

**Retention and persistence through the lens of four  
Black women community college students**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

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2016

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**DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmothers,

Aelsia Bivens and Pearline Daniels,

Whose strength and wisdom pushed me

To see

And think

Beyond what was in front of me;

To my little sister Tamina,

For challenging me

To look deeper and with compassion

Into the community college

Experience.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Everything is possible with God's guidance. Thank you God for your grace and guidance and for instilling in me the energy to persist, celebrate, and embrace this journey.

To my parents, Glenn and Linda: Without your countless sacrifices, prayers, words of affirmation, and comedy I would not have made it through this journey.

To my Fabulous Five dissertation committee:

Dr. Ebbers, my dissertation co-chair: Thanks for your wisdom, sense of humor, and for expanding my knowledge of community college leadership.

Dr. Brodersen, my dissertation co-chair: Thank you for believing in me in my moments of doubt. Your guidance and mentorship mean the world to me.

Dr. Croom: There are so many things to thank you for—your guidance, friendship, laughter, and clothing swaps—most of all I thank you for relentlessly and unapologetically walking in your truth.

Dr. Leigh: Thank you for your support and continuous words of wisdom.

Dr. Starobin: Throughout this journey you have been one of my rocks and someone I could trust. Thank you for seeing my potential and for pushing me to see if for myself.

To the BC–Beta Chapter, Drs. Chad Kee, Cameron Beatty, and Aja Holmes: Words cannot describe the gratitude I have toward you three. You are more than friends; you are family.

To my Iron: Dr. Joyce Lui, Dr. Mahauganee D. Shaw, Ashley Joseph, Chris White, Catlindt Landrum, Orlando D. Jordan Jr., Ellen Tisdale, Nadrea N. Njoku, Renee Hardman, Der Vang, Som Mongtin, Meghan Blancas, Dionna Langford, Deidre DeJear, Reginald

Walker Jr., Marcia Roberts, Pamela Maldonado, Dr. Carla McNelly, and Dr. Lissa Stapleton:  
Thanks for your unconditional love, support, and laughter.

To Dr. Frankie Santos Laanan, Dr. J. Luke Wood, Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, Dr.  
Dimpal Jain, Dr. Carol Heaverlo, and Dr. Mary Howard-Hamilton: Thanks for your  
affirmations and scholarly support.

To my pastors, Elder Mimms and Sis Cheree Mimms, and Pastor Tait and Sheree  
Tait: Thanks for reminding me that God works on purpose and it is my responsibility to work  
“in” purpose.

To Skylar, thanks for your continuous display of love, patience, and support. Thanks  
for holding my hand during this journey.

To my village, my family, the Bivens and Walker crew: Y'all are THE best!

**ABSTRACT**

This study focused on how four Black women described their retention and persistence; how institutional retention efforts support or hinder Black women's perceptions of their ability to persist; and how institutional programs, processes, and policies can be transformed to support the retention and persistence of Black women attending community college. In 2012, 38 percent of Black women in college were enrolled in community colleges, 60 percent were over the age of 25, and 65.3 percent were considered low income.

Although there has been extensive research conducted on retention and persistence broadly, only two studies were identified that focused specifically on Black female students. Black women are positioned at the intersections of their identities, and thus this study sought to expand the current literature on Black women by using a critical race-gendered theory and epistemology to highlight the nuances of the participants' experiences.

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenology was employed as a vehicle to show how the participants individually and collectively described how the community college helped them achieve their educational goals. Hermeneutic phenomenology was utilized, as it describes how Black women, having two minoritized identities, are positioned within society. Heidegger, one of the pioneers of hermeneutic phenomenology, posited that one's realities are influenced by the world in which one lives or one's "lifeworld." A lifeworld can be informed by an individual's race, political affiliation, and other identities. Hermeneutic phenomenology also suggests that one has situated freedom and the notion that, although Black women can make choices, their freedom has limits. Finally, hermeneutic phenomenology includes the use of expertise and prior knowledge to help shape the phenomena being studied.

Because this research was seen as part of a spiritual, academic, and personal journey, an endarkened feminist epistemology was utilized. Endarkened feminist epistemology is a critical race-gendered epistemology that is informed from and by Black women. Critical race feminism is a critical theory was used in this study, as it speaks to the complex realities of women of color. Four aspects of critical race feminism guided this study: intersectionality, gendered racial microaggressions, experiential knowledge, and praxis.

