploration, discovery, and description (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Dang et al., 2017). Therefore, I believed that qualitative research was the best design for this study because it focused on understanding positive and negative factors associated with the success or failure of Black American males while enrolled in a four-year institution.

### **Research Questions**

According to Piepenburg and Beckmann (2022) and Tinto (1975, 2017), academic integration was a student's educational achievement, ability to develop intellectually, and engagement in positive experiences in academic settings. Social integration was students' ability to engage in extracurricular activities and build healthy relationships with their peers and faculty. Identifying which factors attributed to first-generation, low-income Black American males' persistence concerning a student's commitment to the institution or outside efforts could drastically assist institutions of higher education in implementing programs targeted to a specific group of students to help with retaining them (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Floyd et al., 2021). Tinto believed that once students became a part of their campus academically and socially, they were more inclined to stay and graduate. The research questions implemented in this study followed Tinto's (2006, 2017) theory of integration.

#### **Central Research Question**

What academic and social factors presented themselves as challenges to low-income, first-generation Black American males, and how did they overcome challenges?

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

What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success?

**Sub-Question Two**

What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success?

**Sub-Question Three**

What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure?

**Sub-Question Four**

What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure?

**Setting and Participants**

The aim of this phenomenological study was to discover and interpret the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males who graduated from or attended a four-year institution. First-generation college students who were overwhelmingly from low-socioeconomic backgrounds faced many obstacles in their pursuit of graduating from college. Likewise, FGCS endured many difficulties as they continued to finish school through financial, social, and scholastic issues that arose (Frechette et al., 2020; Potter et al., 2019). Nevertheless, Britton et al. (2023) and Campbell et al. (2020b) found that PWIs still overwhelmingly graduated Black American students and were responsible for more than 49% of Black American degree holders.

**Site**

Middle Alabama University, a predominantly Black institution in the southwestern region of the United States, served as the site for this research. Middle Alabama University was chosen as the setting for this study based on the student population, family financial income level, and

expected family contribution. Middle Alabama University had an average enrollment of 3,200 or fewer students. The institution offered specific programs that assisted low-income, first-generation students with various resources that led to graduation. Individuals in the study included students selected by this institution's student services department.

A structural frame lens evaluated the leadership and organizational structure of the University. The structural frame lens focused on the 'how' of change (Heath et al., 2018; Reinholz & Apkarian, 2018). The structural frame lens was mainly task-oriented, concentrating on strategy, setting measurable goals, clarifying tasks and responsibilities, agreeing with metrics and deadlines, and implementing systems and procedures (Heath et al., 2018; Reinholz & Apkarian, 2018). The institution had a chain of command starting with the Board of Trustees and the President and includes the Provost, Vice Presidents, Deans/Directors, and Department Chairs. This structure allowed the President to designate specific jobs and tasks to constituents while aligning with the college's mission (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Callahan et al., 2019).

### **Participants**

Chrysikos et al. (2017) and Neubauer et al. (2019) stated that participants in a phenomenological study had experienced the researched phenomena. The aim of this phenomenological study was to discover and interpret the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males who graduated or attended a four-year institution and effectively solve these issues. A purposeful sampling method was used to identify participants in this study. To successfully implement purposeful sampling, I acquired rapport with the population of interest and matched the aims and objectives of the research and the participants' qualities (Klem et al., 2022; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). This study had two categories of participants; first-generation Black American males that had successfully

graduated from a four-year institution and first-generation Black American males that attended a four-year institution but failed to graduate. The participants were invited to participate in the study from a pool of Black American males who attended Middle Alabama University in Cedar Plain, Alabama. Once the study was Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved, I emailed the potential participants questionnaire to determine participant eligibility. 12 questionnaires were completed, and ten consent forms were sent to the eligible participants. The goal of the study was to receive ten completed questionnaires to utilize in this study. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to respect their privacy. All participants received a consent form detailing their information's confidentiality and participation in this study. Participants received information regarding removing themselves from the study. A locked file cabinet stored all returned documents and forms during the study.

### **Researcher's Position**

I was recently employed as a middle school science teacher in Alabama and am an alumnus of the institution where this study took place. I served as a human instrument seeking to identify success and failure factors identified by first-generation Black American male students. I became interested in this topic for two primary reasons: personal experiences as a first-generation Black American male college student and employment as an educator at a Title I school. The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected the Black American community, suffering from illness, unemployment, and financial crisis (Mizani et al., 2022; Reindl et al., 2022).

Additionally, Black American males' college enrollment dropped 14.3 percent compared to the previous spring (Black & Bimper, 2020), while Black American women's registration only fell 6.9 percent over the same period (Reindl et al., 2022; Sun, 2021). I planned to promote a

positive approach to Black American male student engagement. Brooms et al. (2021) and Reindl et al. (2022) noted that Black male students became more socially integrated onto their campus in efforts to change the narrative of the Black community by dispelling stereotypes, overcoming barriers, and creating new opportunities for their peers. Similarly, DeLaney et al. (2022) and McElderry (2022) noted that Black American male students that attended predominantly White institutions were motivated to become socially integrated when there was a lack of Black American representation and a need to diversify those groups. During the 2020 academic year, students that identified as Black earned 10.1% of all bachelor's degrees awarded (Black & Bimper, 2020; DeLaney et al., 2022; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023).

Additionally, I served as the Director of Student Activities at one of the state's oldest and most private historically Black colleges in Alabama. Although the number of Black American males attending the institution increased, the number of students graduating had not changed. According to the school's website, the graduation rate was 30.14% or 85 out of 282 completed their degrees within four years. These interactions and experiences with assisting students and families with receiving resources and answering questions motivated me to become a bridge for those students and their families before they entered an institution of higher education. If students encountered a successful individual before they graduated from secondary school, their motivation to succeed increased and seem obtainable. Brooms and Davis (2017) and Collier (2017) stated that "having a peer mentor, increased school attitudes (e.g., connectedness), relationships with adults and peers, and improvements in internal affective states" (p. 1).

### **Interpretive Framework**

To further understand how Black American students cope with racial microaggressions in the campus climate, it was pertinent that their experiences were shared to equip higher education



stakeholders with the necessary resources that would increase the graduation rate for Black American males' (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Furthermore, to effectively gauge Black American males' educational and cultural experiences into perspective, critical race theory (CRT) was the interpretive framework. CRT analyzed the impact of race and racism, immortalized dominant and marginalized racial groups (Allen, 2017; Comeaux et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2019). Allen (2017) and Keucheni and Mügge (2021) received recognition as the forerunners who popularized CRT by referencing that Black Americans' social and economic conditions had not improved despite the civil rights legislation in America. CRT had been used to investigate the experiences of Black American students and how those experiences influenced their educational outcomes (Comeaux et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2020). In addition, CRT allowed an analytic framework that investigated how policies and practices had become embedded in our society. Our educational systems influenced Black American males' academic outcomes and experiences before they transitioned to college and while in college (Comeaux et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2020). Also, CRT was utilized to examine vital components taken for granted while analyzing race and privilege and identify keen social exclusion patterns (Delatolla et al., 2021; Ma & Shea, 2021). Researchers implemented CRT more into higher education to assist institutions in becoming more diverse and inclusive. Researchers implemented CRT due to the lackadaisical approach of the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement, which failed to cease the effects of race and racism in U.S. jurisprudence (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Delatolla et al., 2021). As Brooms and Davis (2017) and Sablan (2019) shared, critical race theorists examined how ethnicity, as a social construct, had been implemented to limit the life chances of people of color through institutionalized discriminatory practices.

CRT's framework comprised five tenets: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest conversion, and the critique of liberalism. CRT's principles are still relevant today when studying institutions of higher learning (Lin, 2023; Sablan, 2019). I used counter-stories that allowed Black American male students to share their narratives of marginalized experiences with faculty and staff. The permanence of racism suggested that racism was embedded in our nation's core fabric and controlled society's political, social, and economic realms (Atrey, 2021; Lin, 2023). The third tenet, whiteness as property, was due to the embedded racism in American history that perpetuated that whiteness could be considered property interest. This belief system opposed building a diverse and inclusive learning environment because it supported the embedded hierarchical racist paradigms that still existed (Atrey, 2021; Comeaux et al., 2020). The final tenet, the critique of liberalism, stemmed from the ideas of colorblindness, the law's failure to assist, and equal opportunity for all (Atrey, 2021; Sablan, 2019). Kohli et al. (2017) and Sablan (2019) shared that CRT in education has two categories: K-12 and higher education. Allen (2017) and Comeaux et al. (2020) identified several themes in higher education: color blindness, selective admissions policy, and campus racial climate. In the past, researchers focused on critical race research to identify and eliminate the macro-and microaggressions experienced by Students of Color. Institutions lacking inclusion in their academic curriculum and implementation of student development theory (Lin, 2023; Sablan, 2019) often supported the notion of colorblindness that worked against dismantling social inequities (Atrey, 2021; Kohli et al., 2017). Whereas most recently, researchers in education have expanded their focus to epistemology, policy, pedagogy, and curriculum (Boon et al., 2022; Kohli et al., 2017).

Educators were encouraged to explore curriculum, pedagogy, teaching, and learning through a CRT lens that instituted change in the educational system effectively. Consequently,

researchers discovered that the educational system in America was heavily saturated with White supremacy (Allen, 2017; Atrey, 2021). However, according to Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) and Sablan (2019), CRT provided educators with resources to identify pertinent issues in the curriculum, instruction, schooling, policy, school finance, and community engagement. Likewise, by implementing CRT, researchers offered additional tools for educators in higher education that created an inclusive and safe environment that expressed that learning was valued for all students regardless of race and socioeconomic status (Allen, 2017; Kohli et al., 2017). Therefore, educators were encouraged to implement the tools of CRT to identify how racism existed on college campuses and what the implications were for students of color. Indeed, CRT's tenets of interest convergence theory and the normality of racism assisted educators with understanding that the majority on college campuses advocated for colorblindness and race-neutral policies (Allen, 2017; Boon et al., 2022). According to Brooms and Davis (2017) and Sablan (2019), CRT reminded educators to take the time to reflect and understand how racism works, identify it for what it is, acknowledge it within one's self, and take action to do something about it. Additionally, CRT allowed educators to recognize the impact of race and racism throughout the educational pipeline. They also provided resources that educators could implement to ensure all students had an equal opportunity for quality education (Allen, 2017; Boon et al., 2022).

Similarly, Salisbury (2020) pointed out that the "majoritarian" framework that had disproportionately shaped educational access and opportunity for minority students exposed critical race scholarship (p. 273). CRT scholars noted that pertinent concepts of race and racism in higher education were rarely the focal point of analyzing students of color's academic success and achievement (Allen, 2017; Boon et al., 2022). On the institutional level, institutions of

higher learning had to find ways to be more inclusive; there had to be change to (a) initiatives; (b) infrastructure; (c) environments; (d) curriculum; (e) pedagogy; (f) financing; and (g) policies that eliminated the superiority of racism, inequalities, and social injustices (Allen, 2017; Kohli et al., 2017).

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

I assessed deficits in my research conducted on Black American males, while I notated the importance of the research and considered how to incorporate and share findings from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.19). This section addressed the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions regarding the nature of reality and knowledge. By understanding philosophical beliefs, I implemented problems and research questions to study and investigate information to identify the answers. Incorporating cause-and-effect questions allowed predicting variables to explain the outcome of exploring a single phenomenon in qualitative research (Cook et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Undoubtedly, readers created philosophical assumptions as they evaluated the study. However, epistemology issues drastically declined when researchers understood the audience's stance.

#### ***Ontological Assumption***

Creswell and Poth (2018) and Potter et al. (2019) defined ontology as the “nature of reality.” Personal experiences, worldviews, socioeconomic status, gender, age, geography, and race influenced an individual’s conceptualization of the nature of reality. In phenomenology, ontology incorporated a better understanding of the lived experience or phenomenon. As a first-generation Black American male, who attended an HBCU and PWI, I had multiple incidents that shaped the reality around this phenomenon. The ontological assumption was that the nature of reality was subjective. Therefore, individual experiences were personal (Frechette et al., 2020;

Walach, 2020). I sought to understand the world participants lived in by developing subjective meaning to their life experiences (Frechette et al., 2020; Walach, 2020). The research aimed to understand the collegiate experiences of first-generation Black American males who successfully or unsuccessfully graduated from a four-year institution. I assumed internal and external factors directly influenced low-income, first-generation Black American males' ability to complete a four-year degree at an institution of higher education. Banks and Dohy (2019) and French (2017) noted that factors that impeded student persistence and completion were consistent in their potential to affect all students, regardless of demographic characteristics. To further understand the data, I conducted interviews, focus groups, and a questionnaire to understand the phenomenon of lived experiences of first-generation Black American males attending a four-year institution. Each participant's experiences were documented individually as themes throughout the study emerged. I believe research participants' experiences with this phenomenon were formed through personal interactions with their family, peers, and higher education stakeholders, as well as historical and cultural norms impacting how participants responded to their life experiences (Frechette et al., 2020; Walach, 2020). This ontological assumption influenced the decision to conduct a qualitative rather than a quantitative study.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

As a qualitative researcher, I built rapport with the participants involved in the study. Mpfu et al. (2022) and Stanisławski's (2019) Integrative Model of the Study of Developmental Competencies in Minority Children examined minority adolescents' social position (social class, race, ethnicity) and experiences (racism, discrimination, segregation) within the family, school, and neighborhood context. I believed low-income, first-generation Black American males' ability to succeed directly impacted their interaction with various ecological settings. Students

gained more valuable knowledge through exponential learning experiences; making participants comfortable with being transparent and vulnerable assisted with establishing prosperous and thought-provoking descriptions of the phenomenon (Hayes, 2018; Lakhali et al., 2020).

Therefore, personal and cultural assets directly impacted their academic persistence, despite discrimination experiences (Leath et al., 2019; McElderry, 2022). If rapport was lacking between the participants and me, the study could be compromised, and the accurate data needed to study the phenomenon would not have been accessible (Legette et al., 2022; O.Nyumba et al., 2018). Therefore, identifying factors were critical in developing effective strategies and practices that improved Black American males' college readiness.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), all researchers bring value to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known (p. 21). I assumed that most low-income, first-generation Black American males persisted through college based on self-efficacy, academic support, and communal and financial support throughout their enrollment. In a qualitative study, the value-laden nature of the research were disclosed, and they actively reported their values and biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heath et al., 2018). I aligned myself with the study by identifying my stance concerning the context and setting of the research. My experience as a first-generation Black American male revealed that race, societal issues, family support, and socioeconomic status directly impacted a student's motivation to graduate from college. Having the help of my family throughout my matriculation and having the financial support to assist with reaching my educational goals, I am currently working to earn my Doctorate of Philosophy degree. In addition, Black American males' lack of academic achievement correlated to environmental and cultural differences that directly affected their

academics (Rust, 2019; Taylor et al., 2019).

These issues overwhelmingly affected Black American males and were further exacerbated when higher education stakeholders were unaware of these students' problems. However, research on deficiencies and disparities in school systems, particularly schools with majority-minority populations, significantly eliminated the achievement gap. Data quantifying the deep inequalities in high school found three critical areas for college preparation: coursework availability, qualified teachers, and counselor resources (Sablan, 2019; Sun, 2021). Therefore, I shared my position within the study by articulating my personal beliefs while I actively gathered data, identified common themes, and interpreted the participants' experiences of successfully or unsuccessfully graduating from a four-year institution.

### **Researcher's Role**

I was the primary instrument for interpreting participant data. Therefore, I clearly and concisely, shared the participants' experiences while disclosing my personal beliefs and experiences as a first-generation Black American male. Jilcha Sileyew (2020) and Neubauer et al. (2019) shared that I had to clearly and thoroughly explain how I served as the instrument to conduct this study. I became interested in this topic for two primary reasons: personal experiences as a first-generation Black American male college student and employment as an educator at a Title I school. I had an extreme bias towards the impact of established solid familial bonds with educators and believed those types of relationships assisted students with matriculating successfully. In addition, being the first male in my family to earn a bachelor's degree, I wanted to be able to share with others what was pertinent during my matriculation.

Additionally, I served as the Director of Student Activities at the state's oldest private historically Black college. Therefore, I strongly identified with the research participants. I

worked diligently to ensure that the participant's words were reported verbatim and did not allow any bias to change the participant's answer based on my interpretation.

While serving at the institution, there was an increase in Black American males attending the institution. Still, many students needed more student engagement, mentorship, and belonging. I allowed these interactions and experiences to guide the investigation, becoming a bridge for students before they entered the higher education system. This experience and process enabled me to study validity, which allowed stakeholders to develop and implement programs designed from solid data to increase the number of first-generation Black Americans graduating from four-year institutions.

### **Procedures**

The Institutional Review Board of Liberty University approved the study before conducting research. Participants received information about the study through various sources, including emails and social media platforms. Study announcements were posted on public flyers on campus and throughout the community for first-generation Black American male college graduates and undergraduates. In addition, students interested in the study had to complete the potential participant questionnaire to determine eligibility for the study.

The interview protocol included a semi-structured interview with each participant (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Gill & Baillie, 2018). Interviews took place via Zoom. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. Participants received an informed consent form before beginning the study. Participants also received instructions for clarification and how to omit questions they did not want to answer. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Gill & Baillie, 2018).

### **Permissions**



First, I sought approval from Middle Alabama University to conduct my research at their campus. After completing the research proposal, I forwarded the application and supporting documents for institutional review to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After receiving full approval from Liberty University's IRB, the letter to conduct research at Middle Alabama University ([Middle Alabama University Letter to Conduct Research](#)) was emailed to Mr. Grey, Director of Sponsored Programs and Research at Middle Alabama University, for approval to conduct the study. Next, I shared a recruitment letter ([Participant Recruitment Letter](#)) with the campus of Middle Alabama University to recruit potential candidates for the study via email. I then began disseminating the recruitment letter around campus via bulletin boards, email, and social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. Next, all potential participants had to complete the survey ([Potential Participant Questionnaire](#)) detailing their participation and willingness to participate in the study. Finally, participants received a consent form ([Informed Consent Form](#)) to sign and return before beginning the study.

### **Recruitment Plan**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this study had no recommended number of participants. However, the qualitative research approach determined the number of participants. Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that narrative studies included one to two participants, phenomenological studies three to 10, and grounded theory consisted of 20 to 30 participants. Therefore, I aimed to have 10 to 12 participants in this study because my study was phenomenological. First, I contacted the Middle Alabama University Office of Student Support Services to access contact information and invited potential participants. Potential research participants had to complete the questionnaire before they were identified as a participant. Subsequently, participants recommended other eligible individuals for the study.

Middle Alabama University hosted all the meetings for this study via Zoom. Participants discussed the study's purpose, which aimed to discover and interpret factors low-income, first-generation Black males attributed to their success or failure to obtain a college degree. Potential participants received an [Informed Consent Form](#) disclosing pertinent information regarding meetings, confidentiality, participation in the research, and withdrawal from the study. I shared my personal, professional, and background as an educator, the topic of study, and the research implications, and potential participants were encouraged to engage in conversation. I asked questions for clarity throughout the meeting that corroborated a complete understanding of the purpose and procedures of the study. Information dissemination regarding data collection, the nature of the study, and their role in the study. Participants received information that focus groups and individual meetings would be audio-recorded. Following Liberty University's guidelines, questionnaire responses for this phase continued until 12 individuals submitted the questionnaire; the process continued until the desired number of questionnaires were secured; two individuals that completed the questionnaire did not meet the criteria and were excluded from the research.

Once the [Potential Participant Questionnaire](#) had been completed, I utilized that information to verify whether the participants met the criteria to be a part of the study. The information from the [Potential Participant Questionnaire](#) determined what subgroup the participants would be placed in two focus groups: college graduates and non-college graduates. Based on their responses, participants received instructions to join a Zoom to participate in the focus group for college graduates or the focus group for non-college graduates. Pseudonyms were utilized to protect participants' confidentiality in this study.

After participants were identified as meeting the criteria and the consent form had been

signed and submitted. Participants were sent a link to schedule their one-on-one interviews. During the one-on-one interviews, based on their assigned category, they answered the questions for [Individual Interview Questions: Current Students and College Graduates](#) and [Individual Interview Questions: Non-College Graduates](#). Each participant met via Zoom for 45 minutes to an hour to answer each question.

Lastly, participants were assigned their focus group. Each focus group met via Zoom for 45 minutes to one hour. Each focus group consisted of five members. Participants were encouraged to share dialogue and various views but respected others' opinions. Participants received information that the focus group meetings were recorded and transcribed for this study. After the meeting, participants posed questions about the research. Once the final focus group was held, the information was transcribed using Sonix to identify common themes. Once the data had been transcribed, participants read over the information and determined if it had been recorded correctly.

### **Data Collection Plan**

This study employed three data collection methods that achieved triangulation in the research study. According to Moser and Korstjens (2018) and Santos et al. (2020), triangulation in qualitative research completed the proposed objectives and ensured credibility and reliability. Qualitative research methods allowed researchers the ability to understand the experiences of participants better. They enabled researchers to explore decision-making and provided detailed information (Ames et al., 2019; Busetto et al., 2020). Researchers found that triangulating data was pertinent to qualitative researchers because it increased the credibility and validity of their studies (Noble & Heale, 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The following collection methods were utilized in this study: a questionnaire was used to collect information to verify that

participants met the criteria of the study ([Potential Participant Questionnaire](#)), a focus group ([Focus Group Questions: College Graduate](#) and [Focus Group Questions: Non-College Graduate](#)), and semi-structured individual interviews ([Individual Interview Questions: Current Students and College Graduates](#) and [Individual Interview Questions: Non-College Graduate](#)) to achieve triangulation in this study. One-on-one interviews were utilized to develop initial conversations and to build rapport between the participants and myself. In addition, I conducted two focus groups that allowed participants the ability to elaborate on what was shared during the interview process and allowed them to make connections with their various experiences while pursuing their degree; implementing focus groups after interviews allowed confirmation and refinement for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus groups allowed them to share intricate details regarding their experience, which further assisted with this research study. The focus group questions during the data collection allowed participants to further expound upon earlier findings. The selected data collection methods were appropriate for this study because they allowed me to discover and analyze the phenomenon and participants' lived experiences from various angles.

### **Individual Interviews (Data Collection Strategy #1)**

The main data collection method utilized in this research was interviewing. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) and Liao et al. (2020) noted that interviews were a relevant source for case studies. Interviews provided researchers and participants with answers to events or issues' how and why questions of events or topics. The individual interview was an intricate method of understanding perceptions and experiences of a given phenomenon and contribute to in-depth data collection (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Pessoa et al., 2019). I implemented semi-structured interviews with participants that allowed engaging conversations, allowed them

to share intricate details about their experiences and created an opportunity to ask specific follow-up questions to unsuccessful participants. Research participants participated in a semi-structured interview ([Individual Interview Questions: Current Students and College Graduates](#) and [Individual Interview Questions: Non-College Graduates](#)). Interviews were conducted based on participant availability. Participants met via Zoom for this research study. All interviews were recorded and transcribed later for the study. Interviews were recorded using the Zoom recording feature and stored on an external flash drive for archival purposes. During this study, Sonix transcription services were implemented to transcribe data from the interviews that lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. In addition, I documented participants' body language, responses, and interactions in the individual interviews. The interview questions and I served as the data collection instrument. All participants signed an [Informed Consent Form](#) consenting to the study and recording for research purposes. The aim of this study was to discover and interpret the factors attributed to the success and failure of low-income, first-generation Black male students who had graduated or attended a four-year institution. By utilizing structured interview questions, the research assisted with the education gap for research surrounding successful low-income, first-generation black males pursuing a college degree. Additionally, it provided evidence of effective practices and strategies that could significantly impacted generations of black male students. Finally, this study provided evidence for understanding how some Black males succeeded academically and might help inform academic officials about strategies to assist struggling Black males.

### ***Individual Interview Questions (College Graduates)***

1. Please introduce yourself and share some of your educational background.
2. Please describe your parents' socioeconomic status and educational background.

3. Please describe your childhood community and college climate upon enrolling. RQ1
4. Please describe your knowledge of the collegiate experience before arriving on campus (i.e., financial aid, mentorship, engagement, college class prep). RQ1
5. Please describe internal and external factors you believe contributed to your academic success. CRQ
6. Please describe how you believe those factors contributed to your success. RQ1
7. Please describe the factors that motivated you while pursuing a college degree. SQ1
8. Please describe how you believe those factors helped you accomplish your goal of graduating in the allotted time frame. RQ1
9. Please describe factors that assisted (emotionally, physically, financially) you while pursuing your bachelor's degree. SQ2
10. Please describe what you believe served as obstacles as you pursued your degree. RQ2
11. Please describe how you overcame those obstacles. RQ2
12. Please describe the relationships you built that assisted in your enrollment. RQ2
13. Please describe the influence of those relationships. RQ2
14. Please describe what you think institutions can implement to help with the increment maintenance and improve enrollment of FGAA male students. SQ3
15. Please describe the importance of campus climate and integration to your academic success. (i.e., the campus was family oriented or a bigger campus where you did not know many of the faculty/staff) RQ3

***Individual Interview Questions (Non-College Graduates)***

1. Please introduce yourself and share some of your educational background.
2. Please describe your parents' socioeconomic status and educational background.

3. Please describe your adolescent community and college climate upon enrolling. RQ1
4. Please describe your knowledge of the collegiate experience before arriving on campus. (i.e., financial aid, mentorship, engagement, college class prep). RQ1
5. Please describe internal and external factors that contributed to your failure to graduate. CRQ
6. Please describe how you believe those factors contributed to your failure. RQ1
7. Please describe the factors that could have motivated you while pursuing a college degree. SQ1
8. Please describe how those factors could have helped you accomplish your goal of graduating in the allotted time frame. RQ1
9. Please describe factors that you believe could have assisted you with earning your bachelor's degree. SQ2
10. Please describe what you believe served as obstacles as you pursued your degree. RQ2
11. Please describe how those obstacles halted your matriculation. RQ2
12. Please describe the relationships you built while enrolled in college. RQ2
13. Please describe the influence of those relationships. RQ2
14. Please describe what institutions gain from these perspectives and discernments that can help increment maintenance and improve enrollment of FGAA male students. SQ3
15. Please describe the importance of campus climate and integration to your academic success. RQ3

The first three questions focused on building a relationship with the participant. These statements established rapport and allowed the participant to share prior experiences that affected their matriculation. Environmental and cultural backgrounds directly correlated to Black

American students' lack of academic achievement (DeLaney et al., 2022; Rust, 2019). These questions determined the validity for Black American males who matriculated successfully. Participants were allowed to take breaks when necessary and pass on any questions. Forero et al. (2018) and Heath et al. (2018) shared that qualitative methods enabled researchers to understand how and why behaviors occurred. Question four focused on the knowledge and experiences of low-income, first-generation Black American males. This question addressed the perceived achievement gap of Black American males. DeLaney et al. (2022) and Rust (2019) found that most research attributed Black American males' lack of college readiness to individual deficiencies, families, and communities. Identifying possible deterrents to Black American males' academic success provided findings to assist institutions' stakeholders with potential resources to assist in retaining those students.