The findings emerged from data collected through three modes: a biographical questionnaire, semistructured interviews, and a visual counternarrative. Five themes that summarize the study's findings are presented: (a) establishing rapport with faculty and decision-makers; (b) advising and selecting courses; (c) connecting academics to life; (d) if time is money, why am I wasting both?; and (e) seeing myself in the curriculum. Participants described the opportunities and tensions associated with their retention and persistence within a community college context. Key personnel, such as advisors, faculty, and senior administrators; practices, such as pedagogy; and processes for accountability are also described.

Broadly, the implications of this study provide insights into the need for professional development focused on student learning and inclusive pedagogy; eliminating systemic barriers, such as unnecessary fees and lack of technical assistance for students; and how institutional and federal policies can be transformed to support the retention and persistence of Black women attending community college.

## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

### **Understanding What Is at Stake**

Community colleges have served as the entryway into higher education for many underserved populations since its creation in 1901. Community colleges were created due to social pressures and a demand for an educated workforce, to lengthen schooling timeframes, and to promote social equality through higher education. Subsequently the curricula at community colleges were created for multiple purposes to provide: (a) career and technical training, (b) a pathway to transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution, (c) continuing education opportunities, and (d) an emphasis on community service primarily in rural and private community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Community colleges have expanded their functions to meet the needs of the community by providing recreational learning opportunities (e.g., knitting), dual enrollment for secondary school students, workforce development curriculum, and courses that aid in language acquisition for English language learners.

One of the revolutionary aspects of community colleges was its emphasis on providing access to higher education through its open access mission. Unlike their baccalaureate-granting and for-profit counterparts, community colleges do not deny students admission based upon predetermined admissions criteria. Although there may be some admissions criteria for specific academic programs (e.g., mathematics courses), by and large, students who apply to a community college are admitted.

Although access, as a broad concept, is an essential element of community colleges, the question of whether access results in equity has been investigated by many scholars (Bragg, 2001; Dowd, 2003; Ivery, 2013). In addition, it is important to identify different

variations of access as it relates to community colleges as capitalist institutions. Two forms of access are particularly influential to student success: system access and process access. System access refers to “individual students gaining fair and equal entry into systems of higher education” (Moravek, 2010, p. 17). System access assumes that the admissions policies and procedures are aligned such that any person can be admitted into various types of higher education institutions (e.g., for-profit, community college, and baccalaureate-granting institutions) regardless of one’s social identities. Community colleges employ this form of access through its open access mission.

Whereas systems access focuses on admission into higher education institutions, process access focuses more on students’ access to resources once they are enrolled. Process access assumes that

if all students are given, and perceive that they are being given, equal opportunity to participate in the processes of learning and student life regardless of race, class, gender, or sexuality, then the educational institution can be judged as providing educational equity, or process access, to all students. (Moravek, 2010, p. 17)

Both systems and process access are intertwined and dependent entities. Although community colleges are celebrated for providing systems access to higher education via open admissions policies, process access or the support students get to complete their academic goal remains in question, particularly for community college students of color broadly and specifically for Black women.

### **Black Women Attending Community Colleges**

Community colleges serve as the gateway institution to higher education for the majority of all college students (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC],

2016; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). Black students attend community colleges at a higher rate than their Black peers attend baccalaureate-granting institutions, and thus, it is important to understand how Black students can be supported by community colleges. Students who attend community colleges are more likely to be female, from a racially or ethnically minoritized background, and older than their counterparts attending 4-year institutions (Hagedorn, 2005a).

In the fall of 2014, community colleges enrolled 12.3 million students, representing 45 percent of all undergraduate students and 52 percent of all Black students in higher education (AACC, 2016). Although the majority of all Black college students attend community college at a high rate, the overall graduation rate for Black students is low. According to the NCES (2012), the graduation rate for Black students was a dismal 13.7 percent, and Black women represented 68 percent of the credentials awarded to Black students.