Questions five and six reflected on internal and external factors contributing to the participants' academic success. These questions allowed the identification of critical success factors and resources that assisted during matriculation. Questions seven through 13 explained how and why participants identified specific factors as pertinent to education. Formal and informal interactions were integral to the successful integration of students. Irvine (2019) and Kahu and Nelson (2018) found that students with casual and proper interactions with their peers and faculty were likely to persist and be retained.

Questions 14 and 15 delved into the participants' perceptions of the impact the institution may or may not have had on their academic success. Denny (2021) and Schaeper (2020) shared that institutions provided access to academic integration when students undertook rigorous courses that aligned with the institution's mission and purpose. However, research referenced by Farrell et al. (2018) and Witteveen (2021) found that almost 15% of students who left school



reported feeling that the institution's faculty and staff were uncaring and indifferent to the needs of students. Allowing participants to share their perceptions of the institution's programs enabled stakeholders to reevaluate and implement different practices and strategies.

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan (Data Analysis Plan #1)***

In qualitative research, data collection and analysis simultaneously identified new findings to determine the data collection for the study (Busetto et al., 2020; Heath et al., 2018). I implemented the epoche process, which allowed preconceptions and prejudgements to enter consciousness and leave freely (Zahavi, 2021). When implementing the epoch, I set aside personal opinions and focused on the participants' lived experiences while analyzing the data. Additionally, I conducted reflexive journaling, which assisted with separating my personal experiences and biases from the participants' experiences. Once the participants' interview transcriptions were complete, each participant received a copy of their interview transcript and were allowed to verify the accuracy of the information listed. First, to begin the data analysis process for transcendental phenomenological research, I created interview transcripts and identified pertinent information and common themes regarding understanding how the participants' experienced the phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Johnson et al., 2020). I omitted my personal bias and experiences with this phenomenon from the analysis process. Jilcha Sileyew (2020) and Neubauer et al. (2019) suggested that data analysis techniques such as; gathering, cleaning, and organizing information assisted with phenomenological reduction. I took notes while the interviews were ongoing, ensuring that I remained unbiased and studied body expressions, environmental contexts, behaviors, and nonverbal cues (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Participants received notification that the meeting was recorded and transcribed for the survey. Participants then began to engage and answer the

questions outlined in [Individual Interview Questions: Current Students and College Graduates](#) and [Individual Interview Questions: Non-College Graduate](#). After the interviews, I shared my appreciation for the participant's willingness to participate in the study and informed them of the next steps. Finally, participants validated the data after all information had been documented and recorded. I established my reflections immediately following the interviews with each participant. By setting aside my personal beliefs and opinions and focusing on the participants' lived experiences, I implemented the bracketing strategy that identified common themes from the lived experiences of each participant's interview. In addition, to implementing the epoche process, I utilized the phenomenological reduction two-step process to understand the findings (Zahavi, 2021). By utilizing phenomenological reduction, I reviewed interview transcripts to further study the lived experiences from the participants' angle. I analyzed and bracketed common themes related to the research topic and omitted information that did not apply to the research.

### **Focus Groups (Data Collection Approach #2)**

For this qualitative research, the triangulation method implemented in this study were focus groups, which served as a research tool (Busetto et al., 2020; Rooshenas et al., 2019). A focus group discussed a pre-defined topic (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Gill & Baillie, 2018). Focus groups connected participants' views (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Pessoa et al., 2019). Additionally, the focus groups discovered rich, detailed data and identified common and uncommon themes among the group (Busetto et al., 2020; Rooshenas et al., 2019). Furthermore, implementing focus groups confirmed and clarified understanding and provided alternate perspectives (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Gill & Baillie, 2018). I prepared several questions to begin discourse among participants. The study was enhanced by the data collected from the

focus group secession as participants discussed their interpretation of their subjective experiences with successfully or unsuccessfully completing college.

Two focus groups provided the data for this study. Focus groups were assigned based on participants' education status. Each focus group met for approximately 45 minutes to one hour. During the focus groups, participants answered 12 pre-planned questions ([Focus Group Questions: College Graduate](#) & [Focus Group Questions: Non-College Graduate](#)) that encouraged open and thorough discussion of participants' experiences and interpretations. Overarching questions assisted the participants in sharing their insights with clarity and depth that enhanced the research. Focus groups were held via the Zoom meeting recording feature. In addition, a Zoom meeting recorder recorded meetings conducted via Zoom. Afterward, I reflected on participants' responses and interaction with the group with hand notes following their dismissal from the session.

### ***Focus Group Questions: College Graduates***

1. Tell me about your childhood. (CQ)
  - a. Describe the values instilled in you as a child that inspired you to begin your educational journey.
  - b. What were your goals and aspirations growing up?
  - c. What inspired you to believe that you could accomplish your goals?
  - d. When did you realize you would not be able to reach your goal?
2. Tell me about your decision to apply for college and your selection. (CQ)
  - a. What made you choose Middle Alabama University?
  - b. Were there any influences on your decision to attend college?

- c. Were there any family members, community leaders, or teachers who assisted or encouraged you in the college application process and decided which college was best?
    - d. What was the support level from your family and friends regarding your pursuing a college degree?
3. Describe your overall college experience. (SQ1)
  - a. What pertinent memories (people, events, experiences) influenced or impacted your experience?
  - b. In what ways do you feel your racial and socioeconomic status affected your ability to reach your educational goals and aspirations?
4. What are some highlights of your collegiate experience? (SQ2)
  - a. What did you enjoy most about your campus?
  - b. What inspired you to continue to pursue your degree?
5. Describe your college instructors. Were they approachable? Were they available for office hours? (SQ2)
  - a. What makes an instructor approachable?
  - b. What impact did instructors have on your motivation to succeed academically?
  - c. Describe your relationship with the instructor and class.
  - d. Did you participate in class?
  - e. Describe an assignment that you completed and enjoyed.
  - f. Describe an assignment that caused you stress and anxiety.
6. What campus resources did you use? (SQ1)
  - a. Besides attending class, where did you spend your leisure time on campus?

- b. How often did you meet with your advisor?
  - c. Did you attend tutoring?
  - d. What impact did financial aid have on your experience?
7. Tell me about some barriers you experienced while pursuing your degree. (SQ3)
- a. In what ways do you feel your race and socioeconomic background influenced some barriers you faced?
  - b. How did you overcome those barriers?
8. What caused you to drop out of school? (SQ3)
- a. What contributed to those feelings?
  - b. How did you overcome those pressures?
  - c. Are you motivated to return and complete your degree?
9. What were the most significant barriers to your enrollment at Middle Alabama University? (SQ4)
- a. What could have assisted you with overcoming or removing those barriers?
  - b. What are you currently doing to overcome those barriers?
10. If you had the opportunity to speak with first-generation, low-income Black American male students, what advice would you give them on facing challenges in college? (CQ)
11. What can increase the number of first-generation, low-income Black American males graduating from college? (CQ)
12. Do you have any other information or thoughts you would like to share? (CQ)

***Focus Group Questions: Non-College Graduates***

1. Tell me about your childhood. (CQ)

- a. Describe the values instilled in you as a child that inspired you to begin your educational journey.
  - b. What were your goals and aspirations growing up?
  - c. What inspired you to believe that you could accomplish your goals?
  - d. When did you realize you would not be able to reach your goal?
2. Tell me about your decision to apply for college and your selection. (CQ)
- a. What made you choose Middle Alabama University?
  - b. Were there any influences on your decision to attend college?
  - c. Were there any family members, community leaders, or teachers who assisted or encouraged you in the college application process and decided which college was best?
  - d. What was the support level from your family and friends regarding your pursuing a college degree?
3. Describe your overall college experience. (SQ1)
- a. What pertinent memories (people, events, experiences) influenced or impacted your experience?
  - b. In what ways do you feel your racial and socioeconomic status affected your ability to reach your educational goals and aspirations?
4. What are some highlights of your collegiate experience? (SQ2)
- a. What did you enjoy most about your campus?
  - b. What inspired you to continue to pursue your degree?
5. Describe your college instructors. Were they approachable? Were they available for office hours? (SQ2)
- a. What makes an instructor approachable?

- b. What impact did instructors have on your motivation to succeed academically?
  - c. Describe your relationship with the instructor and class.
  - d. Did you participate in class?
  - e. Describe an assignment that you completed and enjoyed.
  - f. Describe an assignment that caused you stress and anxiety.
6. What campus resources did you use? (SQ1)
- a. Besides attending class, where did you spend your leisure time on campus?
  - b. How often did you meet with your advisor?
  - c. Did you attend tutoring?
  - d. What impact did financial aid have on your experience?
7. Tell me about some barriers you experienced while pursuing your degree. (SQ3)
- a. In what ways do you feel your race and socioeconomic background influenced some barriers you faced?
  - b. How did you overcome those barriers?
8. What caused you to drop out of school?(SQ3)
- a. What contributed to those feelings?
  - b. How did you overcome those pressures?
  - c. Are you motivated to return and complete your degree?
9. What were the most significant barriers to your continued enrollment at Middle Alabama University? (SQ4)
- a. What could have assisted you with overcoming or removing those barriers?
  - b. What are you currently doing to overcome those barriers?

10. If you had the opportunity to speak with first-generation, low-income Black American male students, what advice would you give them on facing challenges in college? (CQ)

11. What can be done to increase the number of first-generation, low-income Black American males graduating from college? (CQ)

12. Do you want to share any other information or thoughts? (CQ)

Question one inquired about participants' childhood, perception of school, and ability to succeed. Romano et al. (2021) and Azmitia et al. (2018) noted that people came from various backgrounds and had different cultural values, goals, and expectations of the collegiate experience. Academic resilience for first-generation college students was identified as how first-generation college students overcame educational barriers to graduation (Goldman et al., 2021; Romano et al., 2021). Questions two through four inquired about participants' college preparedness and overall college experience. Hayes (2018) and Lakhali et al. (2020) found that student experience correlated to involvement and integration. Additionally, researchers argued that student engagement had two entities: the extent to which a student participated and the institution's efforts that actively engaged students with areas of interest (Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022; Tight, 2020).

Questions five and six focused on the relationships that participants formed with instructors or staff on campus. Specifically, what resources participants had available that were taken advantage of and, if not taken advantage of, the reasoning behind those instances. Furthermore, Piepenburg and Beckmann (2022) and Tinto (2017) defined students' sense of belonging as their connection to academic institutions and stakeholders. In addition, researchers had noted that students' understanding of belonging was two-faceted, operating at both personal



levels and institutions working to improve the campus environment (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022).

Questions seven through nine explored barriers first-generation, low-income Black American males faced and their interpretations of how they successfully overcame those barriers or fell to the plight. Subsequently, I considered higher education institutions' advantages in alleviating mental health issues among their students by implementing innovative funding models and building strategic partnerships with mental health specialists (Perkins et al., 2021; Schmidt, 2020). Questions 10 through 12 required participants to reflect on what internal and external factors they believed positively affected their matriculation. Trauma was an unpreventable part of human life caused by external experiences or internal battles. Self-reflection and self-awareness assisted in identifying and overcoming issues of one's past (Ardelt & Grunwald, 2018; Manyanga et al., 2017).

### ***Focus Group Data Analysis Plan (Data Analysis Plan #2)***

The focus group questions for participants intended to invoke deep thought of the candidates and allowed a free flow of conversation between participants. Gill and Baillie (2018) defined focus groups as moderated discussions on a pre-defined topic for research purposes. These questions assisted with understanding the participants' prior knowledge before college enrollment. Focus group members responded to the questions outlined in [Focus Group Questions: College Graduate](#) and [Focus Group Questions: Non-College Graduate](#). Two focus groups provided data for this study. The focus group data analysis plan were guided using the same analysis plan as the individual interview questions. Focus groups explored collective perspectives, attitudes, behaviors, and experiences, thus yielding rich and thorough data that illuminated common and inconsistent themes in the study. Once the focus group interviews were

conducted, I reviewed the data collected and began analyzing using the epoche process. Focus groups can also, alone or in conjunction with other methods, such as interviews or observations, confirm or enrich the phenomenon's understanding and provide a more in-depth look (Gill & Baillie, 2018; Rooshenas et al., 2019). I ensured the study produced the best results by building rapport with participants before the focus group session. I also identified the most compelling themes while relaxing participants and allowed a more meaningful discussion. Focus groups were assigned based on participants' education status. Participants participated in semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Next, I began the phenomenological reduction process that identified the most pertinent information for the study. Research interviews were pertinent in qualitative research methods and utilized across different methodological approaches (Busetto et al., 2020; Rooshenas et al., 2019). Sonix transcription services transcribed the data for this research. I documented participants' body language, responses to questions, and feedback from the group. The interview questions and I served as the data collection instrument. The phenomenological reduction assisted with the bracketing process by identifying the meaning of each experience while categorizing them into themes. Therefore, I focused on the participants' lived experiences and the meaning behind those experiences.

### **Questionnaires (Data Collection Approach #3)**

The development and use of questionnaires were joint in qualitative research. The [Potential Participant Questionnaire](#) were structured using overarching and subsidiary questions that addressed specific components of the central research question (Busetto et al., 2020; Kross & Giust, 2019). Implementing qualitative methods to generate questions enriched the clarity of the items (Busetto et al., 2020; Ricci et al., 2019). Qualitative questionnaires generated in-depth data and captured intricate details, including experiences and opinions of a specific phenomenon

(Neubauer et al., 2019; Rooshenas et al., 2019). Content validity was a complex factor of questionnaire validity. The most suitable way to collect data to ensure content validity was by conducting qualitative research and creating questions with the population of interest (Neubauer et al., 2019; Ricci et al., 2019). Researchers suggested that questionnaire items included qualitative methods to ensure that the questionnaire fully reflected participants' perspectives and that things were appropriate, understandable, and relevant to their experience (Ricci et al., 2019; Rooshenas et al., 2019). Research questions focused on and clarified the research (Heath et al., 2018; Kross & Giust, 2019). In this study, I ensured that participants received instructions to complete the writing prompts contained in the questionnaire as transparent and thoroughly as possible. The questionnaires were closed after a 72-hour window. Participants received the questionnaire via email. Once all questionnaires were collected, I documented personal interpretations. The questionnaire ([Potential Participant Questionnaire](#)) verified that participants were first-generation students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Ricci et al. (2019) and Ye et al. (2021) shared that content validity was fundamental to questionnaire validity. Content validity was the degree to which questionnaire items were relevant to and particular to the assessment (Connell et al., 2018; Ricci et al., 2019). Additionally, questionnaires in this study allowed participants to organize, reflect on and edit their responses before submitting them for review (Connell et al., 2018; Mpofu et al., 2022).

## Potential Participant Questionnaire

**Instructions:** Please answer this questionnaire regarding first-generation college students as transparent and thoroughly as possible. Your answers will be used in a study and will be kept confidential.

### Part One: Demographics

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Age:
  - a. 20-25
  - b. 25-30
  - c. 30-35
  - d. 40 and over
  
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Gender:
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Race or ethnicity
  - a. Black/African American
  - b. Caucasian
  - c. Hispanic/Latino
  - d. Asian
  - e. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_ Parent Education Level
  - a. High School Diploma
  - b. Associate Degree
  - c. Bachelor Degree
  - d. Master's Degree or higher
5. \_\_\_\_ Parent Income Level while the participant was in college
  - a. Under 25,000
  - b. 25,000-35,000
  - c. 35,000-45,000
  - d. 45,000+

The first five questions inquired about potential participants' demographics. These questions allowed the study to identify participants' background information regarding their age, race, and parents' educational and income level (Allen, 2017; Comeaux et al., 2020). When creating the questionnaire, I emphasized the importance and sensitivity of the information needed for this study (Allen, 2017; Boon et al., 2022). These questions assisted in identifying which potential participants were first-generation students. Once findings were implemented and followed up, understanding how education's role and impact on Black American men significantly impacted college campuses across America. Participants that met the criteria of the questionnaire were selected as participants and sent a copy of the consent form.

### ***Questionnaires Data Analysis Plan (Data Analysis Plan #3)***

Potential participants were able to complete the questionnaire to identify whether they met the criteria for this study. Additionally, participants reviewed and reflected on their responses and ensured they were accurately referenced as their experiences being first-generation,

low-income Black American males pursuing a college degree. Participants received the questionnaire via email. Once participants acknowledged the accuracy of the questionnaire, data analysis began for this data collection source. First, Jilcha Sileyew (2020) and Neubauer et al. (2019) instrumentation for phenomenological reduction analyzed this data. Next, I employed the horizontalization process that analyzed audio recordings, reviewed transcriptions, and identified common themes that were relevant and prominent in the phenomenon experience (Heath et al., 2018; Jilcha Sileyew, 2020). Then I began the process of reduction and elimination by evaluating and identifying themes in the study to understand the phenomenon better and effectively identified and labeled those experiences (Heath et al., 2018; Jilcha Sileyew, 2020). Finally, clustering assisted with identifying pertinent themes of the groups, experiences that did not meet the criteria from the study were omitted (Heath et al., 2018; Jilcha Sileyew, 2020).

### **Data Synthesis**

Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological research methods served as the primary resource for this research study. Once the data collection stage was completed, I began implementing the seven steps for analysis based on Moustakas' (1994) revision of the Van Kaam Method. The first step in this process was horizontalization, which consisted of unlimited experiences and providing a detailed description of each event, giving it equal importance (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I listed all pertinent information shared by participants from interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. Next, I started the process of reduction and elimination. During this phase, Moustakas (1994) noted that researchers must seek to find the answer to two questions to determine invariant constituents. The first questions determined if an experience could be understood (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I then reviewed participant statements and determined what was pertinent and what could be omitted from the study. Then, I

began eliminating any statements that were not pertinent to the study (Moustakas, 1994). The third step included clustering and creating themes for the invariant constituents (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I started to group statements and identified common themes during this stage. Next, I validated the identified themes by comparing them to the students' direct accounts (Moustakas, 1994). I then compared the themes identified from the previous steps to the participants' experiences and ensured accurate information was reported. Once the invariant constituents and themes were identified, I created a textural description for each participant. Moustakas (1994) identified the final step of phenomenological research as integrating fundamental textural and structural descriptions. Textural descriptions shared what was experienced and the factors contributing to the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Structural descriptions identified the "how," which spoke to the conditions of the incident and led to what was experienced (Moustakas, 1994, p. 36). The textural descriptions described the experiences of low-income, first-generation Black males' who completed and pursued a college degree. Structural descriptions provided details of low-income, first-generation Black males' lived experiences.

### **Trustworthiness**

Creswell and Poth (2018) viewed trustworthiness as a validation of the study that assisted with building the work's credibility. Trustworthiness addressed conformability, credibility, dependability, and transferability in a study. Understanding trustworthiness was pertinent to the study. It was relevant to gain the trust and understanding of participants which allowed them to be vulnerable and open about their experiences. To build trust and rapport, the initial contact after joining the study were introductions and explaining the research and the procedures (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Dang et al., 2017). Participants met via Zoom throughout the study.

The interview questions evaluated the content validity for pertinent feedback regarding the research. First-generation, low-income Black American males assisted with drafting the interview questions for this study. In determining content validity, the dissertation committee reviewed and approved the interview questions before the data collection phase of the study. Clarity, content, and sensitivity to the nature of the study assessed the content validity of the focus group questions. I created the instrument with individuals who identified as first-generation or from low socioeconomic backgrounds to help craft questions that highlighted common themes across the research. The focus group questions received approval from the dissertation committee before starting the data collection to increase the study's validity.

### **Credibility**

To avoid any discrepancies in the study, I applied triangulation. Triangulation helped with the validation of evidence if any differences arose. Multiple methods were used collect data evidence (Ames et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2020a). First, data collection utilized one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires for information. Finally, credibility was established when participants were allowed to provide feedback on preliminary and written examinations that ensured the data was reported accurately (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

### **Transferability**

Transferability was how results can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings (Forero et al., 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). Researchers provided in-depth context descriptions when increased transferability (Johnson et al., 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). Therefore, qualitative research was more adaptable for transferability if several researchers have studied the research data. This study established transferability by implementing thorough analysis descriptions (Jilcha Sileyew, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). Johnson et al. (2020) and Nowell et al.



(2017) found that implementing the use of “thick description” ensured the transferability of a study. Thick descriptions referred to detailed information regarding experiences, interactions, settings, and individuals to identify transferable factors. Transferability was obtainable by ensuring that all transcriptions were reviewed and approved by participants verifying the presented information. Qualitative researchers generalized findings to a population instead of the reader, who then determined the transferability of the results (Forero et al., 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). Ensuring these steps ensured that information was present and readily available. Therefore, I included thick descriptions of the phenomenon in the study to establish transferability.

### **Dependability**

Context and settings determined the dependability of the study. Dependability referred to the stability and consistency of in-depth details (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Effective duplication of all processes and procedures depended on the studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Data that was collected and analyzed, provided a detailed description of the data accurately. The procedures section outlined the process of implementing the research study. I achieved dependability in this study by utilizing an inquiry audit ([Inquiry Audit Trail](#)), executed once the dissertation committee and Qualitative Research Director reviewed the research process.

### **Confirmability**

Creswell and Poth (2018) and Korstjens and Moser (2018) noted that confirmability was when others confirmed or corroborated the study results. Researchers ensured that participants’ thoughts were accurate and did not represent a specific opinion (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Pessoa et al., 2019). Confirmability was the ability to remain unbiased (DeJonckheere & Vaughn,

2019; Pessoa et al., 2019). For this study, confirmability addressed conducting interviews with research participants that allowed for pertinent feedback and ensured clarity and depth of the information provided (Smith & Wilkins, 2018; van Manen, 2016). Participants were also allowed to review their input for accuracy and clarity. Finally, respondent validation authenticated the accuracy of the findings (Smith & Wilkins, 2018; van Manen, 2016).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Creswell and Poth (2018) and Korstjens and Moser (2018) noted that ethical considerations occurred throughout the research process. Data collection began once approval was received. First, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study ([Appendix A](#)). Once the institution approved the study, I emailed the recruitment letter ([Participant Recruitment Letter](#)). Potential participants then completed the questionnaire ([Potential Participant Questionnaire](#)) and verified that participants met the criteria for the study. Next, I shared the research proposal with potential participants, and participants signed the consent form ([Informed Consent Form](#)) and agreed to the purpose and procedures of the study. Next, all participants received detailed information regarding the research and had any questions answered before participating. Finally, all participants received written and verbal notification of the purpose of this study. Participation in the study allowed the research participants to review and modify transcriptions from their meetings (Heath et al., 2018; Jilcha Sileyew, 2020). Pseudonyms ([Participant Recruitment Letter](#)) were assigned to protect the institution's identities and participants in the study. Finally, I secured all participant interview transcripts and other data on a password-protected laptop to ensure the study's validity.

## Summary

This phenomenological study analyzed and discovered the factors attributed to the success of low-income, first-generation Black American male students who had graduated from a four-year institution and effectively addressed these issues. This chapter provided an overview of the methods used to conduct this study, procedures for conducting the study, the researcher's role, and ethical considerations. I chose qualitative research to understand a social phenomenon through individual interview observations, focus groups, and a questionnaire to understand the participants' perceptions of factors attributed to their academic success or failure.

I established the trustworthiness of the research study by ensuring credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. After joining the study, the initial contact were introductions and explaining the research and the procedures to build trust and rapport. Triangulation assisted with the validation of evidence. This study established transferability by implementing thorough descriptions of the research (Heath et al., 2018; Jilcha Sileyew, 2020). Transferability was attainable by ensuring that all transcriptions were reviewed and approved by participants verifying the presented information. I achieved dependability in this study by utilizing an inquiry audit ([Inquiry Audit Trail](#)); execution occurred once the dissertation committee and Qualitative Research Director reviewed the research process. Finally, I addressed confirmability by conducting interviews with research participants which allowed for pertinent feedback and ensured the clarity and depth of the information provided (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and interpret the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males who graduated or attended Middle Alabama University. This phenomenological study was being conducted to understand the lived experiences of ten low-income, first-generation Black American males that attended or graduated from Middle Alabama University and what assisted or detoured them from completing their degree. Participants in this study identified as being first-generation, low-income Black American males. The purpose of this chapter was to detail a brief description of the participants and to identify the themes that were discovered through the data analysis process. Themes were identified based on individual interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. Chapter Four provided an overview of the participants, identified the findings from the data analysis, and answered the research questions. In this chapter, a table described each participant, and the data presented themes, outlier data, and research question responses.

### **Participants**

The ten participants gave their consent by completing a consent form and emailing or verbally agreeing to participate. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to retain the confidentiality of the research. Each participant in this study identified as a Black male, first-generation, low-income student. A total of five participants graduated from Middle Alabama University, and five participants did not graduate. Participants had to identify as being Black, first-generation, and from a low-socioeconomic background and had to either graduate or

attend the university. Each participant answered questions on the questionnaire to determine their eligibility.