Although enrollment rates have soared over the past decade for Black students, the completion rates have plateaued, which suggests there is some work to be done as it relates to supporting Black students, particularly Black women, as they persist throughout their academic journey. Retention and persistence are particularly important components of student success for community college students because they are indicators of students' progress. Although not all students attend community colleges to graduate with an associate's degree, it is important that they complete the credentials and goals they have set out to achieve.



## **Retention and Persistence in Community Colleges**

Measuring the number of Black women who are admitted to community college and those who complete their credentials are important; yet, there is a lot that happens between those milestones. Retention and persistence are words that are commonly mentioned when discussing student success; however, there are numerous definitions of what constitutes retention and persistence (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). The majority of scholarship on retention and persistence has been conducted from the perspective of baccalaureate-granting institutions (Wild & Ebbers, 2002; Wood & Williams, 2013). Research on retention and persistence have been expanded to include the complex intersections of students' personal, academic, social, and spiritual lives as well as the institutional culture (Astin, 1975, 1984, 1993; Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Hagedorn, 2005a; Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

Defining retention in the context of community colleges is complex, as the majority of retention models were developed within the context of baccalaureate-granting institutions. Astin (1984) developed a model that emphasized that student involvement is key to retaining students. Tinto's (1975) model of student departure suggests that academic and social engagement are key to retaining students. Tinto's (1975) model has been used within the context of Black men and women attending community colleges (Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014); however, the authors found that the model spoke only minimally to the variance of the findings. Strayhorn's (2012) study on Black men and Strayhorn and Johnson's (2014) study on Black women attending community colleges provide evidence that Black men and women experience college differently.

Tinto's (1975) and Astin's (1984) retention frameworks have been widely used; however, the challenge is that they put the onus on the students rather than the institutions in which they are enrolled. Wild and Ebbers (2002) developed a student and institutionally centered definition of retention that was used throughout this study. Wild and Ebbers postulated that colleges should establish their own definitions of retention based on student aspirations and the state in which they operate and should intentionally create retention efforts that meet the needs of students. They stated that, to develop a definition of retention, identifying a student's goals, periodically adjusting and verifying the goal, and measuring how the student persists toward the goal should all be incorporated into retention. Although Wild and Ebbers centered defining retention on the student experience, they further suggested that higher education institutions also have a responsibility to help students reach their educational goals. Specifically, they stated that higher education institutions should develop retention indicators, create learning communities or cohort models, develop directed retention programs, and create tutoring programs and supplemental instruction opportunities for students.

Because Wild and Ebbers' (2002) definition of retention centers on the location of the institution and incorporates the aspirations of students, this definition was used for this study. Additionally, although Wild and Ebbers provided an outline of factors that should be included when defining retention, there is opportunity for expanding how community colleges can support Black women enrolled in these institutions. For example, the authors suggested that developing directed retention programs would enhance the retention of community college students; however, research is needed to help shape how institutional policies, programs, and procedures support Black women. Furthermore, retention, as an

institutional responsibility, should be embedded throughout the institutional programs, policies, and practices to enhance the retention of Black women enrolled in these institutions.

### **Persistence Within the Context of Community Colleges**

Persistence, like retention, is one of the indicators of completing a course of study. A commonly referenced definition of persistence is “continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any higher education institution—including one different from the institution of initial enrollment—in the fall semester of the student’s first and second year” (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014, p. 7). Two challenges of applying this definition to community college students is that it does not measure progress beyond the first and second year, and it does not take into account differences in how students define persistence or time lapses in enrollment. Many community college students “swirl” (Borden, 2004; Crisp, 2013; McCormick, 2003; de los Santos & Wright, 1990) or attend multiple institutions at various times, thus the aforementioned definition may not capture enrollment trends. The working definition for persistence is the extent to which personal and institutional supports are in place for students to remain enrolled in college from one semester to the next.

With regard to specifically Black women attending community college, no persistence model has been developed; however, there has been research on what factors may promote persistence among community college students broadly and Black female community colleges specifically. One’s persistence can be improved through school involvement (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and having meaningful interactions with faculty and classmates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). A study that looked at factors attributed to persistence among nontraditional community college

students found that (a) a shared sense of belonging due to a shared experience of struggling; (b) encouraging relationships among faculty, staff, and peers; (c) visualizing their success; and (d) developing a positive academic self-confidence all positively influenced student persistence (Clark, 2012). This was particularly true for nontraditional students who persisted through a program using a cohort model.