Data were collected from participants completing a questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups. Participants provided a detailed description of factors that motivated or detoured them from graduating college. The one-on-one interviews and focus groups were completed using the Zoom meeting platform, allowing participants and myself to conduct an interactive experience. Zoom was utilized in this study for the convenience of participants since they are located throughout various states. All ten participants completed the questionnaire and returned it to the researcher. Next, participants met with the researcher via Zoom for a one-on-one interview which was recorded using a secured audio device and the virtual recording feature through Zoom; each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. Two focus group sessions were held. The first focus group included the five participants who graduated, and the second group consisted of individuals who did not graduate; each session lasted 45-60 minutes and was recorded via Zoom. Table 1 gave demographic information about the participants.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Black Male</b>	<b>Low-Income</b>	<b>First-Gen.</b>	<b>Graduated/Attended</b>
Chris	Yes	Yes	Yes	Graduated
Trent	Yes	Yes	Yes	Graduated
Joseph	Yes	Yes	Yes	Graduated
Michael	Yes	Yes	Yes	Graduated
Wayne	Yes	Yes	Yes	Graduated
Ronald	Yes	Yes	Yes	Attended

Jeremy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Attended
Keith	Yes	Yes	Yes	Attended
Derek	Yes	Yes	Yes	Attended
Henry	Yes	Yes	Yes	Attended

### **Chris**

Chris was a 27-year-old, first-generation student from a low socioeconomic background. Both parents raised Chris until the age of 10. Chris shared that his aunt raised him with two of his older siblings and her four children. Chris acknowledged and recognized his aunt for how he was able to overcome the barriers that many of his peers faced growing up without a father figure and changing the trajectory of his life. His aunt earned a high school diploma and worked at a local furniture-making company with a yearly salary of \$35,000-\$45,000. Chris attended a public high school where he had the opportunity to meet Mr. Ruffin. Mr. Ruffin, a high school math teacher and football coach, became his surrogate father beginning his ninth-grade year. Ruffin also worked as a financial advisor and wanted to increase financial awareness for the students and their families. Mr. Ruffin worked with local officials and school board members to create a small bank inside the high school that employed and taught students to be financially responsible. It was through this opportunity that Chris's love for math and his innate ability to calculate numbers in his head grew. Mr. Ruffin saw his potential, encouraged Chris to apply for college and scholarships, and assured him he would assist. Chris decided to attend Middle Alabama University due to the location and the possible need to return home at times. Mr. Ruffin sponsored a yearly college tour for football seniors. During one of these trips, Chris visited the campus for the first time, which impacted him so much that he left knowing he wanted to attend.

Chris attended the university and quickly joined organizations around campus, such as Student Support Services (SSS), and attended tutoring sessions two to three times a week. Because Mr. Ruffin profoundly impacted Chris, Chris joined his mentor's fraternity, forming an additional bond. Mr. Ruffin followed Chris' progress and remained close to Chris's life throughout his matriculation, attending many games and extracurricular activities. Chris noted that he made valuable connections with the staff and his peers that were a part of SSS as well as with his local alumni fraternity brothers. Chris shared that it was not his belief in his abilities that allowed him to earn a degree but because he knew individuals were counting on him to succeed. Chris believed the lessons he learned on the field as a football player easily transferred to the type of student he wanted to be in the classroom. Chris graduated with a 3.4 GPA and is currently pursuing his MBA.

### **Joseph**

Joseph was a 33-year-old, self-identified first-generation Black student from a low-socioeconomic background. His father raised him while his mother was in and out of the home. Joseph was the youngest of three children. Joseph grew up in a middle-class neighborhood surrounded by several educated individuals ranging from educators, entrepreneurs, politicians, etc. The neighborhood also had a local book rental box at the end of the street corner where local neighborhood children could take a book to read and return it once they were finished to increase reading literacy. Joseph shared that he often did not understand why his father was tougher on him and his siblings than in other households. Joseph watched his father work odd jobs to provide and meet the children's basic needs. Joseph acknowledged an elderly White woman his father would often work for, growing his love for STEM. Miss Agnes was a retired chemistry professor who grew very fond of Joseph and took the time to show him how fun math and

science could be. Joseph shared the first time he could identify the different metals and nonmetals. Miss Agnes was instrumental in assisting Joseph with scoring a 28 on the ACT. The summer leading up to his senior year, Miss Agnes worked with him twice weekly to prepare for the test. With this score, Joseph knew he had several friends attending the university and receiving academic scholarships, so he decided to apply. This interaction with Miss Agnes inspired him to attend the university, majoring in Cell and Molecular Biology. While attending the university, friends kept him grounded and encouraged him during some of his most difficult times. Joseph credited his relationships with various faculty members and his peers as a motivating factor in completing his college degree. Joseph shared that the institution required certain sports groups and clubs to have their members meet for a certain number of study hours weekly. By implementing this rule, Joseph could create a routine of setting a schedule to study and complete his school tasks. After graduation, he attended graduate school, where he earned his Master's in Public Health.

### **Michael**

Michael was a 35-year-old, self-identified first-generation Black male from a low-socioeconomic background. Michael was raised in Texas by a single mother who dropped out in 10th grade and was unemployed. Michael shared that his family received government assistance. He lost his father to a car accident involving a drunk driver when he was nine. Michael shared that his childhood was tough and that he recalls staying up late at night studying in hopes of one day being able to leave his current situation. Upon his high school graduation, Michael applied to a community college a few hours away from home. While attending the community college, Michael excelled academically and socially, earning his Associate degree in Business Management. While attending the community college, Michael formed a bond with his



accounting professor, Mr. Bates. It was also during this time that Michael met his current wife, Ashley, who became his accountability partner and was very influential on his matriculation journey. Mr. Bates served as the advisor to the Student Ambassador program and encouraged Michael to become an Ambassador. While enrolled at the community college, Michael had the opportunity to attend a workshop for Black males on campus that discussed various resources across campus that assisted students with graduating and transferring to a credible four-year college. Michael attended the workshop, Mr. Bate's college roommate, Mr. Dixon, was there to speak to students and spoke to Michael about Middle Alabama University. Mr. Bates introduced Michael to Mr. Dixon, who convinced Michael to transfer to Middle Alabama University and connected him with Dr. Aaron. Mr. Dixon then began to work with Michael and Ashley to see what credits could transfer and if there were degree programs they were interested in. Dr. Aaron was instrumental in assisting both Michael and Ashley with getting accepted and finding the right program. Once at the university, Michael and Ashley chose the same major and became accountability partners for each other. The two worked to set study and work schedules and included time for free play. The two transferred and completed their program together.

### **Wayne**

Wayne was a 24-year-old two-time Middle Alabama University graduate with a Master of Education in English Language Arts. He currently serves as an English Second Language teacher in Texas. Wayne lived in a mixed neighborhood of diverse families with varying socioeconomic statuses, from middle-class to low-income. Wayne was raised by his maternal aunt, who earned a high school diploma. The neighborhood was friendly and safe in the daytime but was completely different when the streetlights came on at night. Wayne shared that his aunt encouraged him and his cousins to pursue higher education but was unaware of financial aid and thought she would

have to pay out of pocket for them to attend. Once Wayne entered high school and gained acceptance into Upward Bound, he learned more about college and acceptance requirements. Upward Bound provides fundamental support to participants in their preparation for college entrance. The program provides opportunities for participants to succeed in their precollege performance and, ultimately, their higher education pursuits. Before gaining acceptance into Upward Bound, Wayne was unfamiliar with applying to, or attending, college. He shared that once accepted into Upward Bound, he took advantage of every opportunity to increase his chances of being able to attend college. One opportunity that he was awarded was ACT prep courses for students. Through Upward Bound, Wayne received an ACT waiver, and on the first attempt, he scored a 21 in his sophomore year, and in his junior year of high school, he scored a 23, which qualified him for a University scholarship. Wayne's highest score on the ACT was in English, which prompted him to major in English. Wayne credited several individuals with having an impression on him to complete college. Wayne shared that several community members encouraged and inspired him to achieve the highest education from a very young age. Wayne shared that he and three of his friends from high school stayed connected despite attending different colleges. The young men would FaceTime weekly to study, talk about sports, share study tips, etc. The group continued to do this throughout their four-year matriculation. Wayne shared that those calls were very pivotal in his matriculation. Many days, he did not understand how he would overcome whatever barrier was currently presenting itself, but once he shared it with his friends and each spoke, they always felt they could conquer the world with the others helping them. Teachers and peers would encourage him to apply for programs and scholarships because he can write short stories and poems. The transition from high school to college was relatively smooth for Wayne. He quickly identified clubs and organizations on

campus that drew his interest and joined them. During the darkest times, when graduation seemed out of reach, Wayne shared that he leaned heavily on his faith. He often listened to inspirational videos and sermons on YouTube to encourage or motivate himself in a dark space. Because no one in his family had the experience of attending college, he felt as if he was not fully prepared to navigate higher education successfully; however, he did not allow this to hinder him. Instead, because he knew he was not privy to the information, or did not have anyone aware of how to navigate college, he would ask questions and began forming relationships with several staff members on campus that would become instrumental throughout his experience with securing jobs, internships, scholarships, etc.

### **Trent**

Trent is a two-time graduate of Middle Alabama University, having earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from the institution. Trent was raised in a single-parent household but credited his village with assisting his mom with his upbringing. The term “village” refers to a community that provides a safe, healthy environment for Trent to feel secure and begin to develop and flourish to become a young man filled with ambitions and dreams. Although he grew up in the home without his father, several men in the community assisted and worked with him to ensure he did not get entangled with drugs and gangs in the community. Trent credited his mother’s work ethic, as well as his village, with being his biggest motivation to graduate college. Trent decided to attend the university because it was close enough to home that he could commute daily to his classes. He received financial and spiritual support from his local church and community members during this time. Throughout his high school years, Trent volunteered to cut the church grass and remove any debris that could have been on the property. Trent did this for five years without asking the church for money or recognition. Because of his dedication to

the church and his education, several church members and the pastor raised money to purchase him a daily vehicle to commute from home to school. Trent acknowledged that this encouraged him to persevere even more. While at the university, he spent much time in the writing lab with fellow English majors and instructors. Trent shared that the writing lab would often become a sort of make-shift newsroom with the various topics and issues being discussed and students discussing ideas and solutions to the issues currently facing college students. Trent shared some of his most memorable experiences with the Black Student Union (BSU) student organization. The Black Student Union promotes cultural awareness on campus and in the community while developing skills necessary to address issues relevant to African Americans professionally. Surrounding himself with like-minded leaders and students with a passion for change encouraged him to do more on campus, so he became a student senator working with the Student Government Association. Joining BSU allowed Trent to meet more students and build relationships with faculty and staff at the institution. Once he joined the organization, he began to build pertinent relationships with several critical African American faculty members on campus. One of the significant issues that presented itself to Trent was his transition from high school to college. Being from a small town, Trent had the same classmates from Kindergarten to Grade 12; the university presented a new problem, there were new faces every day, and it was not easy to open up to others. He struggled to socialize initially because he felt he did not deserve to be at the institution, nor had he earned the right to be there. Trent began socializing more during his sophomore year and joined several intramural sports teams and student ambassadors.

### **Ronald**

Ronald was a 33-year-old Black male from a single-parent household born and raised in Prichard, Alabama. He was raised by his mother, whose highest level of education was high

school. She worked three jobs, during his time in high school, to support Ronald and his three siblings. Unfortunately, Ronald's mother was not home often, and he did not receive much academic assistance during his adolescent years. His family never taught Ronald the importance of education. Still, he often heard from teachers and other community members that education was a sure way for students to change their socioeconomic status. Although it was shared that education was the way out of poverty, not many students received encouragement from their teachers to attend college after graduation. Ronald was motivated to leave his current living situation to apply to college. Ronald had been encouraged to play collegiate football, and his high school football coach offered to contact a few college scouts to allow him to play. Ronald spoke to his football coach and inquired about football scholarships. His coach arranged for Ronald to visit Middle Alabama University and try out for the team. Middle Alabama University offered Ronald the most scholarship money, which allowed him to attend with most of the cost covered by the scholarship. Ronald received notice from the institution that he had been accepted. Once he shared it with his mother, she quickly informed him that she had completed her task as a parent because he had reached the age of 18. Once on campus, Ronald created relationships with several football team members that assisted him with maneuvering the institution. However, Ronald shared that his socioeconomic status affected his educational goals and hindered his goal of graduating. He was not able to receive monetary support from his family. When he called home with questions regarding financial aid and building relationships with faculty members, no one offered advice on maneuvering the institution. Ronald shared a significant disconnect between him and his faculty members. He shared that many faculty members were not approachable and seemed uninterested in the students and their needs. He felt disconnected from the faculty, which came across as the instructor not being interested in the

students' learning. Several of the faculty members would encourage him to attend tutoring. Still, instructors would not offer office hours for him to receive one-on-one instruction to answer questions directly related to his current problem. Ronald shared that he rarely participated in class due to not fully understanding the subject matter. His most enjoyable assignment was the school shooting simulation. He enjoyed the simulation because it allowed him to participate and work with the victims from the simulation actively. Ronald shared that he had the most issues with math and science. Although he was enrolled in remedial classes in his first semester, he still did not receive the needed assistance. Transitioning from high school to college courses and meeting instructors' expectations was also a barrier. Ronald shared that he needed more time to transition into the college environment and meet the classroom expectations of professors, which caused issues with building relationships with instructors. Ronald said he realized that his goal of graduating was becoming what seemed to be an impossible task due to the lack of financial assistance and grades. Ronald decided to drop out his sophomore year after completing the fall semester. When asked why he did not complete the full sophomore year, he shared that he was no longer eligible for football and that his mother had fallen ill and could no longer provide for the family. He returned home and found work at a nearby plant.

### **Jeremy**

Jeremy was a 28-year-old Black male from a low-socioeconomic family with seven children raised in one household. Jeremy and his three siblings were raised by his maternal grandmother, who also raised his three cousins. Jeremy shared that although he grew up in a household full of people for most of his childhood, he felt lonely, deserted, and unloved. Jeremy had to be taken in by his grandmother because his mother was tragically murdered when he was seven. Jeremy shared that the death of his mother and his father's absence played a pivotal part in

some of his choices early on. Because he did not get much attention at home, Jeremy turned to gang members in his neighborhood for the attention he yearned for from his family but never received. Jeremy quickly became entangled in the local neighborhood gang politics. It was just by chance that one night his grandmother's pastor was leaving from visiting a local church for revival and saw him on the corner and offered a ride. During that ride home, the pastor spoke to Jeremy, and for the first time, he was told regardless of what circumstance he was born into, it did not determine what he could become in the future. Jeremy shared it was through this encounter that he believed he could attend college and change the perspective of his life. Jeremy spoke with his guidance counselor the following year and shared his interest in applying to Middle Alabama University. Although he never honestly had the support of his family to set high academic goals, Jeremy was an average student with a 2.7 high school GPA. He received a waiver to take the ACT and scored an 18. Jeremy shared that his biggest obstacle was transitioning from high school to college courses and several professors' demands. Coming from a Title I school system where the coursework did not require much rigor attending the university was a significant barrier. Jeremy shared that as a first-generation student with no guidance on resources and available services for students regarding tutoring and the writing lab, he utilized only a few resources during his university attendance. However, Jeremy did identify three students in his major-specific program and formed a study group. Jeremy admitted the other students continued to meet, but due to his work schedule at a local food restaurant; his meetings with them became less and less throughout the semester. Jeremy shared that by the time he was supposed to have enough credits to be a junior, he had only earned enough credits to be classified as a first-semester sophomore. Jeremy shared that he realized his dream of graduating had faded away at that moment. He did not understand how he had been enrolled for three consecutive

years and taken enough credit hours but was still not classified as a junior. Once he shared this with his family back home, they encouraged him to come home and perhaps enroll in a local community college and take on a trade. Jeremy shared that before he could enroll in the community college, his grandmother suffered from two major strokes and was left bedridden. Jeremy was left to take on the provider role for the remaining children in the home and provide for his grandmother. Unfortunately, his grandmother passed away four months after he returned home. He still lives in the home, providing for his two younger siblings. He aims to get them through high school and return to the university to earn his degree.

### **Keith**

Keith was a 23-year-old first-generation black male from a low-socioeconomic family in a rural hometown. Keith was raised on a small farm with his two younger brothers by his mother and father. His mother and father earned their high school diploma and planned to attend college but conceived Keith a few months before they could leave home. His mother was raised in a strict Baptist home, and as soon as her parents learned of the pregnancy, they were ushered down to the church to be married. His mother was a homemaker, and his father was employed at the local river pulp factory. Keith shared that the neighborhood he grew up in was plagued with poverty, and many neighbors came together to assist each other with their needs. Because his parents desired to attend college, they instilled in him early that college was his route. Keith said he constantly told his family that he did not believe he was “college material.” He shared that he did well in secondary school, but the assignments were not thought-provoking; he knew that to attend college, he would have to adjust to more rigorous assignments. Nevertheless, Keith applied to college and was accepted into Middle Alabama University. Keith shared that he struggled socially and could not establish a sense of belonging during his first semester. He



continued to seclude himself more during the second semester, and he began to skip class and only leave to go to the cafe or his morning workout. He was placed on academic probation, and because he was conditionally accepted, he had to sit out the summer semester. He returned home, got a job at the Hyundai plant, and became accustomed to making money and not depending on his family for his needs. When it was time to return to the university, Keith declined and chose to continue working at the Hyundai plant. He shared that he eventually wants to return to college and earn a degree in Supply Chain Management to work his way up at his current job.

### **Derek**

Derek was a 40-year-old black male from a low socioeconomic family who attended a rural high school in Cattle Ranch County. Derek was an only child and was raised by a single mother. Derek was an average student in the classroom but excelled in sports. Before transferring to Middle Alabama University, he secured a basketball scholarship with a community college in lower Alabama. He transferred from the community college before receiving his associate degree, a fact he now regrets. Derek shared that building relationships with the faculty members was one of his biggest obstacles. Derek believed many faculty members judged him as an athlete and did not give him much interest as a student. Due to his not connecting with faculty members, Derek eventually stopped attending class. He decided not to play basketball for the university and to focus on his studies. He ultimately decided to return home during his second year while attending the university. Because he did not correctly unenroll from his classes, his GPA was tremendously affected, and he lost the ability to receive financial aid. He is working and plans to begin making payments to the university to receive his transcript from attending a local community college to major in HVAC.

### **Henry**

Henry was a 32-year-old first-generation Black male from a low-socioeconomic background. His uncle raised Henry due to his parents being incarcerated. Henry grew up in a drug-infested neighborhood often filled with homeless individuals and street workers. Henry shared that every day was a struggle just to get to school. He had to learn very early which routes he could take and the best times to take those routes. Henry received little assistance from his uncle regarding his education and pursuit of a college degree. Because Henry's uncle only received an eighth-grade education, he was unable to assist Henry with navigating and understanding the language associated with the collegiate process. Henry shared that his uncle would have angry outbursts when presented with something he could not understand, resulting in him lashing out and punishing Henry. Henry shared that he never had a teacher that took a particular interest in him. He believed this was because he was not the most well-kept student, and his uncle was not active in attending field days and parent-teacher conferences. He was never told that he could become whatever he wanted, but he had listened to a YouTube video of a motivational speaker sharing how college changed his life trajectory. Henry reached out to the admissions counselor from the university and shared his plight. The counselor worked with him on contacting financial aid and applying for financial aid as an independent student not receiving financial support from his family. Henry attended the university for one semester before ultimately leaving to support himself financially. He is currently working and has plans to enroll in the industrial maintenance program at the university.

### **Results**

The results from this study were gathered by analyzing data from questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and focus group interviews with ten participants. The responses from the participants identified factors participants believed assisted or detoured them from completing

their college degree. Once transcribed, the one-on-one and focus group interviews highlighted significant findings, themes, and descriptions. Participants were allowed to review the data, and once member checking was completed, I began to analyze each interview transcript to understand the lived experiences of each participant. I employed open, axial, and selective coding to explore participants' interview responses, resulting in several emerging themes.

Jilcha Sileyew (2020) and Neubauer et al. (2019) suggested utilizing data analysis techniques such as gathering, cleaning, and organizing information to assist with phenomenological reduction. The two focus groups identified five themes in this study using this process. Focus group one identified three themes that motivated them to graduate: community mentors, engagement, and self-motivation. Focus group two identified three themes they perceive as hindrances in pursuing a college degree: preparedness, support, and engagement. Several sub-themes were identified from each theme: mentors, financial and emotional support, and academic and social integration. Table 2 showed the themes supported by participant testimonials. Table 3 depicted the research subquestions with the corresponding themes. Table 4 depicted the thematic categories aligned with research by each participant.

**Table 2**

*Theme Development*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Student Quotes</b>
<b>Mentors</b>	Chris: “Mr. Ruffin, my high school Math teacher and football coach, became like a surrogate father for me beginning my ninth-grade year. He saw my potential, encouraged me to apply for college and scholarships, and walked me through the process.”

	<p>Joseph: “ Miss Agnes, an elderly white neighbor, worked with me to study for the ACT the summer going into my senior year, and I scored a 28.”</p>
<p><b>Engagement</b></p>	<p>Keith: “I struggled socially and could not find a sense of belonging my first semester, which only made me seclude myself more the second semester. I began to skip class and only leave to go to the cafe or morning workouts.”</p> <p>Trent: “As an English major, I spent most of my time in the writing lab on campus with my classmates.”</p> <p>Chris: “I arrived on campus eager to join campus organizations. I was able to connect with several members of SSS and began to frequent their workshops.”</p> <p>Wayne: “The transition from high school to college was smooth. I joined my fraternity my sophomore year and was active the remainder of my matriculation.”</p>
<p><b>Self-Motivated</b></p>	<p>Michael: “I lost my father early, and we had it pretty tough afterward. I recall staying up late at night studying because I knew I had to earn a college degree to change the trajectory of my life and my family’s life.”</p> <p>Joseph: “I can recall the moment I was awakened. I attended my family church, and the Pastor asked the audience, “How bad do you want it?” He shared that anything worth having is worth working for. At that moment, I decided that my current situation would not determine where I would be ten years from now. I began to see myself as a college graduate before enrolling.”</p> <p>Wayne: “My aunt encouraged us to attend college and earn a degree, but ultimately, I saw my parents' lives overtaken by drugs. I knew from a young age that I did not want</p>

	that to be my story.”
<b>Pre-College Experience</b>	<p>Ronald: “My mother was not home often due to work. I cannot recall when I had the opportunity to review homework or an assignment with my mom before it was graded.”</p> <p>Jeremy: “My biggest obstacle was transitioning from high school to college courses and meeting professors' demands. Coming from a Title I school system where the coursework did not require much rigor to attending the University was a significant barrier.”</p> <p>Wayne: “It was not until I entered high school and was accepted into Upward Bound that college became something I thought I could achieve.”</p>
<b>Support</b>	<p>Derek: “I knew my mother could not afford to send me to college before I left home, but I at least wanted to experience it and say I gave it a try. I decided in my second year while attending the University during Spring Break not to return. Because I did not properly unenroll from my classes, my GPA was affected tremendously, and I lost the ability to receive financial aid. ”</p> <p>Ronald: “I recall running home to tell my mom I had been accepted to the University. I knew she wanted to be happy for me, but the realization of her inability to financially support me set in quickly. She ushered me to the table and told me that she was proud but that I would have to pay my way through college.”</p> <p>Trent: “I cut the grass at my church for years without expecting anything in return, more so because my Grandmother made me initially, but I eventually enjoyed it. After graduation, I attended church as I always do, and after</p>

	service, my church gifted me with a car for my years of service to have transportation to and from school.”
--	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Table 3***Thematic Categories Aligned with Research*

Research Question	Thematic Category
SQ1: What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success?	Pre-collegiate experience Mentors
SQ2: What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success?	Mentors Community Self-Motivation
SQ3: What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure?	Pre-collegiate experience
SQ4: What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure?	Adapting to a new environment Financial support

**Table 4***Thematic Categories Aligned with Research by Participant*

Theme	Chris	Trent	Joseph	Michael	Wayne	Ronald	Jeremy	Keith	Derek	Henry
Mentors	x	x	x		x					
Self-Motivation	x	x	x	x	x					x
Pre-College Experience (prep classes)	x		x		x		x	x		
Support	x	x	x	x				x	x	

Engagement	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	
------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	--	--	---	--

## **Theme 1: Mentors**

### *Community Mentors*

Research showed that students with higher levels of community support such as mentors or parental involvement and partnership programs had an increased level of student attendance, grades, and achievements and resulted in fewer behavioral issues and had a general attitude of positivity towards school and homework (Bäulke et al., 2022; Harper et al., 2020). Participants in the study shared the importance of each community member's role on their road to success. In the interview, Chris stated, “My high school math teacher and football coach became like a surrogate father beginning my nine-grade year, and it was through his belief in me that I applied for college and scholarships with his help.”

Joseph stated in his interview,

“Miss Agnes, an elderly white neighbor that retired from being a chemistry teacher, grew fond of me. She worked with me the summer of my junior year to prepare for the ACT. I remember raising my score by three points because of Miss Agnes”.

Wayne shared during the focus group,

“I was lucky to be able to find my crew once I arrived on campus. I intentionally selected the people I would choose to be my friends. I surrounded myself with people who were determined to reach their goal and would hold me accountable throughout my matriculation”.

### *Academic Mentors*

Several of the participants in the study acknowledged that they had an individual that served as an academic mentor in their life. Michael credited his mentors and professors who

helped steer him in the right direction regarding his career and personal life. Michael shared in the focus group,

“I attended a community college before enrolling at the university. While enrolled at the community college, I had the opportunity to meet Mr. Bates. Mr. Bates and I quickly formed a relationship, and he walked me through identifying an institution to attend after completing my associate's degree requirements. Through an event Mr. Bates hosted, I met his college roommate, Mr. Dixon. Mr. Dixon worked at Middle Alabama University and assured Mr. Bates that he would take care of me if I chose to attend Middle Alabama University. Not only did Mr. Dixon keep his promise to Mr. Bates by assuring that I graduate, but he also introduced me to my future wife by encouraging me to join a study group”.

Chris shared in the focus group,

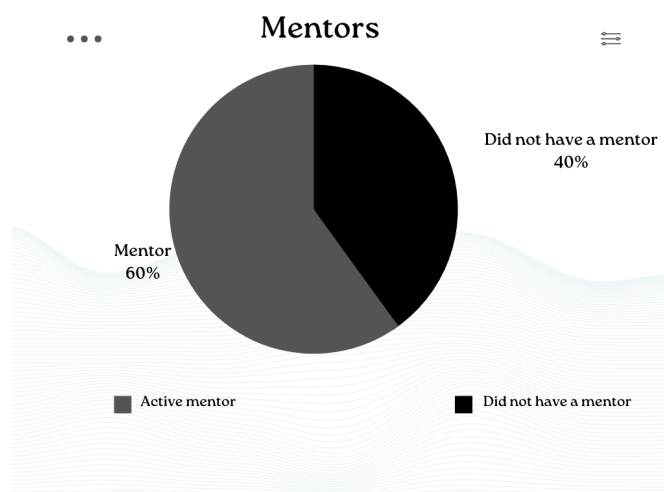
“Mr. Ruffin had spoken so much life into me by the time I reached my senior year that I felt invincible. He could speak to a part of me that I did not know existed. I knew it was nothing that I set my mind to that I could not and would not achieve if I gave it my all”.

Wayne stated in his interview, “I wanted to be like my principal Mr. Langford. I wanted to be the one from my family that made it. So I did everything I could to pattern my life to his”. Joseph shared in the focus group, “My mentors played a pivotal role in my success, in terms of my preparation, networking opportunities, and accountability.”