With regard to Black student persistence in community colleges, there is a growing body of literature examining Black men (Wood & Ireland, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011; Wood & Williams, 2013); however, the same cannot be said for Black women. One study that was identified investigated the meaning of persistence from the perspective of Black women attending an urban community college (Glavan, 2009). Persistence, according to the women in the study, was defined as sticking to one's plan and achieving one's goal. However, the study did not take into account how institutional practices, policies, and programs should be shaped to support Black women. Additionally, Glavan (2009) stated that one of the limitations of his study was that there was mistrust between him and some of his participants and that some discontinued due to lack of social and cultural understanding. Although Glavan's study offered insights into the ways in which Black women define persistence, he did not address how the institution encouraged Black women to persist or deterred them. As such, this study fills the gap in the literature concerning persistence or lack thereof among Black women attending community colleges.

### **Problem Statement**

Five issues make studying Black women's perceptions of persistence significant and timely. The first pertains to rhetoric around Black women being hailed as the new model group of students, as for the first time in American history, Black women are enrolled in

higher numbers than any other race and/or gender (Kaba, 2008). Although the number of Black women enrolled in college is in itself not a problem, this argument stems from measuring solely enrollment numbers and does not consider other indicators of success such as persistence and graduation rates. Black women have enrolled in community colleges more than any other type of higher education institution (National Postsecondary Student Aid Study [NPSAS], 2012d); however, the percentage of Black women attending 2-year public community colleges who graduate within 150 percent of the estimated time to complete the course of study has been decreasing. Specifically, 12.1 percent of the cohort that began in 2005 graduated within 3 years, whereas the percentage of the 2006-, 2007-, and 2008-starting cohorts that graduated within 3 years was 11.8 percent, 11.8 percent and 11.7 percent, respectively. With the exception of the 2005 starting cohort, the percentage of Black women attending community colleges that graduated within 150 percent of the time was lower than that of Black men. Although having Black women enrolled in college is important, it is equally if not more important that higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, support them throughout their academic journeys.

The second problem with the narrative that Black women are doing well in higher education is that it ignores the vast scope of experiences with regard to their academic fields. The fundamental issue with this position is that it assumes Black women are not in need of transformative resources like their male and White female counterparts. For example, according to a study conducted by O'Brien, Blodorn, Adams, Garcia, and Hammer (2014), Black women were more likely to be interested in pursuing a STEM major than were their White female counterparts; however, White women were more likely to graduate with a STEM degree. Additionally, the study found that Black women encountered racist and sexist

barriers that impacted their desires to remain in or change their academic major. Although this study focused on predominately White institutions and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), it does speak to the in-class experiences that may deter Black women from graduating in their desired major or at all.

The third problem is related to narratives about Black female success in higher education in terms of access. This issue focuses on the absence of dialogue on low persistence, college completion rates, and potential financial consequences for not completing a course of study. Although community colleges enroll a high proportion of students who are from racialized and ethnic lineages, are first-generation students, and have low-income backgrounds, the outcomes, specifically transfer, persistence, and graduation rates, for such students are troubling. For example, according to a study conducted by Horn and Nevill (2006), over one third of all community college students indicated they intended to transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution; however, roughly 12 percent of students actually did. Additionally, persistence and graduation rates for Black students attending community college are low, as only 14 percent graduate within 3 years. Thus, the challenge is to understand why Black students, particularly those attending community colleges, leave before they graduate, many times with student debt and without the complete educational foundation to seek employment opportunities where they can earn livable wages.

The fourth challenge in understanding that Black women's persistence and retention while attending community college is connected to the persistence and retention models themselves. As Hagedorn (2005b) suggested, traditional frameworks for persistence do not take into account the complexities of community college students' lives. She identified four types of retention that can be aligned with the experiences of community college students and

the mission of community colleges, namely that retention can be measured by (a) institutional, (b) system, (c) academic discipline, and (d) course. Understanding how the students, specifically Black women, define persistence and the ways in which their families, source of income, and education intersect are complex and understudied phenomena.