## **Figure 1**

*Common Theme 1: Mentors*





## Theme 2: Engagement

Research has shown that academic and social engagement motivated students to participate in their curricula and other campus activities. Engagement helped students stay in the university and graduate, made the university experience pleasant, and helped them get good grades and learn (Farrell et al., 2018; Tight, 2020). Trent stated,

“During my undergraduate career as an English major, much of my time was spent in the writing lab. I was able to gain more than the technical skills needed for my major but gained people skills and leadership skills. We would often have to work together on various projects, so by utilizing the resource on campus, I could gain skills that are beneficial in all aspects of life.”

In the focus group, Chris shared,

“I was active in high school with clubs and organizations. So, I took that approach in college and met new people and connected with like-minded individuals that motivated me to graduate on time”.

Individuals in focus group two shared more difficult transition experiences. Keith shared in his interview, “I struggled socially and did not find a good fit my first semester. Second semester, I skipped classes and only left my room to attend workouts and the cafe”. Derek shared in the focus group session, “I believed my professors never allowed a connection because they prejudged me. They saw a low-income black kid attending their institution to play basketball. That was the impression from my perspective”.

### ***Academic Engagement***

Numerous students attended college not fully prepared to know what to expect. Students that attended high schools that offered advanced placement (AP) courses and prep classes for students interested in attending college typically did well compared to students from Tier 1 districts. Schools had to create inclusive and collaborative climates that encouraged academic engagement, prepared and exposed students to higher education, and get the community involved with supporting the initiative (Farrell et al., 2018; Tight, 2020). Michael shared in his interview, “I formed a bond with my professor, Mr. Dixon, once I transferred to the University. Mr. Dixon was not my assigned advisor but acted as an advisor. Ensuring I registered early to get the needed classes and apply for internships in my field”. Keith shared, “I attended tutoring on several occasions. The times that I went consistently, I could tell the difference when completing assignments and taking tests”. During the focus group, Jeremy shared, “I served as a tutor before I left the institution due to my grandmother becoming ill. I saw firsthand how tutoring services and building relationships impacted my experience while enrolled.”

### ***Social Engagement***

Social engagement referred to students' ability to engage in extracurricular activities and build healthy relationships with their peers and faculty (Cook et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2020).

Wayne shared in his interview,

“I joined BSU my freshman year and formed various connections with individuals around campus and met faculty that served as advisors. Joining BSU gave me my tribe while attending the University that held me accountable and often reminded me why I was attending the University”.

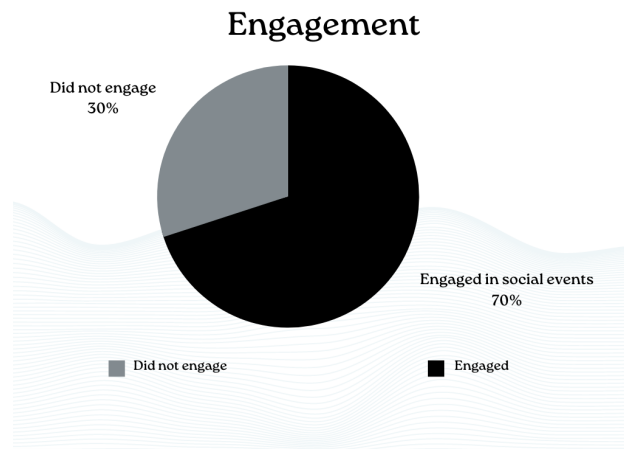
Keith shared in the focus group,

“I was very social in high school and never really had issues making friends. I remember writing my first paper in English and my Professor handing back a paper that was illuminated with red. I was embarrassed and felt as if I was an imposter. I met with my Professor, who encouraged me to attend the writing lab. I was so embarrassed to go and seek help that I began to seclude myself and eventually lost the connection I made when I first arrived”.

Trent shared in the interview, “I joined SGA as a freshman senator, and the passion and drive of fellow student leaders rubbed off on me. I no longer wanted to earn my degree but improve the campus for the next generation”.

## **Figure 2**

*Common Theme 2: Engagement*



### Theme 3: Self-Motivation

Self-motivation was when a student set things up to get what they wanted. It was essential to understand that self-determination usually contributed to positive results in areas like employment, education, community living, and improved quality of life (Ardelt & Grunwald, 2018). Michael shared in his interview, “I lost my father early, and we had it pretty tough afterward. I recall studying late at night because I knew I had to earn a scholarship to attend college after a degree. I use my current situation as motivation to obtain my degree to change the trajectory of my life”. Joseph shared in the focus group,

“I can recall the moment I was awakened. I attended my family church, and the pastor asked the audience, “How bad do you want it?” He shared that anything worth having is worth working for. At that moment, I decided that my current situation would not determine where I would be ten years from now. I began to see myself as a college graduate before enrolling”.

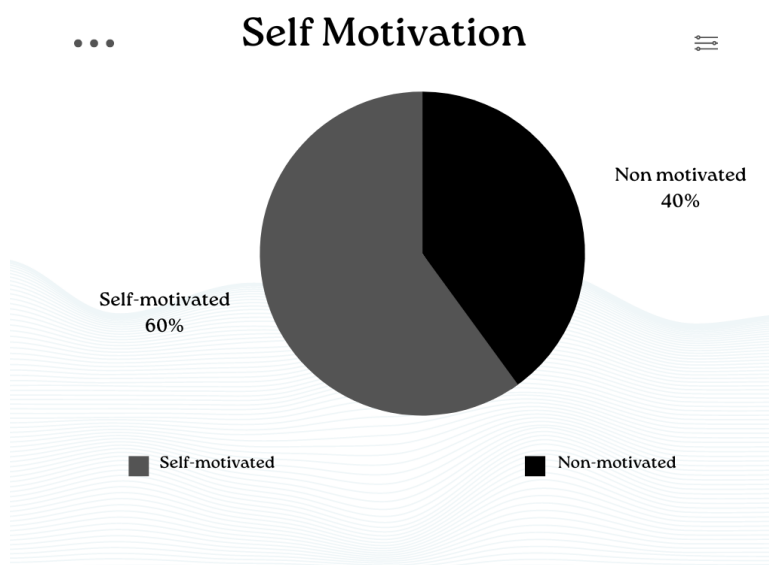
Wayne shared in the interview,

“It was my aunt that instilled the importance of education in us, but ultimately, I saw my parents’ lives overtaken by drugs. From a young age, I knew I did not want that to be my

story. I use that as motivation to keep studying when I felt tired or to turn down a party to study”. Chris shared in his interview, “Mr. Ruffin started speaking life into me early. Therefore, by the time I entered the campus, I knew I already had everything I needed to succeed”.

### Figure 3

*Common Theme 3: Self-Motivation*



### Theme 4: Pre-College Experience

College readiness was the level of preparation a student needed to enroll and succeed in a credit-bearing course at a postsecondary institution without remediation (Hill et al., 2021; Huo, 2021). Derek shared during his interview,

“I was unfamiliar with enrolling or withdrawing from school. I decided my freshman year that I would not return after Spring Break. I left and did not return. I later found out I did not properly unenroll and failed my entire course load that semester, which caused me to lose my financial aid”.

Numerous students needed to gain the knowledge to navigate this new arena properly. During the focus group, Jeremy shared,

“My biggest obstacle was transitioning from high school to college courses and meeting professors’ demands. Coming from a Title I school system where the coursework did not require much rigor to attend the university was a significant barrier”.

Wayne shared, “If it were not for programs like Upward Bound, I would not have had the assistance I needed when applying for college and preparing for entrance exams”.

### ***Prep-Courses***

Several participants shared their experience with college entrance exam preparation courses before enrolling or applying to the institution. Joseph shared during his interview,

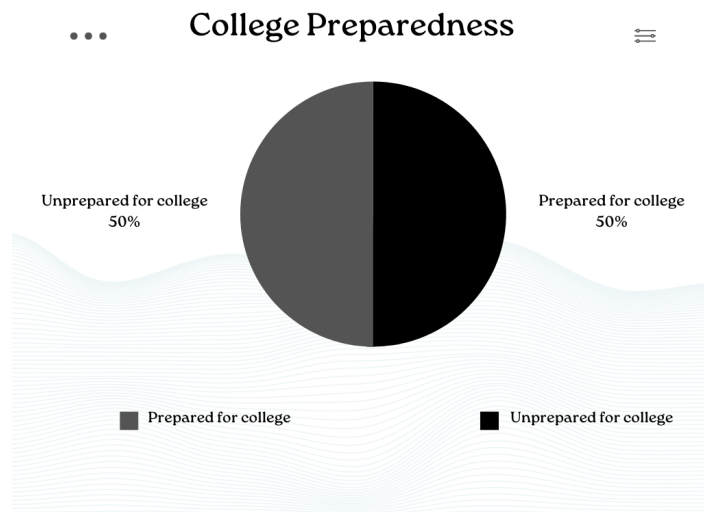
“Miss Agnes worked with me and assisted with preparing me for the ACT. We worked together tirelessly the summer leading up to my senior year, and I scored a 28 on the ACT. I had increased my points since I took it that previous March”.

Wayne shared during his interview,

“I was able to take free ACT prep classes through Upward Bound at the local community college. I attended a few sessions throughout the school year and the summer sessions. I scored a 23 on the ACT, which allowed me to apply for university scholarships”.

### **Figure 4**

*Common Theme 4: College Preparedness*



### **Theme 5: Support**

Henry shared during his interview, “I did not receive much support from my uncle while attending college. He raised my brother and me after our parents were incarcerated but never fully gave us the support we needed as young men”. Ronald shared in his interview,

“I recall running home to tell my mom I had been accepted to the university. I knew she wanted to be happy for me, but the realization of her inability to financially support me set in quickly. She ushered me to the table and told me she was proud but that I would have to pay my way through college”.

#### ***Financial Support***

As the cost of attendance continued to rise across colleges and universities, students and families faced the barrier of finding ways to afford the cost. Derek shared in the focus group, “I knew my mother could not afford to send me to college before I left home, but I at least wanted to experience it and say I gave it a try”.

Trent shared in his interview,

“My grandmother could not afford to send me to college. However, I received scholarship money. There were still the necessities I would need money for. My church

family stepped up and would mail me random care packages. Many members of my church are elderly and did not have the opportunity to graduate high school, let alone attend a college”.

### ***Emotional Support***

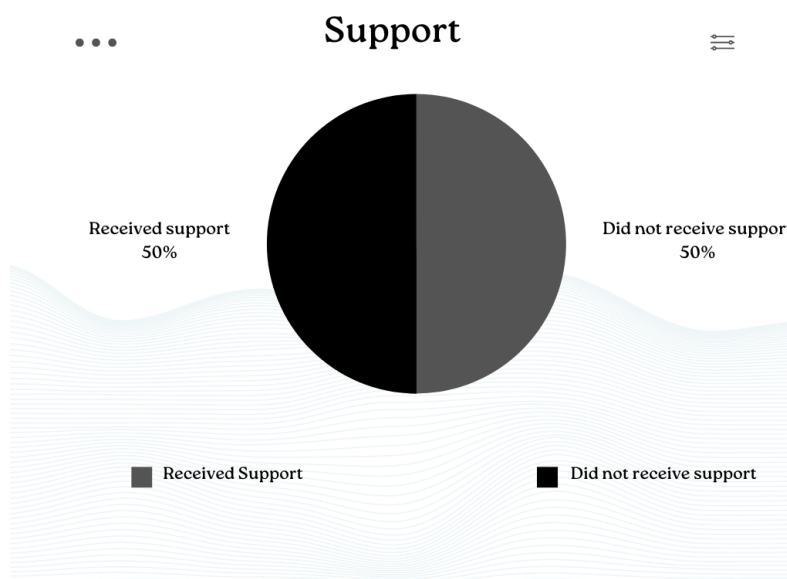
Arriving on a college campus can overwhelm anyone and cause significant anxiety. Several students shared the importance of having an accountability partner or a shoulder to cry on. Ronald shared in his interview, “My mother was not home often due to work, so growing up, she was not around to check our homework or assist with class projects”.

Michael shared in his interview,

“I recall running home to tell my mom I had been accepted to the university. I knew she wanted to be happy for me, but the realization of her inability to financially support me set in quickly. A moment where I wanted to be hugged and praised for my accomplishments were tainted with the bitter taste of realization”.

**Figure 5**

*Common Theme 5: Support*





## **Outlier Data and Findings**

The data collected through this study were related to the research questions and identified pertinent themes throughout the data analysis process. While analyzing data, one outlier was identified and needed to align with the specific research questions. The finding was that high schools should implement programs to assist first-generation students and families with the college process.

### ***High School Programs for Families of First-Generation College Students***

Half participants shared that they received support while pursuing their college degrees. However, the remaining students shared that because they did not have anyone assisting with the process or helping to answer their guardian questions, they felt alone and grew frustrated with the college process before arriving on campus. Joseph shared in the focus group,

“If not for Miss Agnes, I would have never retaken the ACT or applied to college. My father wanted me to attend college but did not know where to begin or how they would afford it. If it were not for Miss Agnes working with me to raise my score on the ACT and assisting my father with completing FAFSA and the required University documents, I would have never applied to college, let alone earned my degree. I did not have a teacher or counselor in high school to help me with the college process, and students today need that. I had Miss Agnes, but not every child has one, and the school system should offer that service”.

Derek shared in his interview,

“I wish I would have had someone explain the importance of college and how FAFSA works before I signed up for it. I left school my sophomore year and did not properly withdraw from my classes. I failed my classes, and my GPA was affected, which affected my FAFSA. I am now in a position where I have to repay the government's funds to be

eligible for financial aid again. I had no idea that I would have to pay those funds back. I did not know I had a balance until I called three years ago inquiring about my transcript, and the University shared that they could not release it until the balance was cleared. This could have been avoided if someone had shared this information with students before they even decided to apply to high school for college. We need more programs in high schools educating students and families because a first-generation student does not know what they do not know”.

### ***First-Year Experience – First-Generation College Students***

Several participants shared the barrier of academically integrating into the campus environment and socially. While conducting interviews and focus group sessions, an outlier emerged that seemed to be of great interest to all participants, whether they had effectively integrated or had not. When asked what could increase the number of first-generation, low-income Black American males graduating from college, participants suggested an office of first-year experience focusing on assisting first-generation college students. Joseph shared,

“Although I had a mentor back home assisting with navigating the college admissions process, I did not have anyone that could assist with navigating the campus of Middle Alabama University. Miss Agnes was a great resource for applying for scholarships and completing required tests, but she was unfamiliar with the campus or community.

Therefore, I was unaware of navigating the campus, such as attending events or major-specific buildings, for a major portion of the first few weeks”.

Ronald asserted during the focus group session,

“I had a high school friend that attended a University in Louisiana, and he shared information regarding his institution’s Office of First-Year Experience. He shared the different

resources available to them for class, such as computers, books, chargers, and information regarding events on campus. The institution had also implemented the buddy system, where freshmen could sign into specific software and find a peer based on their major or residence hall to attend the event with.”

### **Research Question Responses**

This section further detailed the data that supported the research questions. This section described the central research question and the four sub-questions. This section provided a direct narrative responses from the participants relevant to the questions being asked in this study.

#### **Central Research Question**

What academic and social factors presented challenges to low-income, first-generation Black American males, and how did they overcome them? The participants who graduated from Middle Alabama University credit their academic success as low-income, first-generation students to their pre-college experience, mentors/community, and self-motivation. Michael shared in the focus group,

“I was lucky to have two professors from two different institutions assist me. Mr. Bates assisted and worked with me while I pursued my associate degree. Through my connection with Mr. Bates, I met Dr. Aaron, who would serve as my mentor at Middle Alabama. Dr. Aaron was instrumental in identifying a Master’s program and helped identify scholarship opportunities to cover the expense”.

Joseph asserted, “It was my neighbor, Miss Agnes, that worked with me to score a 28 on the ACT, which allowed me to get a scholarship to attend the university”. Trent shared in the focus group,

“My entire church community supported me on my journey to earning my degree. My church purchased the first car that allowed me to commute from home to school daily. While at the university, I spent much time in the writing lab. I formed lifelong friendships and met people we still serve as accountability partners. The university gave me so much more than just an education; they gave me a chance”.

The participants that did not graduate from Middle Alabama University credit their demise as low-income, first-generation students to their pre-college experience, support, and engagement. Ronald shared,

“Transitioning from high school to college courses and meeting instructors' expectations was also a barrier. There was not much time to adjust to the transition from what I was accustomed to and now to the new expectations without much transitioning time. I realized shortly that my goal of graduating was becoming what seemed to be an impossible task”.

Keith shared in the focus group,

“I struggled socially and could not find a sense of belonging my first semester, which only made me seclude myself more the second semester. I began to skip class and only leave to go to the cafe or morning workouts”.

### **Sub-Question One**

What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success? Participants shared several factors that assisted them during their pursuit of higher education. The most common themes identified were participants' pre-collegiate experience and the support of mentors and my community. Chris shared,

“Mr. Ruffin had spoken life into me my entire high school career. It became a point in my life where his belief in me transformed and increased my belief in myself. I went from thinking that maybe I can do this, so I know I can do this”.

Joseph shared in his interview,

“Miss Agnes shared the importance of building relationships in college. She shared that I need first to show my professors I am serious about why I attend and, secondly, identify students with the same mindset as me to form a study group. I was luckily housed with two male students that were like-minded. We worked with our freshman seminar teacher to create schedules for us to study and hang out based on each of our schedules. It was very beneficial because not only did I know what I was supposed to be doing at 3 p.m. on Monday, but my study partners knew as well and would hold me accountable to the schedule”.

### **Sub-Question Two**

What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success? Participants identified social factors they perceived assisted them with successfully earning their college degree. Joseph asserted,

“While attending the University, I created my community of like-minded individuals. My community was made up of various faculty members and peers that I had encountered at the University. My community walked across the stage with me at graduation.”

Wayne shares, “It was my fraternity brothers that kept me grounded and on the path to graduation”. Trent asserted,

“Some of my fondest memories were made with the Black Student Union. The Black Student Union promotes cultural awareness on campus and in the community while developing skills necessary to address issues relevant to African Americans professionally. Through BSU, I could find individuals that looked like me that I would not have known due to the lack of diversity in the program I chose to study. I became active socially while identifying people that would keep me motivated and on track to graduate. My favorite event was planning the Black Wall Street event. We learned much about the real Black Wall Street and assisted students with sharing their talents with the campus and local community”.

### **Sub-Question Three**

What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure? Participants that comprised the second focus group were the participants that attended Middle Alabama University but still needed to graduate successfully. As the research was conducted, several participants asserted that the transition and forming relationships with their peers and faculty members were barriers for them. Ronald asserted,

“I felt a significant disconnect between myself and my professors. They were not approachable and seemed to care little about us as students. Often, campus classes would be moved online, causing even more disconnect with the professor”.

Jeremy asserted,

“I was on track to graduate, but due to issues with my advisor, my major was changed without my consent, and I was assigned classes for a year that I did not need for my

major. I felt my time had been wasted and became frustrated. I left after that year and decided to find a job back home”.

Keith added,

“I applied to college to appease my parents because it was their dream. The importance of education was always instilled in us, so I knew I had to go to college, but it was to make them happy. I took remedial classes for math and english and did not know those were not credits toward my degree. Once I passed those courses and was assigned to EH 100 and MH 113, I became overwhelmed by the work and the pace at which the class moved. I shared with my parents my frustration with the assignments and my inability to understand. They motivated me to complete my freshman year fully but ultimately let me decide after that year that college was not for me”.

#### **Sub-Question Four**

What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure? Participants shared the barriers they faced when arriving on the campus and beginning to immerse themselves in the campus culture. Several students shared that the transition was seamless, while others faced various challenges. Derek asserted,

“I was on the basketball team at the community college I transferred from but decided not to play for the university. The transition from high school to college was not as difficult as growing up in the city and moving to a rural area of Alabama. I grew homesick and began to resent my decision to attend. My attitude towards the school eventually started affecting everything else. I began to skip class, and because I was no longer a part of the team, the socialization I would get at basketball practice was lost, which caused me to

remove myself from others further and things I once enjoyed. Once I lost basketball, I knew no other reason to stay at Middle Alabama”.

Henry added,

“I have always been an introvert, never making many friends. I attended the university and stuck to the same routine. My professors encouraged collaboration between myself and my peers, but it caused great anxiety to the point where I received a medical excuse. The further I went into the program, the more it required me to come out of my shell. I had arrived on campus nervous but excited about the possibilities. I arrived and was quickly ushered to the financial aid office, where I was informed that I had a balance that had to be cleared or have a payment plan in place before the start of the semester. The financial aid office was very informative and helpful in assisting me with identifying as an independent student that semester. However, asking people around campus for necessities was too much. How could I arrive on campus and not have what I needed to succeed? Would they judge me? Assume that I was not serious about my education. The process became scary, and because I did not create relationships with my peers or professors, I felt alone, resulting in me returning home”.

### **Summary**

Chapter Four reviewed the themes and identified the significant findings related to the perceived factors of low-income, first-generation Black American males that attended or graduated from Middle Alabama University. Chapter Four gave an overview of each participant in the study. This chapter also discussed the study's results, which detailed theme development. The themes mentioned in Chapter Four were mentors, engagement, self-motivation, college preparedness, and support. The themes identified also presented subthemes in the research. The



subthemes mentioned in chapter four were academic mentors, academic engagement, social engagement, prep courses, financial support, and emotional support. Chapter Four later identified the outlier data and findings from the data collection and analysis. The chapter concluded with the participant's responses to the research questions.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

This phenomenological study aimed to discover and interpret the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males who graduated or attended Middle Alabama University. This phenomenological study was designed to identify factors that assisted or detoured students from reaching their goal of graduating from Middle Alabama University. Chapter Five contains information on the process of data analysis as well as an in-depth description of the findings. This study collected and analyzed data from questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups. This chapter summarized the findings of this study's implications for policy and practice and addressed theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

This section further reviewed the findings from the study and correlated their alignment with the empirical and theoretical literature surrounding academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males who graduated or attended an institution of higher learning. The themes were established to understand perceived factors participants believed assisted or detoured them from completing their degree. The literature in this chapter supports the findings of this study.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

I utilized a questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups to collect data for this study. Five significant themes were developed from the data analysis in this study that correlated with the central research question; What academic and social factors presented themselves as

challenges to low-income, first-generation Black American males, and how did they overcome challenges? The major themes were: mentors, engagement, self-motivation, college preparedness, and support. The data resulted in several sub-themes identified as pertinent to participants' matriculation. The sub-themes were: financial and emotional support and academic and social integration. The following was the summary of thematic findings with interpretations.

### ***Summary of Thematic Findings***

Theme one covered mentors' impact on students pursuing higher education. A mentor was a person who provided individuals with the tools, guidance, support, and feedback they needed to thrive in school and their careers (Kearney & Levine, 2020; Marshall et al., 2022). Students had to become familiar with receiving advice from individuals who had shared similar experiences and backgrounds. Theme two focused on engagement. Theme two presented two sub-themes that were further explored. The first subtheme was academic engagement. Academic engagement referred to the extent and intensity in which students participated and applied themselves to learning and building relationships with their instructors (Farrell et al., 2018; Tight, 2020). The second sub-theme was social engagement. Social engagement was a student's involvement in the social environment, and educational setups were critical to their success and retention in college (Farrell et al., 2018; Tight, 2020). Theme three detailed participants' self-motivation while pursuing a collegiate degree. Self-motivation was the internal state that helped us initiate, continue, or terminate a behavior (Ardelt & Grunwald, 2018). Participants shared that many used their self-motivation as a factor to continue their matriculation and earn their college degrees. Theme four discussed college preparedness. Several participants' shared the barrier of transitioning from high school to college. Research showed a number of students were attending colleges or universities and enrollment increased by more than half, however,

some estimates showed that more than half of the enrolled students were not prepared to go to college (Hill et al., 2021; Huo, 2021). Many high school students hoped to attend college without the basic skills, which meant several students were set up to fail and create astronomical debt. Theme five detailed the support participants received while pursuing their degree. During the analysis of theme five, two sub themes emerged: financial and emotional support. Often, families from low-socioeconomic backgrounds or non-degree holders were viewed as incapable of supporting their students as they navigated college due to their lack of knowledge or finances (Cook et al., 2019; Malaney-Brown, 2022). However, this study revealed participants also appreciated having emotional support from their parents/guardian.

**Accountability Partners.** When it came to earning a college degree the participants faced unique challenges and barriers that made their pursuit to higher education that much more difficult. Accountability has been increasingly emphasized as a key to improving the quality and inclusiveness of basic education (Yan, 2019). Additionally, many participants shared the importance of having a mentor or confidante that went along the journey with them while assisting and giving advice on how to deal with or overcome the various barriers that one faced. The idea of having an accountability partner created a support structure that did not prescribe or monitor engagement and achievement (Cook-Sather, 2022) but rather ensured each enrolled student had a classmate attending to them, affirming their “values, growth, transformation, healing, freedom, and liberation (Mingus, 2019, para 9). Mentoring counteracted negative behavior by pairing students with individuals that not only guided them but assisted with maneuvering various obstacles throughout life. First-generation students often lack familiarity with higher education complex nuances. Mentors helped them navigate the college application process, understand financial aid options, select appropriate courses, and make informed

decisions about majors and career paths. Mentoring also increased programs and initiatives geared toward helping students with acclimation and dealing with mental health while pursuing a college degree. Low-income students faced many hardships and lacked access to educational resources. Mentors provided information about scholarships, grants, part-time jobs, and other financial aid options. They also shared academic resources such as study tips, tutoring services, and learning materials. Mentoring also exposes mentees to new and different perspectives, increases self-awareness and self-confidence, and improves leadership skills while growing a student's networking opportunities. Participants shared the impact of having someone expose them to opportunities they would not have had access to without their connection. Participants were able to secure research projects, study abroad programs, and leadership roles through the guidance and advice they received from their mentors. Mentors served various roles in their mentee's life; it was not a one-size-fits-all position. A mentor can be a spiritual advisor, teacher, coach, sponsor, or a good listener. When students had a mentor, it benefitted their network, gains opportunities, and prepared them for future academic or professional ventures. Tinto's social integration theory (2017) proposed that students that were more integrated academically and socially persisted to graduation. Mentoring programs that encourage social integration frameworks provided structure and processes for encouraging students to join social and academic groups, including developing relationships with their peers and instructors (Farrell et al., 2018; Tight, 2020). Mentoring not only benefits the mentee but also the mentor. Students who serve as accountability partners can witness first-hand the accountability their partners take and are also "changed for the better from its power (Mingus, 2019). Serving as a mentor allowed individuals to practice the core skills needed to be successful leaders. For instance, students have had various mentors serving different purposes in their life; they may have had a spiritual mentor

who walked with them through their spiritual journey, whereas one student had a financial advisor who gave financial advice and taught him how to save and invest money. Tinto's theory of integration (2017) found that students with mentors were more likely to persist and graduate because they were more connected to the university than non-mentored students. Research also revealed that mentored students had a significantly higher chance of successfully integrating into the university compared to students that entered the university without a mentor (Nicoletti, 2019; Yomtov et al., 2017). Many students struggled with finding a sense of belonging once arriving on college campuses. Students with mental health issues often experienced isolation and anxiety about their future and abilities. Mentors were able to build mentees' self-confidence and self-awareness by supporting them in their career and personal life choices. Having an accountability partner or mentor served as a vital catalyst in the journey of low-income, first-generation students pursuing their college degree. Building such strong and supportive relationships allows students to articulate the importance of relationships, affirmation, and confidence building while demonstrating the ability to account for what is true within their experience and how that informs their engagement, learning, and growth (Yan, 2019). By providing guidance, emotional support, and resources, their presence significantly impacted students' ability to navigate the complexities of the university, while building their confidence and ultimately motivating them to earn their college degree.