To complicate further the dominant discourse of Black students attending community colleges, the fifth issue is the narrative that is driving policy, practices, and procedures within these institutions. For example, the Pew Foundation (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014) did a comparison of college enrollment trends by gender among Asian, Black, Hispanic [sic], and White students that were recent high school graduates and were enrolled in college the following October. The study found that, in 1994, Black men outpaced Black women by nine percent in college enrollment; however, in 2012, Black women outpaced Black men by 12 percent. The authors further stated that the percentage of Black students enrolled in high school decreased between 1994 and 2012. Specifically the authors asserted that, in 1994, Black high school enrollments represented 17 percent of the student body, whereas in 2012, Black students decreased to eight percent of the student body.

Politically, there is a difference between what higher education policy looked like in the 1990s compared to the present. In the 1990s, America saw a surge of legal cases combatting for and against the use of affirmative action in admissions policies. Specifically, the ruling of *Hopwood v. State of Texas* (1996) stated that race could not be used as a factor in deciding college admission. This decision was later challenged and overturned via two cases: *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2000, 2003) and *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2001, 2003). The courts ruled that colleges could take race into account for college admissions to diversify the learning environment; however, colleges had to look at each applicant holistically when

making admissions decisions. Although these policies were centered on baccalaureate-granting institutions and graduate programs, there were direct implications for community colleges. In the 1990s and 2000s, in addition to the political tension pertaining to the use of race in college admissions policies, higher education institutions were experiencing a large decrease in federal funding, which directly impacted students. Specifically during this time, monies allocated to federal grants decreased, students began to rely more on loans, and low- and middle-income students were most directly negatively affected by these policy shifts (McPherson & Shapiro, 1993).

Although the 1990s political atmosphere questioned the role of race and income in college admissions policies, today a lot of discourse looks at the intersection of race and gender—specifically men of color. Specifically, in an article in *Diverse Education* entitled “Addressing the Crisis Among Men of Color in Higher Education,” Vincent (2014) suggested that men of color, specifically Black and Latino men, are in a crisis due to low rates of high school completion, college enrollment, and college completion. However, *Diverse Education* is not the only educational publication making a call to action for men of color. The American Association for Colleges and Universities (Williams, 2010), The College Board (2010), and the Center for Community College Engagement (2014), to name a few, have published articles calling for higher education institutions to pump more attention, resources, and funding into supporting men of color. In addition, there is political support for men of color through initiatives, such as President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper (The White House, 2014), to create institutional and structural structures of support for men of color throughout the educational sector. More recently, President Obama proposed a new initiative for community colleges to be free for students provided they are successfully



progressing toward a degree or credential (Bidwell, 2015). The president's new initiative is color blind and gender blind and, thus, may not bring about the types of institutional support needed for Black women to succeed. Specifically, it mutes the unique needs of Black women and other minoritized groups.

Black women have politically begun to push back through the creation of the Congressional Caucus on Black Women and Girls (CCBWG; Watson Coleman, 2016). U.S. Representatives Bonnie Watson of New Jersey, Robin Kelly of Illinois, and Yvette D. Clarke of New York created the CCBWG as a means to give voice to the unique challenges and opportunities Black women face. According to their press release, Representative Kelly stated,

Black women and girls are disproportionately affected by myriad socioeconomic issues that diminish their quality of life and threaten the well-being of their families and communities. . . . The Congressional Caucus on Black Women and Girls gives Black women a seat at the table for the crucial discussion on the policies that impact them while also providing a framework for creating opportunities and eliminating barriers to success for black women. (as cited in Watson Coleman, 2016, para. 4)

Representative Clarke further stated,

In many ways, 23.5 million Black women and girls are consistently left out of the national discourse on a variety of policies that will affect their lives. . . . This caucus will be purposed to ensure that the infrastructure of inclusion fully incorporates the varied and unique needs of Black women. Our experiences must and will inform the direction we take as a nation and we can no longer afford to be excluded from

important conversations. I am proud to stand with my colleagues at the inception of this caucus to be a vehicle for change. (as cited in Watson Coleman, 2016, para. 5)