**Sense of belonging.** The concise goal of higher education institutions was to foster learning and growth in students to prepare them to be productive and law-abiding citizens. The rate at which a student begins to successfully integrate into a college campus, the higher their sense of belonging will become. A student's sense of belonging has been identified as having a significant impact on students' academic success, engagement, and well-being in college

(Gopalan & Brady, 2020). However, as simple as it seems, it continues to plague campuses across America. Academic and social integration positively correlated with a student's resilience in engagement and demonstrating independent positive predictive effects such as degree completion (Piepenburg & Beckmann, 2022; Versteeg et al., 2022). Students from various aspects of life had shared the impact of effectively integrating academically and socially. Engagement with learning and socializing at higher education institutions was difficult to evaluate due to the various forms that engagement might take; lecture attendance, self-study, usage of online/digital systems, student events, etc. Engaged students were active not only socially but academically as well. Active engagement in class discussions, group projects, and extracurricular academic activities help students better understand the course material and assist with developing critical thinking skills. A sense of belonging is relational; thus, both parties benefit once a sense of belonging is established. Each member benefits from the group, and the group, in a sense (no pun intended), benefits from the contributions of each member. It is the "I am we and we are each" phenomenon (Strayhorn, 2018, p.4). I noticed in the study that an involved student paid attention in class, took notes, listened, and provided feedback to the instructor. In addition, the sooner low-income, first-generation students began to engage socially, they started to form a sense of belonging and committed to the ideals and principles of the institution. Social connections with fellow students led to emotional support, shared experiences, and encouragement. These relationships helped students persevere through challenges and setbacks. According to Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1982), the more involved students were while attending the institution, the more likely they were to interact with and be affected by the campus environment. A greater sense of belonging correlates with higher academic performance and persistence and supports good mental health practices throughout a

student's matriculation (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Involvement in student organizations and clubs allowed students the ability to take on leadership roles, which improved their communication, teamwork, and organizational skills. In an effort to continue to improve student engagement, higher education institutions must ensure the learning activity relates to students' interests and that students view the task as worth their time to learn the skill and that faculty and students make a connection. This becomes especially important for low-income, first-generation students who have not had access to a network of academic support, however, once engaged to the campus, those students were more likely to build relationships with professors, which led to mentorship, research opportunities, and stronger letters of recommendation. A teacher with a sense of self-efficacy can establish a trust-based relationship with parents and students, thus providing positive learning environments in the classroom (Aysel & Ünal, 2021). Additionally, students became more engaged academically when instructors personalized assignments. When the curriculum was set in place with the students in mind, students recognized the importance of the lesson easier than a subject they had no connection with. Personalization varied for students and related to the pace of learning a student was accustomed to. Implementing the correct rate for each student keeps them engaged as they will not become frustrated, overwhelmed, or bored. In essence, both academic and social engagement was essential for low-income, first-generation students that successfully earned their college degree. These forms of engagement provided a holistic experience that fostered personal growth, supported academic achievement, and created a sense of belonging, which ultimately increased the likelihood of graduation and future success for students.

**If it is to be, it is up to me.** Self-motivation was a pertinent capability, as it varied from individual to individual and had a purpose to achieve. An individual had to be self-directed and



motivated to turn their dreams into reality. Low-income, first-generation students encountered financial difficulties, family responsibilities, and academic challenges. However, their belief in themselves pushed them through those obstacles and by maintaining a positive attitude and a determination to succeed they were able to successfully graduate. When individuals were self-motivated, they identified a path to success and had tunnel vision on reaching that goal. Individual differences in academic achievement are partly the result of differences in motivation for learning (Vu et al., 2021). Students' motivation can be impacted by various factors such as; emotions, previous learning experiences, gender, and ethnic identity (Lo et al., 2022). Self-motivation brought the individual closer to their goals and gave them a clear vision. Students knew that college would be challenging, and setbacks were common for them. However, because of their self-motivation, these students were accustomed to being knocked down but getting back up. They viewed the know down as a lesson for opportunity and growth and not as a negative or barrier on their road to graduation. As technological innovations change the nature of colleges and universities, self-determination theory provides insight into how the resulting uncertainty and interdependence influences student motivation, performance, and well-being. Self-determination theory distinguishes between two different types of motivation that students might experience: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation describes how an individual takes pleasure in completing a task or seeing the importance of a task. Students were empowered to take charge of their education. Learners of all ages must identify pertinent information from their environments with and without explicit direction. In the absence of explicit direction, learning is self-motivated. The successful learner, rather than by outside forces, self-initiates and self-motivates in acquiring information (Cronin-Golomb & Bauer, 2023). It allows them the ability to make informed decisions about their major, classes, and

career paths, based on their personal interest and strengths and not the opinion of others. Intrinsic motivators identified the correlation between the lesson and related it to real-life scenarios by allowing an experiential learning experience that enabled the student to engage with the task physically. Extrinsic motivation deals with an individual's willingness to complete a task, not the actions taken to complete the task, but the benefits of completing the task. Extrinsic motivators appeared in a student's life as a means of living up to others expectations, earning a high GPA for scholarships, or earning a college degree. Students that were self-motivated developed a growth mindset, believing that their efforts and learning can lead to improvement. Many students shared the fact that they inspired others to pursue higher education by demonstrating their commitment to education. However, these developmental tendencies did not operate in isolation and required an environment that supported them. Unfortunately, in many social contexts, school included, these tendencies were thwarted, leading to a lack of compliance, oppositional behaviors, and disengagement (Gagné et al., 2022; Guay, 2022). Students' self-determined motivation (acting out of interest, curiosity, and abiding values) is associated with high academic well-being, persistence, and achievement is relevant to the quality of their learning experience (Bureau et al., 2021). Self-motivated students were proactive in seeking out resources and opportunities. They utilized tutoring, attended office hours, and engaged in extracurricular activities that enhanced their academic experience. Self motivation was a driving force that empowered low-income, first-generation students to overcome challenges, persist through their difficulties, and achieve their goal of earning a college degree. These students were equipped with determination, resilience, and initiative that was necessary to navigate the complexities of higher education and succeed in the face of adversity.

**Pre-College Experience.** The American College Testing Association (ACT) defines college and career readiness as the ability to gain the knowledge of skills a student needs to enroll in and succeed in credit-bearing first-year courses at a postsecondary institution, such as a 2- or 4-year college, trade, or technical school, without the need for remediation (ACT, 2018). College readiness is paramount for low-income, first-generation students aiming to earn a college degree. These students often lacked the exposure, resources, and support their peers received which made the transition into college more challenging. Being prepared for college academically, socially, and logistically significantly impacted students' success. The acquisition of college and career readiness skills has often been measured by student performance on assessments measuring proficiency in mathematics and English/language arts. Students who show proficiency in these areas are deemed college and career-ready. However, a growing consensus states that students in the United States must be prepared to work in a world that demands more than just proficiency in academic skills (Green et al., 2023). Preparing for college was exceptionally pertinent for students to succeed once they enrolled. Intentionally assisting students throughout high school and the summer leading up to college enrollment easily correlated to how students valued relationships with faculty and staff and the importance of seeing guidance from an instructor. To effectively prepare students for college, K12 systems must mentally, emotionally, and academically prepare them to transition from high school to higher education. This reduced the likelihood of students feeling overwhelmed or lost in a new environment. Researchers defined college and career readiness as ensuring students take rigorous courses and meet specific metrics on standardized tests (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Kotlikoff et al., 2022). School counselors and school psychologists have worked together to prepare students for college and the workforce by addressing students' academic and mental health needs

by providing needs assessments to determine any needed academic and learning interventions that would help students become successful during their transition into college (Hines et al., 2019). Standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT are required for college admissions and scholarships. By preparing students for college, school counselors and psychologist provided guidance and resources for test preparation, which increased the students' chances of admission to their desired institutions. Once students identified their talents and interests and aligned them with specific careers, they were able to better set the courses they wanted to take early on. For students, readiness included additional factors such as parental support, emotional intelligence, and financial management. Low-income, first-generation students were not privileged to have access to comprehensive financial education. College readiness programs can provide information about financial aid, scholarships, budgeting, and managing student loans, thus assisting students with making informed decisions about their future. Despite the importance of academics, students experience the transition from a child to a young adult. Students began to think independently and demonstrated self-discipline and time management during this time. It was also essential to recognize the pertinence of a student's college years while they were developing their own identity, shaping their identity, and connecting to their communities. Making college students ready requires colleges to cultivate a sense of belonging as a critical context for helping students navigate the social, academic, and cultural changes they experience. For some students, college exposed them to a more diverse and culturally rich environment. Being culturally prepared helped students adapt, respect differences, and engage positively with the diversity on campus. Institutions must alternate their thinking from being a student-ready college to what makes a student college-ready (Ciocca Eller & DiPrete, 2018) and provided academic and financial support while also providing social-emotional support for students to feel

they belong on campus and persist to graduation (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Ma & Shea, 2021). The Gallup Communities in Schools Report (2018) showed that only 3% of adults in the United States believed that high school graduates were well prepared for college, and only 22% believed that high school graduates were prepared for college. In addition, only 5% of adults believed that high school graduates were very well prepared for the workplace, and 17% believed that high school graduates were prepared for the workplace (Green et al., 2023). College readiness is pivotal for the success of low-income, first-generation Black American males as it equips them with the skills, knowledge, and confidence that was necessary to navigate the challenges of higher education. It sets the foundation for academic success, personal growth, and a smoother transition into the college environment, which ultimately increases the chances of earning a college degree.

**Support.** Emotional, financial, and social support are crucial components for low-income, first-generation college students. These various forms of support addressed the various hurdles and barriers that these students faced throughout their matriculation. College was a pivotal yet challenging time for most of the participants. Around the world, each year, large sums of money are expended in helping students access higher education, but there is remarkably little evidence to show whether this investment is effective or not (Moore & Burgess, 2022). However, those difficulties increased for first-generation college students (FGCSs), defined as those whose parents did not attend college. In a college environment, students often receive financial, emotional, spiritual, and other support from family members. College life has many demands, and families' support may be necessary for a student to succeed academically (DeFauw et al., 2018). Low-income students can receive financial support through scholarships, grants, and financial aid, thus by having adequate financial support reduces the need for

excessive borrowing, minimizing the burden of student loan debt after graduation. Institutions must keep the students' experiences', barriers, and various educational needs at the forefront when implementing programs and initiatives to assist. College was emotionally overwhelming for some of the participants. However, the students shared that through counseling services, support groups, and mentorship, emotional support helped students manage their stress, anxiety, and mental health challenges. Emotional support also taught students healthy coping mechanisms and provided a sense of belonging and community, which caused a decrease in the number of students feeling alone and isolated. FGCS navigated new terrain that sometimes seemed tumultuous and isolating. Historically, economic trends influence the transition to adulthood. The transition to adulthood is more complex and gradual today. Many young people do not achieve economic and psychological autonomy as quickly as individuals in the past, partially due to increased education costs, stagnant wages, and the ever-changing job market (Bartoszuk et al., 2019). Institutions of higher learning must remember that first-generation students have the same goals and ambitions as their peers, yet without the needed support and guidance; they face barriers that cause them to miss out on social events, missed opportunities for career growth and internships, or worse, leave the institution. Building social connection exposed students to a network of peers, mentors, and professionals that provided guidance, resources, and future career opportunities. Researchers conceptualized life transitions in emerging adulthood as critical periods for well-being during which many can thrive, whereas others experienced increased distress and reduced well-being. This conceptualization of life transitions was supported in research concerning graduating from high school, entering and leaving college, and adjusting to professional life (Eveland, 2020; Ricks & Warren, 2021). Social support also assisted students with transitioning into a diverse community and navigating the various cultural differences and

building relationships with peers who better understand their experiences. Regardless of the limited access to information or college experiences, many students solely depended on their families for emotional and financial support throughout their enrollment. Research revealed an array of data for first-generation college students. The study found that emotional support from family members and their home community was intricate in their reason for not dropping out of college. At the same time, other studies showed that students that did not receive support from their family members and community members were more inclined to drop out of college (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Qaqish et al., 2020). Emotions, financial, and social support were vital components for success of low-income, first-generation students in earning their college degree. For first-generation students from any background, social support is one factor that can ease the transition period for students to adjust to the stress of the university environment. However, first-generation students often feel they belong to two worlds: their home community and their university community (Suwinyattichaiorn & Johnson, 2022). Those forms of support addressed various barriers, enhanced well-being, fostered a sense of belonging, and provided opportunities that contributed to a positive college experience and increased their chances of graduation.

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**

The implications of this case study supported the literature. Past research was conducted mainly from the theoretical perspective. This case study attempted to discover and interpret the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males who graduated or attended Middle Alabama University. This section included a description of the implication for policy and the implication for the practice of this study. These implications were drawn from the findings of this case study.

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

Conducting a study to measure the campus climate for low-income, first-generation Black males pursuing a college degree is a pivotal step in creating a more inclusive and equitable higher learning environment. Higher education stakeholders, including institutions, policymakers, and researchers can play a vital role in shaping policies that promote a positive campus climate for all students. Policymakers should allocate funding to support research on campus climate, specifically focusing on low-income, first-generation Black males. This funding can facilitate comprehensive studies that explore their experiences, challenges, and opportunities for success. I recommend administrators of higher education institutions conduct a study to measure the campus climate towards first-generation, low-income Black American boys pursuing a college degree. Encourage collaboration between universities, researchers, community organizations, and advocacy groups to ensure that the study is comprehensive, culturally sensitive, and addresses the multifaceted aspects of the campus climate. Stakeholders should then develop standardized methods to gather information on students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges. Analyze this data and to identify patterns and trends related to campus climate and review the curriculum for Freshmen Orientation to include vital information such as financial aid, mentorship programs, academic support, mental health services, and cultural competence training for faculty and staff. Professors should be encouraged to develop an inclusive curriculum that reflects the Black communities diverse experiences and contributions, which will foster a sense of belonging and validation among low-income, first-generation Black boys. Based on the study's findings, develop policy recommendations that address systemic barriers and create a more supportive environment for low-income, first-generation Black boys. Stakeholders should develop and fund mentorship and support programs tailored to the needs of



students at local high schools to implement the “First-Generation...First Step Program,” which will work with local families of students interested in attending the university. The “First-Generation...First Step” program will work alongside the student and family throughout the student's matriculation process. At each level of the student's matriculation, they will be moved to another tier (T). Families will be assigned a university first-generation advisor to assist with the college application process and follow up to ensure all required documents are received promptly. Once students arrive on campus, they will be placed as T2 students in the program. T2 participants will be assigned a new advisor that will work with them to create a monthly calendar that includes assignment deadlines, test/quiz dates, to-do lists, and extracurricular activities on campus. Students will be moved to T3 the semester before enrolling in their junior year of college. During T3, students will work closely with the Director of Career Services to identify potential internships and career opportunities after graduation. Throughout the T3 year, students will attend sessions regarding applying for an internship, resume building, networking etiquette, and salary negotiation. Participants will be placed as T4 in their final year of undergraduate studies. T4 will indicate that the student has a year or less to graduate. During T4, participants work diligently to identify graduate programs or career opportunities. The program aims to identify either program for continued education or a career of their choice. Implementing the “First-Generation...First Step” program will not only increase the number of low-income, first-generation students graduating from the university but will also alleviate the wealth and education gap that currently plagues the nation. By thoroughly studying the campus climate for low-income, first-generation Black males pursuing a college degree and implementing policies and procedures based on the study's findings, higher education stakeholders can create a more

inclusive, supportive, and equitable environment that promotes their academic success and well-being.

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

Middle Alabama University and similar institutions should establish a program to assist low-income, first-generation families with applying and enrolling in college while in high school. Such a program can assist with bridging the gap and providing the necessary support to ensure that students and their families are well informed and prepared for the college admissions process. This will, in turn, assist with closing the education gap by creating avenues of resources for families in need of assistance. The First-Generation...First Step program will serve as an example to other institutions and stakeholders that first-generation, low-income Black American males are interested in attending and graduating college, and with the implementation of needed resources, the institution is making progressive strides in improving the lived experiences of first-generation, low-income, Black American males attending a college or university. By initiating outreach efforts early, ideally, during a student's freshman or sophomore years of high school thus allowing ample time to prepare for enrollment. Throughout the program stakeholders will provide information about the benefits of higher education and the specific advantages of attending college. Families will be allowed to attend workshops that cover various topics such as college admissions, financial aid, scholarship applications, and career exploration. Institutions should also be proactive in offering sessions for families from diverse cultures with different languages to receive the information as well. Thus by creating a more intentional program for low-income, first-generation students' and their families will allow counselors the ability to work closely to provide individualized support and guidance throughout the college application. The researcher suggests creating a mentoring program that intentionally pairs current Black males

with alumni Black males that graduated from the university. Pairing current college students with individuals with similar backgrounds or career goals assisted with retaining students as well as a way that students were offered guidance, support, and a relatable perspective. By implementing a platform that allows generations of Black males to share their experiences, the institution can be more intentional with securing and offering the necessary resources for student achievement. After being intentional, stakeholders must monitor the program's effectiveness by tracking metrics such as college enrollment rates, application completion rates, and student satisfaction. By regularly assessing the program's impact, stakeholders will effectively make adjustments based on the needs of the students. By implementing a comprehensive program that addresses the unique needs of low-income, first-generation families and providing them with the necessary guidance and resources, students can significantly increase their chances of successfully navigating the college application and enrollment process.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

This research study correlates with previous literature regarding first-generation, low-income Black American males who attended or graduated from college. I utilized Tinto's student integration model (1975, 2017) to understand better the lived experiences of first-generation, low-income Black American males. I allowed participants to voice their perspectives regarding their collegiate experience. Applying this theory to the study's findings revealed the correlations and perceived factors that impacted the participants and contributed to their success or failure. The study revealed clear connections between participants who received the influence of parents, community members, teachers, peers, and mentors. They were more inclined to graduate than their peers who did not receive the same support. Students' adjustment to their academic and social environment significantly influenced their decision to persist or drop

out of higher education (Tinto, 2006, 2017). Once at the institution, students had an experience with the institution and interacted with formal and informal academic and social systems. These systems shaped activities involving faculty and staff and included interactions with these individuals in formal settings such as courses, assignments, content, teaching, learning and assessment activities, supervision, and informal settings such as; breaks between classes, out-of-class activities before beginning the class (Tinto, 2006, 2017). The research revealed several themes that supported previous research mentors, engagement, self-motivation, college preparedness, and support (Schmidt, 2020; Stadtfeld et al., 2019). The findings from this research yielded a further understanding of the impact of mentors, engagement, self-motivation, college preparedness, and support and the correlation to participants completing their college degrees.

Research literature focusing on what assisted first-generation, low-income Black American males to graduate from college was scarce, if not non-existent. The study addressed the need for education stakeholders to be proactive in preparing low-income, first-generation Black males for college rather than being reactive. Several participants shared that although they grew up in diverse neighborhoods, their schools did not directly reflect what they experienced outside of the school building. Bi et al. (2021), Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023), and Hines et al. (2020) found that Black students remain concentrated in racially segregated public schools in urban zones where a higher percentage is from families with low socioeconomic status. In addition, urban schools provide less rigorous coursework because of fewer resources, leading to lower academic achievement among students. Akaba et al. (2020) and Sun (2021) suggest that college readiness should start early with the country's most vulnerable youth (Black males). The study revealed that participants with previous college knowledge transitioned quickly into

meeting the demands and navigating on a collegiate level. Most recently, ACGR reported that 80% of Black students in public high schools were below the U.S. average of 86%, while 89% of White students were above the U.S. average (Hill et al., 2021). These statistics urge the need for academic intervention to assist Black males in adapting and successfully matriculating (Bratton, 2018; Harper et al., 2020). One of the themes from this study highlighted the importance of participants' social and academic engagement on a college campus and creating a sense of belonging. Several participants were active in clubs and organizations, held on-campus jobs, and joined a fraternity while pursuing their collegiate degree. Understanding a student's ability to integrate academically, make sound educational decisions, and progress successfully was pivotal in the initial phase of transition (Levine et al., 2020; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). Creating spaces for students to feel connected to the college environment allowed students to connect with the new environment. Allowing students the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging enabled a student's persistence and heavily influenced their transition into the new space (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Casanova et al., 2022). Levine et al. (2020) and Schaeper (2020) found that students must successfully manage their transition into the new environment due to the correlation to student outcomes, such as academic and social well-being (Bonilla et al., 2021; Hassle & Ridout, 2018).

The one-on-one and focus group interviews allowed for a more in-depth, detailed conversation that provided valuable information about participants' experiences. Many participants expressed their view of education as a means of changing the trajectory of their lives and creating a better life for their family members. Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023) and Johnson et al. (2021) noted that the academic achievement gap in the United States education system continues to persist despite significant investments and efforts to correct it. However, Kromydas (2017) and Rust (2019) found that there has been an increase in Black youth attending

institutions of higher learning, showing that academic success is pertinent, among other competing factors, to assist with alleviating the achievement gap. The achievement gap describes the difference in academic performance or educational outcomes among student demographic groups (gender, income level, disabilities, English language learners, among others). Several participants noted that higher education allowed them to leave their current situation to better their lives. Klein (2019) and Ma and Shea (2021) shared that college attainment was an immediate solution that reduced poverty and closed wealth gaps for people of color in the United States.

The final theme that emerged from this study was the impact that support from family, friends, and community members had on the matriculation of low-income, first-generation Black males. College years were instrumental in developing many of the participants' character. Denny (2021) and Wang and Geng (2019) found that parental involvement and family socioeconomic status positively correlate with the student's quality of achievement. Several participants shared that they were unaware of the impact of their parent's socioeconomic status before enrolling in the institution. Therefore, when evaluating learners' academic performance, researchers must consider the socioeconomic status and psychological and environmental factors influencing learning (Denny, 2021; Wang & Geng, 2019). Several participants who did not successfully graduate from the institution shared their socioeconomic status as if they had a badge of shame attached to their shirts. The participants shared that they did not have what they deemed basic college necessities, such as a computer and books for class, so they were ashamed to seek financial assistance. However, Edgar et al. (2019) and Estrada (2016) found that to recruit and retain more minority students at colleges and universities, stakeholders must analyze and study

the characteristics of their underrepresented students to be able to provide aid for them to assist with their pursuit of higher education effectively.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations of this transcendental phenomenological study were not planned for. A limitation of this study was the number of years participants had graduated before participating in this study. Utilizing data from five to ten years ago for attendance would have provided more accurate and additional insight into this research study. Another limitation was the participants' limited schedule due to their work and family schedules. Several participants worked in a factory setting, and hours of operation varied. However, participants were willing to meet as soon as they got off to conduct one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions.

Delimitations were utilized to clarify boundaries in the research study. Transcendental phenomenology was utilized in this study because it allowed the researcher to identify textural and structural descriptions of participants' lived experiences. Due to utilizing transcendental phenomenology, the researcher had to implement purposive sampling to ensure all participants have experienced the phenomenon and can articulate their lived experiences. Participant criteria being first-generation, low-income Black American male is a delimitation in this study. Identifying Middle Alabama University as the research location allowed the researcher to eliminate outliers and identify common themes. Only first-generation, low-income Black American males that attended or graduated from Middle Alabama University were recruited for this study. These requirements were selected to provide a detailed set of results.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the findings of this study, limitations, and delimitations, the recommendation for future research on low-income, first-generation Black males pursuing a college degree should

aim to deepen institutions of higher education understanding of Black males experiences, challenges, and factors that contribute to their success. In addition, the study should include low-income first-generation African American women. Exploring intersecting identities such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and first-generation status impact the experiences of Black students in higher education. Understanding their unique challenges due to those intersecting identities can guide targeted support strategies. Adding both male and female experiences together will give an inclusive and well-rounded perspective and deliver additional factors that can assist with alleviating the achievement gap for African Americans. Institutions should also conduct research into the academic majors and career paths chosen by low-income, first-generation students and the factors that influenced that decision. Institutions should work with students to explore how their choices sign with their personal interest and societal expectations. Institutions should invest in researching the impact of policy changes and institutional initiatives on the success of low-income, first-generation Black males. Identifying policies that effectively support their educational attainment and recommend evidence-based policy solutions, will in turn assist with implementing new policies, programs, and interventions that support students throughout their educational journey. Future researchers should look into employing qualitative research methods, such as narrative inquiry or life history interviews, to capture students' personal stories and lived experiences. This approach will allow stakeholders the ability to identify nuanced insights into students' motivations, struggles, and triumphs.

Additional recommendations include expanding the research to learn about the experiences of low-income, first-generation African American students attending a historically black college or university in Alabama. A comparison of the experiences between male and female students at various institutions across Alabama would provide invaluable research. In



comparing the two different types of institutions, PWIs, and HBCUs', institutions will receive pertinent information that can change the trajectory of each institution and assist with the longevity of HBCUs. PWIs attract various cultures from across the world and host a more diverse population of students and possibly more resources to assist students, but they need to learn the cultural competency and significance it will take to retain students. HBCUs provide a sense of belonging and a unique cultural experience but may not give students the needed resources by bringing the resources that assist students at their respective institutions and implementing initiatives and programs statewide that assist all students with attracting the number of African American students pursuing a college degree and increase the number of students achieving those degrees. By partnering and collaborating with local colleges and universities, to conduct research on campus climate and cultural experiences of low-income, first-generation Black males at different types of institutions. Examining inclusivity, representation, microaggressions, and discrimination that influence students' sense of belonging and well-being. Institutions must be proactive in evaluating the effectiveness of existing support service, programs, and interventions to assist low-income, first-generation Black males at their institution and examine the financial constraints, student loan debt, and lack of access to financial resources after the college experience of their respective students and provide solutions that alleviate financial stress and enhance their financial literacy. By identifying the gaps in these services and recommending the best strategies will in turn enhance the students' college experience. By conducting research that delves into these areas, stakeholders can better understand the experiences of low-income, first-generation Black males pursuing a college degree. This knowledge can inform strategies to create more equitable and inclusive higher education environments and enhance the educational outcomes of this important demographic.