Within the national educational research sector, there have been intentional programs and conversations on the educational and familial experiences and outcomes of Black women and girls. For example, during the 2016 American Educational Research Association's (AERA) presidential session, entitled “#AERABlackGirlsMatter: Public Scholarship Engaging with the Race/Gender Interaction in Schools,” Drs. Lori Patton-Davis, Adrienne D. Dixon, Bettina L. Love, and Melissa Harris-Perry vividly explored the needs of Black girls and women in K–12- and baccalaureate-level education. The session was, in part, a reply to the National Assessment of Educational Progress report, which stated that the math scores for fourth and eighth grade girls of color had improved, while omitting that Black girls had the least amount of growth in every category (AERA, 2016). During this session, the women discussed historical experiences of Black women and girls and connections to present-day issues and opportunities, the role of policy in creating and maintaining disproportionality toward Black women, and how Black women can continue to collectively inform and transform the educational outcomes of Black women and girls. Although the session was rich in data, dialogue, and critique, what was missing, from an educational expertise framework, was the voice of Black women attending community colleges.

Although the increased attention on men of color in higher education is warranted, it should not be at the expense of decreasing or depleting resources for women of color, particularly Black women. The political call to action for additional resources for men of color feeds into notions of patriarchy that mute the needs of women of color, particularly Black women. Black students, male and female, have low graduation rates at public

community colleges. The challenge then becomes, how does one broaden the discourse on Black students in higher education to focus on community college students—specifically Black women? Kimberlé Crenshaw and Walter Allen (2014) challenged educational leaders, researchers, and political agencies to expand the scope of current interventions backed by national policies to include Black girls. They also stressed that the need for research and policy focusing on Black girls is an urgent matter. I expand that notion to also include Black women.

For example, when looking at Black students who graduate within 150 percent of time of completion (3 years), Black men have enrolled in community college at higher rates (NPSAS, 2012d); however, among cohorts that began enrollment between 2006 and 2008, Black women graduated at a lower rate than did Black males (NCES, 2012). Black women attending community colleges are also more likely to delay enrollment (NPSAS, 2012a), care for dependents (NPSAS, 2012b), and be enrolled part time (NPSAS, 2012d), all of which can negatively affect their persistence and graduation rates. Where are the policies to address the needs of Black women in the dominant discourse?

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to provide a description and highlight the unique experiences of four Black, female community college students to inform institutional practices, policies, and procedures from the perspective of Black women in the midst of their postsecondary education. By focusing on how the women described their persistence and retention, institutions can learn ways in which they can shift their institutional culture to better support the Black women who are enrolled. Because community colleges function as racialized and gendered institutions (Jain, 2009), it is important to understand how Black

women are retained in and persist at throughout their academic careers while attending these institutions and how institutional processes, policies, and programs affect these students' persistence while attending community college.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do Black women attending community colleges describe their retention?
2. How do Black women attending community colleges describe their persistence?
3. How do institutional retention efforts support or hinder Black women's perceptions of their ability to persist?
4. How can institutional programs, processes, and policies be transformed to support the retention and persistence of Black women attending community college?

### **Significance**

This study can contribute to the literature on Black women in community colleges and institutional practices to support them from the perspective of Black women. According to Wild and Ebbers (2002), there is a dearth of research that identifies factors that contribute to persistence for community college students. Likewise, there is a dearth of research focused on retention of Black women attending community colleges. I expand this notion to include that Black women attending community colleges comprise an isolated group that has been excluded from this body of work. Black women are enrolling in college at rates higher than any other group; however, within the context of community colleges, the rate of retention, persistence, and completion of programs of study by Black women attending community college is low. Thus, this study provides insights into how community colleges

can support Black women's persistence throughout their academic careers while enrolled in community college and beyond.

### **Research Design**

The research design for this study was informed by critical race methodologies and methods. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000), in her article entitled "Racialized Discourses and Ethnic Epistemologies," stressed that there is not only a need for racially and culturally aligned epistemologies and discourses but also is an urgent need to design and implement these frameworks. Because this study entailed a Black woman studying Black women, it was important that the research design, from the epistemology to the methods, be aligned in a way that emphasizes Black womanhood as the core of coming to know. As Ladson-Billings (2000) stated, "the point of working in racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies is not merely to 'color' the scholarship. It is to challenge the hegemonic structures (and symbols) that keep injustice and inequity in place" (p. 271). As such, the research design for this study drew from critical-raced-gendered research methods.