## Conclusion

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to discover and interpret the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation Black American males who graduated or attended Middle Alabama University. Tinto's student integration model (1975, 2017) provided the theoretical framework for this study. This study sought to identify perceived factors that participants identified as assisting or detouring them from completing their degree. The participants' lived experiences were captured and shared using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. During the study, three common themes emerged as perceived factors that assisted students in successfully graduating from Middle Alabama University. Those factors were mentors, engagement, and self-motivation. Additionally, participants that did not graduate from Middle Alabama University identified three common factors: college preparedness, support, and engagement. All ten participants completed the questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups. All participants highlighted the importance of integrating academically and socially and its impact on their matriculation. The mentorship was identified as pivotal in their pursuit to earn their degree and receiving emotional and financial support from family and friends. Several participants shared the importance of knowing family and community members supported their efforts, which made graduation attainable for those receiving the support. Participants shared the importance of relationships with their peers and faculty members while attending the university.

Informing individuals responsible for adolescent children, such as parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders, about factors that assist low-income, first-generation African American males to graduate is essential in reducing the achievement and financial gap plaguing black and brown communities. Given the critical and unique realities of African

American students that impact their educational experiences, engagement, identity development, and achievement in various types of school contexts, self and sociocultural variables must be included in research on the motivational psychology of African American students. All students deserve the opportunity to academically and socially thrive without the burden of proving that they are worthy. Black students continue to prove that they are motivated and more than negative stereotypes and are eager to change the trajectory of the next generation of learners.

## References

- Abu Saa, A., Al-Emran, M., & Shaalan, K. (2019). Factors affecting students' performance in higher education: A systematic review of predictive data mining techniques. *Technology, Knowledge and Learning*, 24(4), 567-598.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10758-019-09408-7>
- Agyekum, S. (2019). Teacher-student relationships: The impact on high school students, *Journal of Education and Practice* (n.d.). <https://doi.org/10.7176/jep>
- Akaba, S., Peters, L. E., Liang, E., & Graves, S. B. (2020). "That's the whole idea of college readiness": A critical examination of universal pre-k teachers' understandings around kindergarten readiness. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 96, 103172.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103172>
- Alase, A. (2017). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative research approach. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 5(2), 9. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.9>
- Allen, M. (2017). The SAGE encyclopedia of communication research methods.  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411>
- Álvarez-Rivadulla, M. J., Jaramillo, A. M., Fajardo, F., Cely, L., Molano, A., & Montes, F. (2022). College integration and social class. *Higher Education*, 84(3), 647-669.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00793-6>
- Alyahyan, E., & Düşteğör, D. (2020). Predicting academic success in higher education: Literature review and best practices. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-020-0177-7>

Amaral, A. (2022). Equity in higher education: Evidences, policies and practices. Setting the scene. *Equity Policies in Global Higher Education*, 23-46.

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-69691-7\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-69691-7_2)

American College Testing Association (2018). *The condition of college and career readiness*.

<https://www.act.org/research-policy/college-career-readiness-report-2018/>

Amerstorfer, C. M., & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, C. (2021). Student perceptions of academic engagement and student-teacher relationships in problem-based learning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.713057>

Ames, H., Glenton, C., & Lewin, S. (2019). Purposive sampling in a qualitative evidence synthesis: A worked example from a synthesis on parental perceptions of vaccination communication. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 19(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0665-4>

Andrade, H. L. (2019). A critical review of research on student self-assessment. *Frontiers in Education*, 4.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2019.00087>

Ardelt, M., & Grunwald, S. (2018). The importance of self-reflection and awareness for human development in hard times. *Research in Human Development*, 15(3-4),

187-199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2018.1489098>

Arnaiz-Sánchez, P., de Haro, R., Alcaraz, S., & Mirete Ruiz, A. B. (2020). Schools that promote the improvement of academic performance and the success of all students. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02920>

- Aspers, P., & Corte, U. (2019). What is qualitative in qualitative research? *Qualitative Sociology*, 42(2), 139-160. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7>
- Assari, S., Cochran, S. D., & Mays, V. M. (2021a). Money protects white but not African American men against discrimination: Comparison of African American and White men in the same geographic areas. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(5), 2706. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052706>
- Assari, S., Mardani, A., Maleki, M., Boyce, S., & Bazargan, M. (2021b). Black-White achievement gap: Role of race, school urbanity, and parental education. *Pediatric Health, Medicine and Therapeutics*, Volume 12, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.2147/phmt.s238877>
- Astin, A. W. (1982). Minorities in American higher education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Atrey, S. (2021). Structural racism and race discrimination. *Current Legal Problems*, 74(1), 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.1093/clp/cuab009>
- Awuonda, M. K., Akala, E., Wingate, L. M. T., Weaver, S. B., Brown, K., Williams-Fowlkes, C., & Tofade, T. (2021). A pre-matriculation success program to improve pharmacy students' academic performance at a historically Black university. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 85(6), 8214. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe8214>
- Aysel, A. & Ünal, A. (2021). The relationship between teacher academic optimism and student academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Psycho-Educational Research Reviews*, 10(2),

284-297. [https://doi.org/10.52963/PERR\\_Biruni\\_V10.N2.20](https://doi.org/10.52963/PERR_Biruni_V10.N2.20)

Azmitia, M., Sumabat-Estrada, G., Cheong, Y., & Covarrubias, R. (2018). "Dropping out is not an option": How educationally resilient first-generation students see the future:

"Dropping out is not an option". *New Directions for Child and Adolescent*

*Development*, 2018(160), 89-100. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20240>

Babik, I., & Gardner, E. S. (2021). Factors affecting the perception of disability: A developmental perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.702166>

Baker, R., Klasik, D., & Reardon, S. F. (2018). Race and stratification in college enrollment over time. *AERA Open*, 4(1), 233285841775189.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858417751896>

Banaji, M. R., Fiske, S. T., & Massey, D. S. (2021). Systemic racism: Individuals and interactions, institutions and society. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*,

6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-021-00349-3>

Banks, T., & Dohy, J. (2019). Mitigating barriers to persistence: A review of efforts to improve retention and graduation rates for students of color in higher education. *Higher*

*Education Studies*, 9(1), 118. <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v9n1p118>

Bartoszuk, K., Deal, J. E., & Yerhot, M. (2019). Parents' and college students' perceptions of support and family environment. *Emerging Adulthood*, 9(1), 76-87.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696818823947>

Bartscher, A. K., Kuhn, M., & Schularick, M. (2020). The college wealth divide: Education and inequality in America, 1956-2016. *Review*, *102*(1). <https://doi.org/10.20955/r.102.19-49>

Bäulke, L., Grunschel, C., & Dresel, M. (2022). Student dropout at university: A phase-orientated view on quitting studies and changing majors. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, *37*(3), 853-876. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-021-00557-x>

Bausell, S. B., Staton, T. A., & Hughes, S. (2020). Out of site, out of mind: The evolving significance of race in the story of an early quaker-freedmen school. *American Educational Research Journal*, *57*(4), 1730-1756.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219883871>

Bensimon, E. M. (2018). Reclaiming racial justice in equity. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, *50*(3-4), 95-98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2018.1509623>

Bernaras, E., Jaureguizar, J., & Garaigordobil, M. (2019). Child and adolescent depression: A review of theories, evaluation instruments, prevention programs, and treatments. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00543>

Bettencourt, G. M., George Mwangi, C. A., Green, K. L., & Morales, D. M. (2022). But, do I need a college degree? Understanding perceptions of college and career readiness among students enrolled in a career and technical high school. *Innovative Higher Education*, *47*(3), 453-470. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-021-09585-3>

Bi, S., Stevens, G. W. J. M., Maes, M., Boer, M., Delaruelle, K., Eriksson, C., Brooks, F. M.,



- Tesler, R., van der Schuur, W. A., & Finkenauer, C. (2021). Perceived social support from different sources and adolescent life satisfaction across 42 countries/regions: The moderating role of national-level generalized trust. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 50(7), 1384-1409. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-021-01441-z>
- Billingham, S. (2018). *Access to success and social mobility through higher education: A curate's egg?*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78743-836-120181001>
- Bingham, T. J., Wirjapranata, J., & Bartley, A. (2017). Building resilience and resourcefulness: The evolution of an academic and information literacy strategy for first year social work students. *Information and Learning Science*, 118(7/8), 433-446. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ils-05-2017-0046>
- Bittmann, F. (2021). When problems just bounce back: About the relation between resilience and academic success in German tertiary education. *SN Social Sciences*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00060-6>
- Black, R., & Bimper, A. Y., Jr. (2020). Successful undergraduate African American men's navigation and negotiation of academic and social counter-spaces as adaptation to racism at historically white institutions. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 22(2), 326-350. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025117747209>
- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2017). Reframing organizations.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119281856>

Bond, M., Buntins, K., Bedenlier, S., Zawacki-Richter, O., & Kerres, M. (2020). Mapping research in student engagement and educational technology in higher education: A systematic evidence map. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-019-0176-8>

Bonilla, S., Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2021). Ethnic studies increases longer-run academic engagement and attainment. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(37). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2026386118>

Boon, M., Orozco, M., & Sivakumar, K. (2022). Epistemological and educational issues in teaching practice-oriented scientific research: roles for philosophers of science. *European Journal for Philosophy of Science*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13194-022-00447-z>

Bratton, J. (2018). The academic success of African American males at a Maryland community college. *Journal of Underrepresented & Minority Progress*, 2(1), 44-72. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jump.v2i1.44>

Britton, T., Rall, R. M., & Commodore, F. (2023). The keys to endurance: An investigation of the institutional factors relating to the persistence of historically Black colleges and universities. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 94(3), 310-332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2022.2082786>

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), 513-531. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.32.7.513>

- Brooms, D. R., Clark, J. S., & Druery, J. E. (2021). "We can redefine ourselves": Enhancing Black college men's persistence through counterspaces. *Journal of Black Studies*, 52(3), 277-295. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934720976410>
- Brooms, D. R., & Davis, A. R. (2017). Staying focused on the goal: Peer bonding and faculty mentors supporting Black males' persistence in college. *Journal of Black Studies*, 48(3), 305-326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934717692520>
- Brorsson, A. L., Lindholm Olinder, A., Viklund, G., Granström, T., & Leksell, J. (2017). Adolescents' perceptions of participation in group education using the guided self-determination-Young method: A qualitative study. *BMJ Open Diabetes Research & Care*, 5(1), e000432. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjdr-2017-000432>
- Broton, K. M., Goldrick-Rab, S., & Benson, J. (2016). Working for college: The causal impacts of financial grants on undergraduate employment. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38(3), 477-494. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373716638440>
- Brouwer, J., Flache, A., Jansen, E., Hofman, A., & Steglich, C. (2018). Emergent achievement segregation in freshmen learning community networks. *Higher Education*, 76(3), 483-500. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0221-2>
- Bureau, J. S., Howard, J. L., Chong, J. X. Y., & Guay, F. (2021). Pathways to student motivation: A meta-analysis of antecedents of autonomous and controlled motivations, *American Educational Research Association*, 92(1). <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543211042426>

- Busetto, L., Wick, W., & Gumbinger, C. (2020). How to use and assess qualitative research methods. *Neurological Research and Practice*, 2(1).  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z>
- Byun, S.-y., Meece, J. L., & Agger, C. A. (2017). Predictors of college attendance patterns of rural youth. *Research in Higher Education*, 58(8), 817-842.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9449-z>
- Cabrera, N. L., Franklin, J. D., & Watson, J. S. (2016). Whiteness in higher education: The invisible missing link in diversity and racial analyses: Whiteness in higher education. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 42(6), 7-125. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aehe.20116>
- Cachia, M., Lynam, S., & Stock, R. (2018). Academic success: Is it just about the grades? *Higher Education Pedagogies*, 3(1), 434-439.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2018.1462096>
- Callahan, R., DeMatthews, D., & Reyes, P. (2019). The impact of Brown on EL students: Addressing linguistic and educational rights through school leadership practice and preparation. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 14(4), 281-307.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775119878464>
- Camasso, M. J., & Jagannathan, R. (2018). Improving academic outcomes in poor urban schools through nature-based learning. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 48(2), 263-277.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764x.2017.1324020>
- Cameron, R. K. C., & McCall, R. (2020). Coming from where we're from: The stories and

- experiences of African American students in predominantly White high schools. *VUE (Voices in Urban Education)*, 49(2). <https://doi.org/10.33682/qpmj-e2he>
- Campbell, K. M., Corral, I., Infante Linares, J. L., & Tumin, D. (2020a). Projected estimates of African American medical graduates of closed historically Black medical schools. *JAMA Network Open*, 3(8), e2015220. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.15220>
- Campbell, R., Goodman-Williams, R., Feeney, H., & Fehler-Cabral, G. (2020b). Assessing triangulation across methodologies, methods, and stakeholder groups: The joys, woes, and politics of interpreting convergent and divergent Data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 41(1), 125-144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214018804195>
- Cappelen, A., List, J., Samek, A., & Tungodden, B. (2020). The effect of early-childhood education on social preferences. *Journal of Political Economy*, 128(7), 2739-2758. <https://doi.org/10.1086/706858>
- Carroll, J. M., Pattison, E., Muller, C., & Sutton, A. (2020). Barriers to bachelor's degree completion among college students with a disability. *Sociological Perspectives*, 63(5), 809-832. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121420908896>
- Casanova, J. R., Gomes, A., Moreira, M. A., & Almeida, L. S. (2022). Promoting success and persistence in pandemic times: An experience with first-year students. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.815584>

- Castro, E. L. (2021). "They sellin' us a dream they not preparin' us for": College readiness, dysconscious racism, and policy failure in one rural Black high school. *The Urban Review*, 53(4), 617-640. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-020-00585-9>
- Chankseliani, M., Qoraboyev, I., & Gimranova, D. (2021). Higher education contributing to local, national, and global development: New empirical and conceptual insights. *Higher Education*, 81(1), 109-127. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00565-8>
- Checkoway, B. (2018). Inside the gates: First-generation students finding their way. *Higher Education Studies*, 8(3), 72. <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v8n3p72>
- Chen, D. T.-H., & Wang, Y.-J. (2021). Inequality-related health and social factors and their impact on well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic: Findings from a national survey in the UK. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(3), 1014. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18031014>
- Chrysikos, A., Ahmed, E., & Ward, R. (2017). Analysis of Tinto's student integration theory in first-year undergraduate computing students of a UK higher education institution. *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development*, 19(2/3), 97-121. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijced-10-2016-0019>
- Ciocca Eller, C., & DiPrete, T. A. (2018). The paradox of persistence: Explaining the Black-White gap in bachelor's degree completion. *American Sociological Review*, 83(6), 1171-1214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418808005>
- Coertjens, L., Brahm, T., Trautwein, C., & Lindblom-Ylänne, S. (2017). Students' transition into

higher education from an international perspective. *Higher Education*, 73(3), 357-369.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0092-y>

Colen, C. G., Pinchak, N. P., & Barnett, K. S. (2021). Racial disparities in health among college-educated African Americans: Can attendance at historically Black colleges or universities reduce the risk of metabolic syndrome in midlife? *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 190(4), 553-561. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwaa245>

Collier, P. (2017). Why peer mentoring is an effective approach for promoting college student success. *Metropolitan Universities*, 28(3). <https://doi.org/10.18060/21539>

Collins, C. S., & Stockton, C. M. (2018). The central role of theory in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1), 160940691879747.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918797475>

Comeaux, E., Chapman, T. K., & Contreras, F. (2020). The college access and choice processes of high-achieving African American students: A critical race theory analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 57(1), 411-439.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219853223>

Connell, J., Carlton, J., Grundy, A., Taylor Buck, E., Keetharuth, A. D., Ricketts, T., Barkham, M., Robotham, D., Rose, D., & Brazier, J. (2018). The importance of content and face validity in instrument development: Lessons learnt from service users when developing the recovering quality of life measure (ReQoL). *Quality of Life Research*, 27(7),

1893-1902. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11136-018-1847-y>

Cook, C. R., Lyon, A. R., Locke, J., Waltz, T., & Powell, B. J. (2019). Adapting a compilation of implementation strategies to advance school-based implementation research and practice. *Prevention Science, 20*(6), 914-935.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-019-01017-1>

Cook-Sather, A. (2022). *Co-creating equitable teaching and learning: Structuring student voice into higher education*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (Fifth edition.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (Fourth edition.). SAGE.

Cronin-Golomb, L. N. & Bauer, P. J. (2023). Self-motivated and directed learning across the lifespan. *Acta Psychologica, 232*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103816>

Crumb, L., Haskins, N., Dean, L., & Avent Harris, J. (2020). Illuminating social-class identity: The persistence of working-class African American women doctoral students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 13*(3), 215-227. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000109>

Dang, B. N., Westbrook, R. A., Njue, S. M., & Giordano, T. P. (2017). Building trust and rapport early in the new doctor-patient relationship: A longitudinal qualitative study. *BMC Medical Education, 17*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-017-0868-5>

Daniel, J., Quartz, K. H., & Oakes, J. (2019). Teaching in community schools: Creating



conditions for deeper learning. *Review of Research in Education*, 43(1), 453-480.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x18821126>

Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied*

*Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97-140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791>

DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., Johnson, O. T., Womble Edwards, C., McCoy, W. N., & White, A. M.

(2020). African American professionals in higher education: Experiencing and coping with racial microaggressions. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 23(4), 492-508.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1579706>

DeFauw, C., Levering, K., Msipa, R. T., & Abraham, S. (2018). Families' support and influence on college students' educational performance. *Journal of Educational and Development*,

2(1), 11-19. <https://doi.org/10.20849/jed.v2i1.312>

DeJonckheere, M., & Vaughn, L. M. (2019). Semistructured interviewing in primary care

research: A balance of relationship and rigour. *Family Medicine and Community Health*,

7(2), e000057. <https://doi.org/10.1136/fmch-2018-000057>

DeLaney, E. N., Williams, C. D., Jones, S. C. T., Corley, N. A., Lozada, F. T., Walker, C. J.,

Dick, D. M., & The Spit for Science Working Group. (2022). Black college students' ethnic identity and academic achievement: Examining mental health and racial

discrimination as moderators. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 48(1), 100-129.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00957984211034268>

Delatolla, A., Rahman, M., Anand, D., Caesar, M., Haastrup, T., Adiong, N. M., Parashar, S., & Youde, J. (2021). Challenging institutional racism in international relations and our profession: Reflections, experiences, and strategies. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 50(1), 110-148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298211059357>

de los Reyes, E. J., Blannin, J., Cohrssen, C., & Mahat, M. (2022). Resilience of higher education academics in the time of 21st century pandemics: A narrative review. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 44(1), 39-56.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080x.2021.1989736>

Denny, E. (2021). Student views on transition to higher education in Ireland: Challenges, impacts and suggestions. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 75(1), 113-145.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12273>

Detgen, A., Fernandez, F., McMahon, A., Johnson, L., & Dailey, C. R. (2021). Efficacy of a college and career readiness program: Bridge to employment. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 69(3), 231-247. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12270>

Deutschlander, D. (2019). Enhancing engagement with faculty and staff to facilitate student success: An evaluation of a parent intervention. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 41(3), 239-259. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373719845653>

Dörfler, V., & Stierand, M. (2021). Bracketing: A phenomenological theory applied through transpersonal reflexivity. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 34(4),

778-793. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jocm-12-2019-0393>

Dubois, G., Sovacool, B., Aall, C., Nilsson, M., Barbier, C., Herrmann, A., Bruyère, S., Andersson, C., Skold, B., Nadaud, F., Dorner, F., Moberg, K. R., Ceron, J. P., Fischer, H., Amelung, D., Baltruszewicz, M., Fischer, J., Benevise, F., Louis, V. R., & Sauerborn, R. (2019). It starts at home? Climate policies targeting household consumption and behavioral decisions are key to low-carbon futures. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 52, 144-158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2019.02.001>

DuBois, D. L., Holloway, B. E., Valentine, J. C., & Cooper, H. (2002). Effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth: A meta-analytic review. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(2), 157-197. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1014628810714>

Duchek, S. (2020). Organizational resilience: A capability-based conceptualization. *Business Research*, 13(1), 215-246. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40685-019-0085-7>

Duijster, D., Monse, B., Dimaisip-Nabuab, J., Djuharnoko, P., Heinrich-Weltzien, R., Hobdell, M., Kromeyer-Hauschild, K., Kuntharith, Y., Mijares-Majini, M. C., Siegmund, N., Soukhanouvong, P., & Benzian, H. (2017). 'Fit for school' - a school-based water, sanitation and hygiene programme to improve child health: Results from a longitudinal study in Cambodia, Indonesia and Lao PDR. *BMC Public Health*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4203-1>

Dunkley, D. M., Solomon-Krakus, S., & Moroz, M. (2016). Personal standards and self-critical

perfectionism and distress: Stress, coping, and perceived social support as mediators and moderators. *Perfectionism, Health, and Well-Being*, 157-176.

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-18582-8\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-18582-8_7)

Dutil, S. (2020). Dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline: A trauma-informed, critical race perspective on school discipline. *Children & Schools*, 42(3), 171-178.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdaa016>

Edgar, S., Carr, S. E., Connaughton, J., & Celenza, A. (2019). Student motivation to learn: Is self-belief the key to transition and first year performance in an undergraduate health professions program? *BMC Medical Education*, 19(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-019-1539-5>

English, D., Lambert, S. F., Tynes, B. M., Bowleg, L., Zea, M. C., & Howard, L. C. (2020). Daily multidimensional racial discrimination among Black U.S. American adolescents. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 66, 101068.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2019.101068>

Estrada, M., Burnett, M., Campbell, A. G., Campbell, P. B., Denetclaw, W. F., Gutiérrez, C. G., Hurtado, S., John, G. H., Matsui, J., McGee, R., Okpodu, C. M., Robinson, T. J., Summers, M. F., Werner-Washburne, M., & Zavala, M. (2016). Improving underrepresented minority student persistence in STEM. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 15(3), es5.

<https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.16-01-0038>

Eveland, T. J. (2020). Supporting first-generation college students: Analyzing academic and

- social support's effects on academic performance. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(8), 1039-1051. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2019.1646891>
- Farrell, L. C., Jorgenson, D., Fudge, J., & Pritchard, A. (2018). College connectedness: The student perspective. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 18(1), 75-95. <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v18i1.22371>
- Fazekas, N., & Beck-Biró, K. (2021). Losing touch? A case study on students' learning barriers within an experiential-learning-based course. *Vezetéstudomány - Budapest Management Review*, 51(7), 53-64. <https://doi.org/10.14267/veztud.2021.07.06>
- Flenbaugh, T. K., Howard, T. C., Malone, M.-L., Tunstall, J., Keetin, N., & Chirapuntu, T. (2017). Authoring student voices on college preparedness: A case study. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 50(2), 209-221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2017.1301840>
- Floyd, A. S., Lyons, V. H., Whiteside, L. K., Haggerty, K. P., Rivara, F. P., & Rowhani-Rahbar, A. (2021). Barriers to recruitment, retention and intervention delivery in a randomized trial among patients with firearm injuries. *Injury Epidemiology*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40621-021-00331-z>
- Forero, R., Nahidi, S., De Costa, J., Mohsin, M., Fitzgerald, G., Gibson, N., McCarthy, S., & Aboagye-Sarfo, P. (2018). Application of four-dimension criteria to assess rigour of qualitative research in emergency medicine. *BMC Health Services Research*, 18(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-018-2915-2>

Franklin, S., Hane, E., Kustus, M., Ptak, C., & Sayre, E. (2018). Improving retention through metacognition: A program for deaf/ hard-of-hearing and first-generation STEM college students. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 048(02).

[https://doi.org/10.2505/4/jcst18\\_048\\_02\\_21](https://doi.org/10.2505/4/jcst18_048_02_21)

Frechette, J., Bitzas, V., Aubry, M., Kilpatrick, K., & Lavoie-Tremblay, M. (2020). Capturing lived experience: Methodological considerations for interpretive phenomenological inquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 160940692090725.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920907254>

Freeman, K. E., Winston-Proctor, C. E., Gangloff-Bailey, F., & Jones, J. M. (2021). Racial identity-rooted academic motivation of first-year African American students majoring in STEM at an HBCU. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.669407>

French, T. (2017). Toward a new conceptual model: Integrating the social change model of leadership development and Tinto's model of student persistence. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 16(3). <https://doi.org/10.12806/v16/i3/t4>

Fries-Britt, S., & White-Lewis, D. (2020). In pursuit of meaningful relationships: How Black males perceive faculty interactions in STEM. *The Urban Review*, 52(3), 521-540.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-020-00559-x>

Fruht, V., & Chan, T. (2018). Naturally occurring mentorship in a national sample of

first-generation college goers: A promising portal for academic and developmental success. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 61(3-4), 386-397.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12233>

Gadosey, C. K., Grunschel, C., Kegel, L. S., Schnettler, T., Turhan, D., Scheunemann, A., Bäumle, L., Thomas, L., Buhlmann, U., Dresel, M., Fries, S., Leutner, D., & Wirth, J. (2022). Study satisfaction among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic: Longitudinal development and personal-contextual predictors. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.918367>

Gagné, M., Parker, S. K., Griffin, M. A., Dunlop, P. D., Knight, C., Klonek, F. E., & Parent-Rochelleau, X. (2022). Understanding and shaping the future of work with self-determination theory. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1(7), 378-392.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00056-w>

Gardner-Neblett, N., Iruka, I. U., & Humphries, M. (2023). Dismantling the Black-White achievement gap paradigm: Why and how we need to focus instead on systemic change. *Journal of Education*, 203(2), 433-441.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00220574211031958>

Gartland, D., Riggs, E., Muyeen, S., Giallo, R., Afifi, T. O., MacMillan, H., Herrman, H., Bulford, E., & Brown, S. J. (2019). What factors are associated with resilient outcomes in children exposed to social adversity? A systematic review. *BMJ Open*, 9(4), e024870.

<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-024870>

Geven, S., O. Jonsson, J., & van Tubergen, F. (2017). Gender differences in resistance to schooling: The role of dynamic peer-influence and selection processes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(12), 2421-2445. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0696-2>

Gill, P., & Baillie, J. (2018). Interviews and focus groups in qualitative research: An update for the digital age. *British Dental Journal*, 225(7), 668-672.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.bdj.2018.815>

Gillen-O'Neel, C. (2021). Sense of belonging and student engagement: A daily study of first- and continuing-generation college students. *Research in Higher Education*, 62(1), 45-71. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-019-09570-y>

Goings, R. B. (2018). "Making up for lost time": The transition experiences of nontraditional Black male undergraduates. *Adult Learning*, 29(4), 158-169.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159518783200>

Goldman, J., Cavazos, J., Heddy, B. C., & Pugh, K. J. (2021). Emotions, values, and engagement: Understanding motivation of first-generation college students. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000263>

Gopalan, M. & Brady, S. T. (2020). College students' sense of belonging: A national perspective. *Educational Researcher: A Publication of the American Educational Research Association.*, 49(2), 134–137. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19897622>

Goralnik, L., & Marcus, S. (2020). Resilient learners, learning resilience: Contemplative



- practice in the sustainability classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2020(161), 83-99. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20375>
- Goward, S. L. (2018). First-generation student status is not enough: How acknowledging students with working-class identities can help us better serve students. *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience*, 23(4), 19-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086482218817534>
- Gray, D. L., Hope, E. C., & Matthews, J. S. (2018). Black and belonging at school: A case for interpersonal, instructional, and institutional opportunity structures. *Educational Psychologist*, 53(2), 97-113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2017.1421466>
- Green, S., Sanczyk, A., Chambers, C., Mraz, M., & Polly, D. (2023). College and career readiness: A literature synthesis. *Journal of Education*, 203(1), 222-229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220574211002209>
- Guay, F. (2022). Applying self-determination theory to education: Regulations types, psychological needs, and autonomy supporting behaviors. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 37(1), 75-92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08295735211055355>
- Guzmán, A., Barragán, S., & Cala Vitery, F. (2021). Dropout in rural higher education: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Education*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.727833>
- Haas, C., & Hadjar, A. (2020). Students' trajectories through higher education: A review of quantitative research. *Higher Education*, 79(6), 1099-1118.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00458-5>

Hadjar, A., Haas, C., & Gewinner, I. (2022). Refining the Spady-Tinto approach: The roles of individual characteristics and institutional support in students' higher education dropout intentions in Luxembourg. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 1-20.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2022.2056494>

Harper, C. E., Zhu, H., & Marquez Kiyama, J. (2020). Parents and families of first-generation college students experience their own college transition. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 91(4), 540-564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2019.1647583>

Hassel, S., & Ridout, N. (2018). An investigation of first-year students' and lecturers' expectations of university education. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02218>

Havlik, S., Pulliam, N., Malott, K., & Steen, S. (2020). Strengths and struggles: First-generation college-goers persisting at one predominantly White institution. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 22(1), 118-140.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025117724551>

Hayes, S. (2018). Invisible labour. *Learning and Teaching*, 11(1), 19-34.

<https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2018.110102>

Hayter, C. S., & Parker, M. A. (2019). Factors that influence the transition of university postdocs to non-academic scientific careers: An exploratory study. *Research Policy*, 48(3),

556-570. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2018.09.009>

- Heath, J., Williamson, H., Williams, L., & Harcourt, D. (2018). "It's just more personal": Using multiple methods of qualitative data collection to facilitate participation in research focusing on sensitive subjects. *Applied Nursing Research*, 43, 30-35.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnr.2018.06.015>
- Hill, K., Hirsch, D., & Davis, A. (2021). The role of social support networks in helping low income families through uncertain times. *Social Policy and Society*, 20(1), 17-32.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s1474746420000184>
- Hines, E. M., Hines, M. R., Moore, J. L., III, Steen, S., Singleton, P., II, Cintron, D., Golden, M. N., Traverso, K., Wathen, B.-J., & Henderson, J. (2020). Preparing African American males for college: A group counseling approach. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 45(2), 129-145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2020.1740846>
- Hines, E. M., Vega, D. D., Mayes, R., Harris, P. C., & Mack, M. (2019). School counselors and school psychologists as collaborators of college and career readiness for students in urban school settings. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 13(3), 190-202.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-02-2019-0015>
- Holy Bible, New Living Translation. (2015). BibleGateway.  
<https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Living-Translation-NLT-Bible0>
- Honicke, T., & Broadbent, J. (2016). The influence of academic self-efficacy on academic performance: A systematic review. *Educational Research Review*, 17, 63-84.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2015.11.002>

Horrillo, S. J., Smith, M. H., Wilkins, T. R., Diaz Carrasco, C. P., Caeton, N. W., McIntyre, D., & Schmitt-McQuitty, L. (2021). A positive youth development approach to college and career readiness. *Journal of Youth Development, 16*(1), 74-99.

<https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2021.966>

Huo, M.-L. (2021). Career growth opportunities, thriving at work and career outcomes: Can COVID-19 anxiety make a difference? *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management, 48*, 174-181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2021.06.007>

Ibrahim, A., & El Zaatari, W. (2020). The teacher-student relationship and adolescents' sense of school belonging. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 25*(1), 382-395.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1660998>

Irvine, F. R., III. (2019). Academic success of African American males in a historically Black university. *Journal of African American Studies, 23*(3), 203-216.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-019-09434-w>

Isik, U., Tahir, O. E., Meeter, M., Heymans, M. W., Jansma, E. P., Croiset, G., & Kusurkar, R. A. (2018). Factors influencing academic motivation of ethnic minority students: A review. *SAGE Open, 8*(2), 215824401878541.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018785412>

Ives, J., & Castillo-Montoya, M. (2020). First-generation college students as academic learners: A systematic review. *Review of Educational Research, 90*(2), 139-178.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319899707>

James, M. C., Wandix White, D., Waxman, H., Rivera, H., & Harmon, W. C., Jr. (2022).

Remixing resilience: A critical examination of urban middle school learning environments among resilient African American learners. *Urban Education*, 57(3), 432-462. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085921991632>

Jilcha Sileyew, K. (2020). Research design and methodology. *Cyberspace*.

<https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.85731>

Johansson, M. (2021). Moving in liminal space: A case study of intercultural historical learning in Swedish secondary school. *History Education Research Journal*, 18(1).

<https://doi.org/10.14324/herj.18.1.05>

Johnson IV, J. J., Padilla, J. J., & Diallo, S. Y. (2021). Closing the academic achievement gap: A system dynamics study. *Journal of Simulation*, 15(4), 284-308.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17477778.2020.1718021>

Johnson, J. L., Adkins, D., & Chauvin, S. (2020). A review of the quality indicators of rigor in qualitative research. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 84(1), 7120.

<https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe7120>

Jonsson, B., Wiklund-Hörnqvist, C., Stenlund, T., Andersson, M., & Nyberg, L. (2021). A learning method for all: The testing effect is independent of cognitive ability. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 113(5), 972-985. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000627>

- Jury, M., Smeding, A., Stephens, N. M., Nelson, J. E., Aelenei, C., & Darnon, C. (2017). The experience of low-ses students in higher education: Psychological barriers to success and interventions to reduce social-class inequality: Low-ses students in higher education. *Journal of Social Issues*, 73(1), 23-41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12202>
- Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 58-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197>
- Kakar, V., Daniels, G. E., Jr., & Petrovska, O. (2019). Does student loan debt contribute to racial wealth gaps? A decomposition analysis. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 53(4), 1920-1947. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joca.12271>
- Kalunta-Crumpton, A. (2020). The inclusion of the term 'color' in any racial label is racist, is it not? *Ethnicities*, 20(1), 115-135. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968198884675>
- Kanaya, T. (2019). Intelligence and the individuals with disabilities education act. *Journal of Intelligence*, 7(4), 24. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jintelligence7040024>
- Kearney, M. S., & Levine, P. B. (2020). Role models, mentors, and media influences. *The Future of Children*, 30(2020), 83-106. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2020.0006>
- Keuchenius, A., & Mügge, L. (2021). Intersectionality on the go: The diffusion of Black feminist knowledge across disciplinary and geographical borders. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 72(2), 360-378. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12816>
- Klein, D. (2019). Das Zusammenspiel zwischen akademischer und sozialer integration bei der

- erklärung von studienabbruchintentionen. Eine empirische anwendung von Tintos integrationsmodell im deutschen kontext. *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 22(2), 301-323. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11618-018-0852-9>
- Klem, N.-R., Shields, N., Smith, A., & Bunzli, S. (2022). Demystifying qualitative research for musculoskeletal practitioners part 4: A qualitative researcher's toolkit—Sampling, data collection methods, and data analysis. *Journal of Orthopaedic & Sports Physical Therapy*, 52(1), 8-10. <https://doi.org/10.2519/jospt.2022.10486>
- Knaggs, C. M., Sondergeld, T. A., & Schardt, B. (2015). Overcoming barriers to college enrollment, persistence, and perceptions for urban high school students in a college preparatory program. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 9(1), 7-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689813497260>
- Kohli, R., Pizarro, M., & Nevárez, A. (2017). The "new racism" of K-12 schools: Centering critical research on racism. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 182-202. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x16686949>
- Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*, 24(1), 120-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092>
- Kotlikoff, P., Rahman, A. S., & Smith, K. A. (2022). Minding the gap: Academic outcomes from pre-college programs. *Education Economics*, 30(1), 3-28.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2021.1931664>

- Kozleski, E. B. (2017). The uses of qualitative research: Powerful methods to inform evidence-based practice in education. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 42(1), 19-32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796916683710>
- Kromydas, T. (2017). Rethinking higher education and its relationship with social inequalities: Past knowledge, present state and future potential. *Palgrave Communications*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0001-8>
- Kross, J., & Giust, A. (2019). Elements of research questions in relation to qualitative inquiry. *The Qualitative Report*. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2019.3426>
- Kunesh, C. E., & Noltemeyer, A. (2019). Understanding disciplinary disproportionality: stereotypes shape pre-service teachers' beliefs about Black boys' behavior. *Urban Education*, 54(4), 471-498. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085915623337>
- Lakhal, S., Mukamurera, J., Bédard, M.-E., Heilporn, G., & Chauret, M. (2020). Features fostering academic and social integration in blended synchronous courses in graduate programs. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-020-0180-z>
- Leath, S., Mathews, C., Harrison, A., & Chavous, T. (2019). Racial identity, racial discrimination, and classroom engagement outcomes among Black girls and boys in predominantly Black and predominantly White school districts. *American Educational Research Journal*, 56(4), 1318-1352. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218816955>



- LeBouef, S., & Dworkin, J. (2021). First-generation college students and family support: A critical review of empirical research literature. *Education Sciences, 11*(6), 294.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11060294>
- Legette, K. B., Rogers, L. O., & Warren, C. A. (2022). Humanizing student-teacher relationships for Black children: Implications for teachers' social-emotional training. *Urban Education, 57*(2), 278-288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920933319>
- Lehtinen, J., Aaltonen, K., & Rajala, R. (2019). Stakeholder management in complex product systems: Practices and rationales for engagement and disengagement. *Industrial Marketing Management, 79*, 58-70. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2018.08.011>
- Levine, S. L., Milyavskaya, M., & Zuroff, D. C. (2020). Perfectionism in the transition to university: Comparing diathesis-stress and downward spiral models of depressive symptoms. *Clinical Psychological Science, 8*(1), 52-64.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702619865966>
- Levy, D. B. (2019). For the common good: A new history of higher education in America by Charles Dorn. *The Review of Higher Education, 42*(4), E-6-E-9.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2019.0086>
- Lewis, B. L., & James-Gallaway, A. D. (2022). White philanthropy won't save Black education: Tracing an "ordinary" segregated school's life in Delaware. *Journal of Black Studies, 53*(3), 269-289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219347211067585>

Li, Y., Allen, J., & Casillas, A. (2017). Relating psychological and social factors to academic performance: A longitudinal investigation of high-poverty middle school students.

*Journal of Adolescence*, 56(1), 179-189.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2017.02.007>

Liao, K. Y.-H., Wei, M., & Yin, M. (2020). The misunderstood schema of the strong Black woman: Exploring its mental health consequences and coping responses among African American women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 44(1), 84-104.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319883198>

Liew, J., Cao, Q., Hughes, J. N., & Deutz, M. H. F. (2018). Academic resilience despite early academic adversity: A three-wave longitudinal study on regulation-related resiliency, interpersonal relationships, and achievement in first to third grade. *Early Education and Development*, 29(5), 762-779.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2018.1429766>

Lin, J. C. P. (2023). Exposing the chameleon-like nature of racism: A multidisciplinary look at critical race theory in higher education. *Higher Education*, 85(5), 1085-1100.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00879-9>

Lindfors, P., Minkkinen, J., Rimpelä, A., & Hotulainen, R. (2018). Family and school social capital, school burnout and academic achievement: A multilevel longitudinal analysis among Finnish pupils. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 23(3), 368-381.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2017.1389758>

- Liversage, L., Naudé, L., & Botha, A. (2018). Vectors of identity development during the first year: Black first-generation students' reflections. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(1), 63-83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2017.1359159>
- Lo, K. W. K., Ngai, G., Chan, S. C. F. & Kwan, K. (2022). How students' motivation and learning experience affect their service-learning outcomes: A structural equation modeling analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.825902>
- Lodge, J. M., Kennedy, G., Lockyer, L., Arguel, A., & Pachman, M. (2018). Understanding difficulties and resulting confusion in learning: An integrative review. *Frontiers in Education*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2018.00049>
- Luzeckyj, A., McCann, B., Graham, C., King, S., & McCann, J. (2017). Being first in family: Motivations and metaphors. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(6), 1237-1250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1300138>
- Ma, P.-W. W., & Shea, M. (2021). First-generation college students' perceived barriers and career outcome expectations: Exploring contextual and cognitive factors. *Journal of Career Development*, 48(2), 91-104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845319827650>
- Malaney-Brown, V. K. (2022). The influence of familial relationships: Multiracial students' experiences with racism at a historically White institution. *Genealogy*, 6(3), 64. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy6030064>

- Manfra, M. M. (2019). Action research and systematic, intentional change in teaching practice. *Review of Research in Education, 43*(1), 163-196.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x18821132>
- Manyanga, F., Sithole, A., & Hanson, S. M. (2017). Comparison of student retention models in undergraduate education from the past eight decades. *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education, 07*(Spring), 30-39. [https://doi.org/10.57186/jalhe\\_2017\\_v7a3p30-39](https://doi.org/10.57186/jalhe_2017_v7a3p30-39)
- Marcucci, O. (2020). Parental involvement and the Black-White discipline gap: The role of parental social and cultural capital in American schools. *Education and Urban Society, 52*(1), 143-168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124519846283>
- Marsh, H. W., Pekrun, R., Murayama, K., Arens, A. K., Parker, P. D., Guo, J., & Dicke, T. (2018). An integrated model of academic self-concept development: Academic self-concept, grades, test scores, and tracking over 6 years. *Developmental Psychology, 54*(2), 263-280. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000393>
- Marshall, A. G., Brady, L. J., Palavicino-Maggio, C. B., Neikirk, K., Vue, Z., Beasley, H. K., Garza-Lopez, E., Murray, S. A., Martinez, D., Shuler, H. D., Spencer, E. C., Morton, D. J., & Hinton, A. J. (2022). The importance of mentors and how to handle more than one mentor. *Pathogens and Disease, 80*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1093/femspd/ftac011>
- Martin, J. P., Stefl, S. K., Cain, L. W., & Pfirman, A. L. (2020). Understanding first-generation undergraduate engineering students' entry and persistence through social capital theory. *International Journal of STEM Education, 7*(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-020-00237-0>

Maxwell, S., Reynolds, K. J., Lee, E., Subasic, E., & Bromhead, D. (2017). The impact of school climate and school identification on academic achievement: Multilevel modeling with student and teacher data. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02069>

McElderry, J. A. (2022). Creating practices and strategies towards persistence for undeclared, Black males at predominately White institutions (PWIs). *New Directions for Higher Education, 2022*(197), 35-45. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20425>

McIsaac, J.-L., Hernandez, K., Kirk, S., & Curran, J. (2016). Interventions to support system-level implementation of health promoting schools: A scoping review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 13*(2), 200.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph13020200>

McLeay, F., Robson, A., & Yusoff, M. (2017). New applications for importance-performance analysis (IPA) in higher education: Understanding student satisfaction. *Journal of Management Development, 36*(6), 780-800. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jmd-10-2016-0187>

Mingus, M. (2019, May 5). “*Dreaming Accountability*”: Leaving Evidence.

<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/05/05/dreaming-accountability-dreaming-a-returning-to-ourselves-and-each-other/>

Minor, K. A., & Benner, A. D. (2018). School climate and college attendance for black

- adolescents: Moving beyond college-going culture. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 28(1), 160-168. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12361>
- Mizani, H., Cahyadi, A., Hendryadi, H., Salamah, S., & Retno Sari, S. (2022). Loneliness, student engagement, and academic achievement during emergency remote teaching during COVID-19: The role of the God locus of control. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01328-9>
- Mondi, C. F., Reynolds, A. J., & Ou, S.-R. (2017). Predictors of depressive symptoms in emerging adulthood in a low-income urban cohort. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 50, 45-59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2017.03.009>
- Moore, E. & Burgess, A. P. (2022). Financial support differentially aids retention of students from households with lower incomes: A UK case study. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(1), 220-231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2022.2125950>
- Moser, A., & Korstjens, I. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 3: Sampling, data collection and analysis. *European Journal of General Practice*, 24(1), 9-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375091>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). Phenomenological research methods. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658>
- Mpofu, J. J., Cooper, A. C., Ashley, C., Geda, S., Harding, R. L., Johns, M. M., Spinks-Franklin, A., Njai, R., Moyse, D., & Underwood, J. M. (2022). Perceived racism and demographic, mental health, and behavioral characteristics among high school

students during the COVID-19 pandemic — adolescent behaviors and experiences survey, United States, January-June 2021. *MMWR Supplements*, 71(3), 22-27.

<https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7103a4>

Muskens, M., Frankenhuis, W. E., & Borghans, L. (2019). Low-income students in higher education: Undermatching predicts decreased satisfaction toward the final stage in college. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48(7), 1296-1310.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01022-1>

Nemtcan, E., Sæle, R. G., Gamst-Klaussen, T., & Svartdal, F. (2020). Drop-out and transfer-out intentions: The role of socio-cognitive factors. *Frontiers in Education*, 5.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.606291>

Neroni, J., Meijs, C., Kirschner, P. A., Xu, K. M., & de Groot, R. H. M. (2022). Academic self-efficacy, self-esteem, and grit in higher online education: Consistency of interests predicts academic success. *Social Psychology of Education*, 25(4), 951-975.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-022-09696-5>

Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 8(2), 90-97.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2>

Nevarez, C., Jougantatos, S., & Wood, J. L. (2019). Benefits of teacher diversity: Leading for transformative change. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*,

- 4(1), 24-34. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jsard.v4i1.1940>
- Nicoletti, M. d. C. (2019). Revisiting the Tinto's theoretical dropout model. *Higher Education Studies*, 9(3), 52. <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v9n3p52>
- Noble, H., & Heale, R. (2019). Triangulation in research, with examples. *Evidence Based Nursing*, 22(3), 67-68. <https://doi.org/10.1136/ebnurs-2019-103145>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 160940691773384. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Nusbaum, A. T., Cuttler, C., & Swindell, S. (2020). Open educational resources as a tool for educational equity: Evidence from an introductory psychology class. *Frontiers in Education*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2019.00152>
- Oikonomidou, E., Edwards, A. L., Aguirre, M., Jimenez, M. S., Lykes, J., Garcia, M., & Guinn, T. (2021). Exploring the campus experiences of underrepresented low-income college students through emotion mapping. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(3), 567-580. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1765318>
- O.Nyumba, T., Wilson, K., Derrick, C. J., & Mukherjee, N. (2018). The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation. *Methods in Ecology and Evolution*, 9(1), 20-32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210x.12860>
- Palomar-Lever, J., & Victorio-Estrada, A. (2019). Intellectual performance and educational attainment of Mexican adolescents in poverty. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 15(3),



553-567. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v15i3.1542>

Park, J., Bowman, N., Denson, N., & Eagan, K. (2019). Race and class beyond enrollment: The link between socioeconomic diversity and cross-racial interaction. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 90(5), 665-689. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1547032>

Peiffer, H., Ellwart, T., & Preckel, F. (2020). Ability self-concept and self-efficacy in higher education: An empirical differentiation based on their factorial structure. *PLOS ONE*, 15(7), e0234604. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0234604>

Perkins, A., Clarke, J., Smith, A., Oberklaid, F., & Darling, S. (2021). Barriers and enablers faced by regional and rural schools in supporting student mental health: A mixed-methods systematic review. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 29(6), 835-849. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajr.12794>

Pessoa, A. S. G., Harper, E., Santos, I. S., & Gracino, M. C. da S. (2019). Using reflexive interviewing to foster deep understanding of research participants' perspectives. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 160940691882502. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918825026>

Phyo, A. Z. Z., Freak-Poli, R., Craig, H., Gasevic, D., Stocks, N. P., Gonzalez-Chica, D. A., & Ryan, J. (2020). Quality of life and mortality in the general population: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09639-9>

Piepenburg, J. G., & Beckmann, J. (2022). The relevance of social and academic integration for students' dropout decisions. Evidence from a factorial survey in Germany. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 12(3), 255-276.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2021.1930089>

Pires, C. M., & Chapin, L. A. (2022). Barriers, support, and resilience of prospective first-in-family university students: Australian high school educators' perspective. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 50(7), 3221-3236. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22834>

Potter, L., Zawadzki, M. J., Eccleston, C. P., Cook, J. E., Snipes, S. A., Sliwinski, M. J., & Smyth, J. M. (2019). The intersections of race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status: Implications for reporting discrimination and attributions to discrimination. *Stigma and Health*, 4(3), 264-281. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sah0000099>

Power and Privilege in the Learning Sciences. (2016). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315685762>

Prather, C., Fuller, T. R., Marshall, K. J., & Jeffries, W. L., IV. (2016). The impact of racism on the sexual and reproductive health of African American women. *Journal of Women's Health*, 25(7), 664-671. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2015.5637>

Pratt, I. S., Harwood, H. B., Cavazos, J. T., & Ditzfeld, C. P. (2019). Should I stay or should I go? Retention in first-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 21(1), 105-118.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025117690868>

Purcell, W. M., & Lumbreras, J. (2021). Higher education and the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Navigating disruption using the sustainable development goals. *Discover Sustainability*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-021-00013-2>
- Pychyl, T. A., Flett, G. L., Long, M., Carreiro, E., & Azil, R. (2022). Faculty perceptions of mattering in teaching and learning: A qualitative examination of the views, values, and teaching practices of award-winning professors. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 40(1), 142-158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073428292111057648>
- Qaqish, O., Grant, C. S., & Bowles, T. (2020). Success factors that shape Black male transfer and academic experiences in engineering. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 44(10-12), 885-898. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2020.1771628>
- Ramli, N., Muljono, P., & Afendi, F. M. (2018). External factors, internal factors and self-directed learning readiness. *Journal of Education and e-Learning Research*, 5(1), 37-42. <https://doi.org/10.20448/journal.509.2.2018.51.37.42>
- Reed, M., Maodzwa – Taruvinga, M., Ndofirepi, E. S., & Moosa, R. (2019). Insights gained from a comparison of South African and Canadian first-generation students: The impact of resilience and resourcefulness on higher education success. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 49(6), 964-982. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2018.1479185>
- Reindl, M., Auer, T., & Gniewosz, B. (2022). Social integration in higher education and development of intrinsic motivation: A latent transition analysis. *Frontiers in*

*Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.877072>

Reinholz, D. L., & Apkarian, N. (2018). Four frames for systemic change in STEM departments.

*International Journal of STEM Education*, 5(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-018-0103-x>

Ribeiro, L., Rosário, P., Núñez, J. C., Gaeta, M., & Fuentes, S. (2019). First-year students background and academic achievement: The mediating role of student engagement.

*Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02669>

Ricci, L., Lanfranchi, J.-B., Lemetayer, F., Rotonda, C., Guillemin, F., Coste, J., & Spitz, E.

(2019). Qualitative methods used to generate questionnaire items: A systematic review. *Qualitative Health Research*, 29(1), 149-156.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732318783186>

Ricks, J. R., & Warren, J. M. (2021). Transitioning to college: Experiences of successful first-generation college students. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 11(1).

<https://doi.org/10.5590/jerap.2021.11.1.01>

Riddle, T., & Sinclair, S. (2019). Racial disparities in school-based disciplinary actions are associated with county-level rates of racial bias. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(17), 8255-8260.

<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1808307116>

Romanelli, F. (2020). Reflections of a first-generation college student, American, and academician. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 84(8), ajpe8007.

<https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe8007>

- Romano, L., Angelini, G., Consiglio, P., & Fiorilli, C. (2021). Academic resilience and engagement in high school students: The mediating role of perceived teacher emotional support. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology, and Education, 11*(2), 334-344. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe11020025>
- Rooshenas, L., Paramasivan, S., Jepson, M., & Donovan, J. L. (2019). Intensive triangulation of qualitative research and quantitative data to improve recruitment to randomized trials: The quintet approach. *Qualitative Health Research, 29*(5), 672-679. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732319828693>
- Rust, J. P. (2019). Addressing the sociocultural determinants of African American students' academic achievement: The four themes of the American school counselor association's national model and the role of school counselors. *Urban Education, 54*(8), 1149-1175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916636657>
- Rutkowski, D., Rutkowski, L., Wild, J., & Burroughs, N. (2018). Poverty and educational achievement in the US: A less-biased estimate using PISA 2012 data. *Journal of Children and Poverty, 24*(1), 47-67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10796126.2017.1401898>
- Sablan, J. R. (2019). Can you really measure that? Combining critical race theory and quantitative methods. *American Educational Research Journal, 56*(1), 178-203. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218798325>
- Saleh, D., Camart, N., & Romo, L. (2017). Predictors of stress in college students. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00019>

- Salisbury, J. (2020). A tale of racial fortuity: Interrogating the silent covenants of a high school's definition of success for youth of color. *American Journal of Education*, *126*(2), 265-291. <https://doi.org/10.1086/706923>
- Sánchez, J., Ruiz, Y., Auleda, J. M., Hernández, E., & Raventós, M. (2009). Review. Freeze concentration in the fruit juices industry. *Food Science and Technology International*, *15*(4), 303-315. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1082013209344267>
- Sano, Y., Mammen, S., & Houghten, M. (2021). Well-Being and Stability among Low-income Families: A 10-Year Review of Research. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, *42*(S1), 107-117. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-020-09715-7>
- Santos, K. da S., Ribeiro, M. C., Queiroga, D. E. U. de, Silva, I. A. P. da, & Ferreira, S. M. S. (2020). O uso de triangulação múltipla como estratégia de validação em um estudo qualitativo. *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva*, *25*(2), 655-664. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1413-81232020252.12302018>
- Schaeper, H. (2020). The first year in higher education: The role of individual factors and the learning environment for academic integration. *Higher Education*, *79*(1), 95-110. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00398-0>
- Schmidt, S. J. (2020). The importance of friendships for academic success. *Journal of Food Science Education*, *19*(1), 2-5. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1541-4329.12176>
- Schnitzler, K., Holzberger, D., & Seidel, T. (2021). All better than being disengaged: Student

engagement patterns and their relations to academic self-concept and achievement.

*European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 36(3), 627-652.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-020-00500-6>

Serdyukov, P. (2017). Innovation in education: What works, what doesn't, and what to do about it? *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, 10(1), 4-33.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/jrit-10-2016-0007>

Shay, J. E., & Pohan, C. (2021). Resilient instructional strategies: Helping students cope and thrive in crisis. *Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education*, 22(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.v22i1.2405>

Shi, Y., & Qu, S. (2021). Cognition and academic performance: Mediating role of personality characteristics and psychology health. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.774548>

Silverman, D. M., Hernandez, I. A., & Destin, M. (2023). Educators' beliefs about students' socioeconomic backgrounds as a pathway for supporting motivation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 49(2), 215-232. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211061945>

Simonsmeier, B. A., Peiffer, H., Flaig, M., & Schneider, M. (2020). Peer feedback improves students' academic self-concept in higher education. *Research in Higher Education*, 61(6), 706-724. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-020-09591-y>

Smith, E. P., Witherspoon, D. P., Bhargava, S., & Bermudez, J. M. (2019). Cultural values and behavior among African American and European American children. *Journal of Child*

- and Family Studies*, 28(5), 1236-1249. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01367-y>
- Smith, L. S., & Wilkins, N. (2018). Mind the gap: Approaches to addressing the research-to-practice, practice-to-research chasm. *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, 24, S6-S11. <https://doi.org/10.1097/phh.0000000000000667>
- Snodgrass Rangel, V., Vaval, L., & Bowers, A. (2020). Investigating underrepresented and first-generation college students' science and math motivational beliefs: A nationally representative study using latent profile analysis. *Science Education*, 104(6), 1041-1070. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21593>
- Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students' mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(9), e21279. <https://doi.org/10.2196/21279>
- Spight, D. B. (2020). Early declaration of a college major and its relationship to persistence. *NACADA Journal*, 40(1), 94-109. <https://doi.org/10.12930/nacada-18-37>
- Stadtfeld, C., Vörös, A., Elmer, T., Boda, Z., & Raabe, I. J. (2019). Integration in emerging social networks explains academic failure and success. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(3), 792-797. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1811388115>
- Stanisławski, K. (2019). The coping circumplex model: An integrative model of the structure of coping with stress. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00694>



- Steinmayr, R., Weidinger, A. F., Schwinger, M., & Spinath, B. (2019). The importance of students' motivation for their academic achievement - Replicating and extending previous findings. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01730>
- Sterrett, E. M., Jones, D. J., McKee, L. G., & Kincaid, C. (2011). Supportive non-parental adults and adolescent psychosocial functioning: Using social support as a theoretical framework. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 48*(3-4), 284-295. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-011-9429-y>
- Strada Education Network & Gallup. (2018). *2018 Strada-Gallup alumni survey. Mentoring college students to success report*. [https://tacc.org/sites/default/files/documents/2018-11/strada-gallupalumnisurvey\\_year4report.pdf](https://tacc.org/sites/default/files/documents/2018-11/strada-gallupalumnisurvey_year4report.pdf)
- Strayhorn, T. (2018). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Suárez, E., & Beatty, C. C. (2022). Advising in science education: Critiquing where we have been, moving toward an equitable and holistic advising approach. *Science Education, 106*(5), 1299-1317. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21745>
- Sun, Y. (2021). The effect of teacher caring behavior and teacher praise on students' engagement in EFL classrooms. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.746871>
- Suwinyattichaiorn, T., & Johnson, Z. D. (2022). The impact of family and friends social

support on latino/a first-generation college students' perceived stress, depression, and social isolation. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 21(3), 297–314.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192720964922>

Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Way, N., Hughes, D., Yoshikawa, H., Kalman, R. K., & Niwa, E. Y.

(2007). Parents' goals for children: The dynamic coexistence of individualism and collectivism in cultures and individuals. *Social Development*, 0(0),

071124114012002-???. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2007.00419.x>

Taylor, E., Guy-Walls, P., Wilkerson, P., & Addae, R. (2019). The historical perspectives of

stereotypes on African-American males. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*,

4(3), 213-225. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-019-00096-y>

Teltemann, J., & Schunck, R. (2020). Standardized testing, use of assessment data, and low

reading performance of immigrant and non-immigrant students in OECD countries.

*Frontiers in Sociology*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2020.544628>

Theories of Early Childhood Education. (2017). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315641560>

Thomson, P., & Jaque, S. V. (2017). Self-regulation, emotion, and resilience. *Creativity and the*

*Performing Artist*, 225-243. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-804051-5.00014-7>

Tight, M. (2020). Student retention and engagement in higher education. *Journal of Further and*

*Higher Education*, 44(5), 689-704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2019.1576860>

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research.

*Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89-125.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>

Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 8(1), 1-19.

<https://doi.org/10.2190/4ynu-4tmb-22dj-an4w>

Tinto, V. (2017). Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19(3), 254-269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621917>

Tomaszewski, W., Xiang, N., & Western, M. (2020). Student engagement as a mediator of the effects of socio-economic status on academic performance among secondary school students in Australia. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(3), 610-630.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3599>

Trautwein, C., & Bosse, E. (2017). The first year in higher education—critical requirements from the student perspective. *Higher Education*, 73(3), 371-387.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0098-5>

Turner, A. (2017). How does intrinsic and extrinsic motivation drive performance culture in organizations? *Cogent Education*, 4(1), 1337543.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186x.2017.1337543>

Turner, C., & Grauerholz, L. (2017). Introducing the invisible man: Black male professionals in higher education. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 1(39), 212-227.

<https://doi.org/10.55671/0160-4341.1013>

van Manen, M. (2016). Phenomenology of practice. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315422657>

Varner, F. A., Hou, Y., Hodzic, T., Hurd, N. M., Butler-Barnes, S. T., & Rowley, S. J. (2018).

Racial discrimination experiences and African American youth adjustment: The role of parenting profiles based on racial socialization and involved-vigilant parenting. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 24*(2), 173-186.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000180>

Velásquez-Rojas, F., Fajardo, J. E., Zacharías, D., & Laguna, M. F. (2022). Effects of the

COVID-19 pandemic in higher education: A data driven analysis for the knowledge acquisition process. *PLOS ONE, 17*(9), e0274039.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0274039>

Versteeg, M., Kappe, R. F., & Knuiman, C. (2022). Predicting student engagement: The role of

academic belonging, social integration, and resilience during COVID-19 emergency remote teaching. *Frontiers in Public Health, 10*.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.849594>

Vu, T., Magis-Weinber, L., Jansen, B. R. J., Atteveldt, N., Janssen, T. W. P., Lee, N. C., Maas, H.

L. J., Raijmakers, M. E. J., Sachisthal, M. S. M., & Meeter, M. (2021).

Motivation-achievement cycles in learning: A literature review and research agenda.

*Educational Psychology Review, 34*, 39-71. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09616-7>

Wai, J., Brown, M., & Chabris, C. (2018). Using standardized test scores to include general

cognitive ability in education research and policy. *Journal of Intelligence, 6*(3), 37.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/jintelligence6030037>

Walach, H. (2020). Inner experience - direct access to reality: A complementarist ontology and dual aspect monism support a broader epistemology. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00640>

Walsemann, K. M., Pearson, J., & Abbruzzi, E. (2022). Education in the Jim Crow South and Black-White inequities in allostatic load among older adults. *SSM - Population Health, 19*, 101224.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2022.101224>

Wang, J., & Geng, L. (2019). Effects of socioeconomic status on physical and psychological health: Lifestyle as a mediator. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 16*(2), 281.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16020281>

Wang, Y. (2021). Building teachers' resilience: Practical applications for teacher education of China. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.738606>

Whaley, K. D., Wells, S., & Williams, N. (2019). Successful instructional reading practices for African American male third-grade students. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice, 9*(1).

<https://doi.org/10.5590/jerap.2019.09.1.20>

Wigg, U. J., & Ehrlin, A. (2021). Liminal spaces and places - dilemmas in education for newly arrived students. *International Journal of Educational Research Open, 2*, 100078.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2021.100078>

Witteveen, D. (2021). Encouraged or discouraged? The effect of adverse macroeconomic

conditions on school leaving and reentry. *Sociology of Education*, 94(2), 103-123.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040720960718>

Wood, D., Crapnell, T., Lau, L., Bennett, A., Lotstein, D., Ferris, M., & Kuo, A. (2018).

Emerging adulthood as a critical stage in the life course. *Handbook of Life Course*

*Health Development*, 123-143. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-47143-3\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-47143-3_7)

Wright, A. L., Roscigno, V. J., & Quadlin, N. (2023). First-generation students, college majors, and gendered pathways. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 64(1), 67-90.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2021.1989991>

Wu, I.-C. (2019). Self-determination of college students with learning and attention challenges. Proceedings of the 2019 AERA Annual Meeting

<https://doi.org/10.3102/1433236>

Yan, Y. (2019). Making accountability work in basic education: Reforms, challenges and the role of the government. *Policy, Design, and Practice*, 2(1), 90-102.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2019.1580131>

Yang, S., & Wang, W. (2022). The role of academic resilience, motivational intensity and their relationship in EFL learners' academic achievement. *Frontiers in Psychology*,

12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.823537>

Ye, W., Strietholt, R., & Blömeke, S. (2021). Academic resilience: Underlying norms and validity of definitions. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 33(1),

169-202. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-020-09351-7>

- Yomtov, D., Plunkett, S. W., Efrat, R., & Marin, A. G. (2017). Can peer mentors improve first-year experiences of university students? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19(1), 25-44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115611398>
- Zahavi, D. (2021). Applied phenomenology: Why it is safe to ignore the epoché. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 54(2), 259-273. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-019-09463-y>
- Zander, L., Brouwer, J., Jansen, E., Crayen, C., & Hannover, B. (2018). Academic self-efficacy, growth mindsets, and university students' integration in academic and social support networks. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 62, 98-107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2018.01.012>

## Appendix A

### Participant Recruitment Letter

(Insert Date)

Dear (Name of participant):

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate in education. My study aims to discover and interpret the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income, first-generation African American males who graduated or attended a four-year institution and effectively provide a solution to these issues. My goal is to explore what factors were vital in assisting you in graduating or those that hindered you from graduating successfully. I am writing to you to participate in my study.

To be eligible for this study, you must be a first-generation African American male with low socioeconomic background and have graduated with a degree from a four-year institution. Attending one or more activities is mandatory if you are willing to participate. First, participants will meet for one hour, completing a focus group activity. Secondly, participants will interview individually. This research portion can be conducted over the phone or in person. Lastly, participants will submit journal prompts detailing their matriculation. This process will be completed over two days for one hour and a half each day.

To participate, contact me via phone at [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED]. First, participants will receive a consent form to complete and submit. This consent form will contain additional information about the research and inquire about the participant's personal information to help structure and align their involvement in this study. Upon completion of the form, each participant's interview times will accommodate their schedule and arrange a mutual meeting location.

This research will further assist with understanding how some first-generation, low-income African American males failed to graduate college and assist higher education stakeholders in implementing strategies to help struggling students. In addition, identifying critical factors contributing to African American males' success, especially those behind academically, provides an opportunity to discover methods, tools, and approaches for being academically successful. Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study. I am confident that your efforts will help motivate and assist the next generation of first-generation students in succeeding academically.

Sincerely,

Tre' Finklea  
Doctoral Candidate  
Liberty University



## Appendix B

### Potential Participant Questionnaire

**Instructions:** Please take this questionnaire regarding first-generation college students as transparent and thoroughly as possible. Your answers will be used in a study and will be kept confidential.

#### Part One: Demographics

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Age:
  - a. 20-25
  - b. 25-30
  - c. 30-35
  - d. 40 and over
  
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Gender:
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Race or ethnicity
  - a. Black/African American
  - b. Caucasian
  - c. Hispanic/Latino
  - d. Asian
  - e. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Parent Education Level
  - a. High School Diploma
  - b. Associate Degree
  - c. Bachelor Degree
  - d. Master's Degree or higher
  
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Parent Income Level during college years
  - a. Under 25,000
  - b. 25,000-35,000
  - c. 35,000-45,000
  - d. 45,000-55,000

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

#### **A Phenomenological Study on Perceived Academic and Social Factors that Attribute to the Collegiate Success or Failure of Low-Income, First-Generation Black Males**

Tre' Finklea  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study on perceived academic and social factors Black American males attribute to their collegiate success or failure from a four-year college. Your selection is due to your identifying as a first-generation, low-income Black male who obtained a four-year college degree. Please review the attached form and ask questions before agreeing to participate in the study. Tre' Finklea, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** This phenomenological study aims to discover and interpret the academic and social factors attributed to the success or failure of low-income. These first-generation Black American males graduated or attended a four-year institution and effectively provided a solution to these issues. The problem is that low-income, first-generation Black American males graduate significantly less than their peers. For example, studies have found that students with at least one college-educated parent are 70% more likely to graduate than a first-generation college student. Unfortunately, studies show that only 26% of first-generation college students graduate. My goal is to identify what internal and external factors impact the educational journey of first-generation Black American males. Additionally, I hope that information gathered in this study from participants' personal experiences can help education stakeholders better understand and assist Black American males in pursuing academic success. This study hopes to answer what academic and social factors presented as challenges to low-income, first-generation Black American males and how they overcame those challenges. What educational factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success? What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who participated at a four-year institution and continued graduating attribute to their success? What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure? What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who participated at a four-year institution and could not graduate attribute to their loss?

**Procedures:** Participants will complete one of the following activities:

1. Participate in a focus group session where guiding questions encourage conversation amongst all participants. This activity will last 45-60 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded, and I will take notes during the interview.

2. Participate in a personal interview that will last 45-60 minutes. The discussion will be audio-recorded, and I will take notes during the interview.
3. Participate in completing journal prompts and narratives of personal experiences. Guiding questions will assist participants with completing this activity. This activity will take 30-45 minutes.

**Confidentiality:** The documentation for this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely on a password-protected device; only I can access the documents. Participants' names will be replaced with pseudonyms for this study, while individual interviews will be conducted privately with only the participant and researcher. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed, with only I accessing the information.

**Participation in Study:** Participants in this study are strictly volunteers. Participants' involvement will not affect current or future relations with Liberty University. Participants can dismiss themselves from the research or decline to answer any questions.

**Withdrawal from Study:** Participants interested in withdrawing from the study can contact Tre' Finklea at the email address or phone number provided at the beginning of the study. Information will be excluded and destroyed for participants who withdraw from the study. Participants who withdraw will not have the focus group data destroyed; however, focus group contributions will be excluded from the investigation after dismissal.

**Contacts and Questions:** Tre' Finklea will conduct this study; participants are encouraged to ask questions anytime during the process. Participants can contact Tre' at anytime using [REDACTED] or faculty advisor Dr. Patty Ferrin at [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, participants can contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Please notify Tre' Finklea if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and received answers as appropriate. I allow Tre' Finklea to audio-record our meetings as part of my participation in this study. I consent to participate in this study.

---

Name of Participant

---

Signature of Participant Date

## Appendix D

### Focus Group Questions: College Graduate

1. Tell me about your childhood. (CQ)
  - a. Describe the values instilled in you as a child that you believe has helped you to this point in your educational journey.
  - b. What were your goals and aspirations growing up?
  - c. What inspired you to believe that you could accomplish your goals?
2. Tell me about your decision to apply for college and your college selection. (CQ)
  - a. What made you choose Middle Alabama University?
  - b. Were there any influences on your decision to attend college?
  - c. What family members, community leaders, and teachers assisted or encouraged you in the college application and decided which college was best?
  - d. What is the support level from your family and friends regarding your pursuing a college degree?
3. Describe your overall college experience. (SQ1)
  - a. What pertinent memories (people, events, experiences) influenced or impacted your experience?
  - b. How did your racial and socioeconomic status affect your educational goals and aspirations?
4. What are some highlights of your collegiate experience? (SQ2)
  - a. What did you enjoy most about your campus?
  - b. What inspired you to continue to pursue your degree?

5. Describe your college instructors. Were they approachable? Were they available for office hours? (SQ2)
  - a. What makes an instructor approachable?
  - b. What impact do instructors have on your motivation to succeed academically?
  - c. Describe your relationship with the instructor and class.
  - d. Do you participate in class?
  - e. Describe an assignment that you completed and enjoyed.
6. What campus resources have you used? (SQ1)
  - a. Besides attending class, where do you spend your leisure time on campus?
  - b. How often do you meet with your advisor?
  - c. Do you attend tutoring?
  - d. What impact has financial aid had on your experience?
7. Tell me about some barriers that you experienced while pursuing your degree. (SQ3)
  - a. How did you overcome those barriers?
8. Do you ever feel pressured to drop out of school? (SQ3)
  - a. What contributed to those feelings?
  - b. How did you overcome those pressures?
  - c. What helped you in staying the course to graduation?
9. What are the most significant barriers to your enrollment at Middle Alabama University?  
(SQ4)
  - a. What can assist you with overcoming or removing those barriers?
  - b. What are you currently doing to overcome those barriers?

- c. In what ways do you feel your racial identity or socioeconomic status connects you to those barriers?
10. If you had the opportunity to speak with first-generation, low-income Black American male students, what advice would you give them on how to complete college? (CQ)
11. What can increase the number of first-generation, low-income Black American males graduating from college? (CQ)
12. Do you have any other information or thoughts you would like to share? (CQ)

## Appendix E

### Focus Group Questions: Non-College Graduates

1. Tell me about your childhood. (CQ)
  - a. Describe the values instilled in you as a child that you believe has helped you to this point in your educational journey.
  - b. What were your goals and aspirations growing up?
  - c. What inspired you to believe that you could accomplish your goals?
  - d. When did you realize you wouldn't be able to reach your goal?
2. Tell me about your decision to apply for college and your college selection. (CQ)
  - a. What made you choose Middle Alabama University?
  - b. Were there any influences on your decision to attend college?
  - c. Were there any family members, community leaders, or teachers who assisted or encouraged you in the college application process and decided which college was best?
  - d. What was the support level from your family and friends regarding your pursuing a college degree?
3. Describe your overall college experience. (SQ1)
  - a. What pertinent memories (people, events, experiences) influenced or impacted your experience?
  - b. In what ways do you feel your racial and socioeconomic status affected your ability to reach your educational goals and aspirations?

4. What are some highlights of your collegiate experience? (SQ2)
  - a. What did you enjoy most about your campus?
  - b. What inspired you to continue to pursue your degree?
5. Describe your college instructors. Were they approachable? Were they available for office hours? (SQ2)
  - a. What makes an instructor approachable?
  - b. What impact did instructors have on your motivation to succeed academically?
  - c. Describe your relationship with the instructor and class.
  - d. Did you participate in class?
  - e. Describe an assignment that you completed and enjoyed.
  - f. Describe an assignment that caused you stress and anxiety.
6. What campus resources did you use? (SQ1)
  - a. Besides attending class, where did you spend leisure time on campus?
  - b. How often did you meet with your advisor?
  - c. Did you attend tutoring?
  - d. What impact did financial aid have on your experience?
7. Tell me about some barriers that you experienced while pursuing your degree. (SQ3)
  - a. How did you overcome those barriers?
8. What caused you to drop out of school? (SQ3)
  - a. What contributed to those feelings?
  - b. How did you overcome those pressures?
  - c. Are you motivated to return and complete your degree?



9. What were the most significant barriers to your enrollment at Middle Alabama University? (SQ4)
  - a. What could have assisted you with overcoming or removing those barriers?
  - b. What are you currently doing to overcome those barriers?
  - c. In what ways do you feel your racial identity or socioeconomic status connects you to those barriers?
10. If you had the opportunity to speak with first-generation, low-income Black American male students, what advice would you give them on facing challenges in college? (CQ)
11. What can increase the number of first-generation, low-income Black American males graduating from college? (CQ)
12. Do you have any other information or thoughts you would like to share? (CQ)

## Appendix F

### Individual Interview Questions: Current Students and College Graduates

Date:

Interviewer Name:

Interviewee Name:

Start Time:

End Time:

College/University Name and Completion Year:

#### **Opening Statement:**

First, thank you for taking time out of your schedule to meet with me, participate in this study, and share your collegiate experience. Your interpretations and experiences regarding the phenomena are vital to this study. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. In addition, I will allow the interviewee to review the data. Finally, the recording used during the interview will transcribe verbatim to analyze the data further. Participation in this study is voluntary, and you are free not to answer any questions or withdraw at any time for any reason without consequences or penalties.

#### **Research Questions:**

**CRQ:** What academic and social factors presented challenges to low-income, first-generation Black American males, and how did they overcome them?

**SQ1:** What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success?

**SQ2:** What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success?

**SQ3:** What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure?

**SQ4:** What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure?

Interview Questions:

1. Please introduce yourself and share some of your educational backgrounds.
2. Please describe your parent's socioeconomic status and educational background.
3. Please describe your adolescent community and college climate upon enrolling. SQ1
4. Please describe your knowledge of the collegiate experience before arriving on campus. (i.e., financial aid, mentorship, engagement, college class prep)? SQ1
5. Please describe internal and external factors you believe attributed to your academic success. CRQ
6. Please describe how you believe those factors attributed to your success. SQ1
7. Please describe the factors attributed to motivation while pursuing a college degree. SQ1
8. Please describe how you believe those factors helped you accomplish your goal of graduating in the allotted time frame. SQ1
9. Please describe factors that helped retain you (two or four years) while pursuing your bachelor's degree. SQ2

10. Please describe what you believe served as obstacles as you pursue your degree. SQ2
11. Please describe how you overcome those obstacles. SQ2
12. Please describe the relationships you built that assisted in your enrollment. SQ2
13. Please describe the impact of those relationships. SQ2
14. Please describe what institutions gain from these perspectives and discernments that can help increment maintenance and improve enrollment of FGBA male students. SQ3
15. Please describe the importance of campus climate and integration to your academic success. SQ3

**Closing Statement:**

Again, thank you for your time and participation in this study. You being a part of this study has allowed me a better understanding of the phenomenon, and I am excited about my study's findings. Your experience and interpretations have added significant value. Do you have any additional ideas or concerns about this research? If so, please do not hesitate to contact me via email at [REDACTED].

## Appendix G

### Individual Interview Questions: Non-College Graduates

Date:

Interviewer Name:

Interviewee Name:

Start Time:

End Time:

College/University Name and Completion Year:

#### **Opening Statement:**

First, thank you for taking time out of your schedule to meet with me, participate in this study, and share your collegiate experience. Your interpretations and experiences regarding the phenomena are vital to this study. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. In addition, I will allow the interviewee to review the data to ensure the accuracy of all information. Finally, the interview will record and transcribe verbatim to further analyze the data. Participation in this study is voluntary, and you are free not to answer any questions or withdraw at any time for any reason without consequences or penalties.

#### **Research Questions:**

**CRQ:** What academic and social factors presented challenges to low-income, first-generation Black American males, and how did they overcome them?

**SQ1:** What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success?

**SQ2:** What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and persisted in graduating attribute to their success?

**SQ3:** What academic factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure?

**SQ4:** What social factors do low-income, first-generation Black American males who attended a four-year institution and failed to graduate attribute to their failure?

Interview Questions:

1. Please introduce yourself and share some of your educational backgrounds.
2. Please describe your parents' socioeconomic status and educational background.
3. Please describe your adolescent community and college climate upon enrolling. SQ1
4. Please describe your knowledge of the collegiate experience before arriving on campus. (i.e., financial aid, mentorship, engagement, college class prep)? SQ1
5. Please describe internal and external factors that contributed to your failure to graduate. CRQ
6. Please describe how you believe those factors attributed to your failure. SQ1
7. Please describe the factors that could have motivated you while pursuing a college degree. SQ1
8. Please describe how those factors could have helped you accomplish your goal of graduating in the allotted time frame. SQ1

9. Please describe factors that you believe could have assisted in retaining you (two or four years) while pursuing your bachelor's degree. SQ2
10. Please describe what you believe served as obstacles as you pursue your degree. SQ2
11. Please describe how you overcome those obstacles. SQ2
12. Please describe the relationships you built while enrolled in college. SQ2
13. Please describe the influence of those relationships. SQ2
14. Please describe what institutions gain from these perspectives and discernments that can help increment maintenance and improve enrollment of FGBA male students. SQ3
15. Please describe the importance of campus climate and integration to your academic success. SQ3

**Closing Statement:**

Again, thank you for your time and participation in this study. You being a part of this study has allowed me a better understanding of the phenomenon, and I am excited about my study's findings. Your experience and interpretations have added significant value. Do you have any additional ideas or concerns about this research? If so, please do not hesitate to contact me via email at [REDACTED].

## Appendix H

### Inquiry Audit Trail

Date	Entry
April 19, 2023	Submitted UWA IRB Application
April 20, 2023	Received approval from UWA IRB
May 16, 2023	Completed proposal defense
May 18, 2023	Submitted Liberty IRB Application
June 5, 2023	Received approval from Liberty IRB
June 6, 2023	Emailed and posted recruitment flyer
June 9, 2023	Reviewed Potential Participant Questionnaire
June 9, 2023	Emailed consent form to participants
June 11-13, 2023	Conducted individual interviews
June 14, 2023	Transcribed individual interviews
June 15, 2023	Sent transcription to participants for member checks
June 16-17, 2023	Conducted focus groups
June 17, 2023	Transcribed focus group interviews
June 18, 2023	Sent transcription to participants for member checks
July 6, 2023	Completed and submitted to the chair for review