The research design for this study began with an endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000), which focused on the ways of knowing that encompass historical, cultural, and spiritual aspects of my identity as a Black Christian woman. Critical race feminism (Berry, 2010; Wing, 2003, 2015), a critical theory, recognizes the experiential knowledge of women of Color, and the intersections of race, gender, class and other identities Black women possess. Critical race feminism also seeks to dismantle systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, etc.) that women of color navigate throughout their lives. Using critical race feminism illuminates how racism and sexism play out through organizational policies, practices, and programs as well as how these policies, practices, and programs combat

discriminatory practices. Because Black women's retention and persistence are understudied, a hermeneutic phenomenology methodology (Jehenson, 1984; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Van Manen, 1990) was employed as a vehicle to show how the women individually and collectively described how the community college helped them achieve their educational goals.

### **Endarkened Feminist Epistemology**

Endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000), a critical race-gendered epistemology (Bernal, 2002), speaks to the ways in which I have come to know. Specifically, endarkened feminist epistemology posits that reality is known through (a) the intersections of being Black, female, and other social identities (Collins, 2000a, 2000b), (b) spirituality, and (c) feminist psychology. Dillard (2000) stated that “from an endarkened feminist epistemology is *research as a responsibility*, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry” (p. 6). Endarkened feminist epistemology particularly radiated with me as it aligns coming to know through my mind, body, and soul. The combination of critical theory, a spiritual element of coming to know, dialogue as a medium for the construction of knowledge, and a commitment to social responsibility spoke to the multiple ways I defined myself and made meaning of the world in which I live.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical race feminism is a critical theory that speaks to the complex realities of women of color (Berry, 2010; Wing, 2003, 2015). It has arisen out of critical legal studies, critical race theory (Bell, 1987, Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998), and different variations of feminism, particularly Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1989).

Five tenets help shape critical race feminism as a theoretical framework (Berry, 2010; Wing, 2003). First, critical race feminism states that the experiences of women of color differ from those of White women, men of color, and White men and that those differences in experiences shape the perspectives of women of color. Second, this theory also posits that various forms of oppression are intersected and are projected onto women of color whether through race, gender, age, sexuality, etc. Third, critical race feminism is anti-essentialist in that it rejects notions of generalizations of women of color and their womanhood. Fourth, this theory is multidisciplinary and is informed by theories such as Black feminist thought. Finally, critical race feminism promotes theories and practices that challenge and dismantle oppression targeted at the intersections of race and gender (Wing, 2003).

Within the context of this study, critical race feminism was a useful theory, as it values the experiential knowledge and intersections of race, racism, sexism, class, and sexuality. Although the majority of community college students are students of color and female (AACC, 2016), to my knowledge, critical race feminism has not been utilized in studies that explicitly study Black women attending community colleges.

Four aspects of critical race feminism guided this study: intersectionality, gendered racial microaggressions, experiential knowledge, and praxis. Intersectionality, which is derived from Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1989), indicates that it is neither race nor gender that situates Black women as marginalized but, rather, the combination of both identities. Gendered racial microaggressions are subtle assaults on women of color broadly, and Black women specifically, that target their womanhood and are rooted in negative intersectional stereotypes about Black women (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2013). Stereotypes such as the strong Black woman, Jezebel, Sapphire,

and welfare queen (Collins, 2000a) are intersectional stereotypes targeted at the race, gender, and class of Black women. As such, gendered racial microaggressions provide an intersectional framework and language for the unique forms of microaggressions Black women may face.

Critical race feminism recognizes the knowledge gained through experience for women of color and values the use of narrative and storytelling as one means of communicating that knowledge. Experiential knowledge can be passed from generation to generation through art, dance, poetry, storytelling, or observation (Collins, 2000a; Dillard, 2000; Pratt-Clarke, 2012; Rodriguez, 2006) and can be used to help make decisions about one's life. Within critical race feminist works, praxis is defined as the combination of theory and practice (Wing, 1990). When situated in critical race feminist theory, praxis is the combination of action, politics, and social transformation for the betterment of women of color. Developing praxis within the context of this study was especially important due to the dearth of research that has focused on retention and persistence of Black women in community colleges.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to understand how four Black women were retained and persisted throughout their postsecondary education while enrolled in a community college. The methodology employed was hermeneutic phenomenological (Jehenson, 1984; Lopez & Willis, 2004), which centers one's history, identities, and claims that meaning is derived through the participants and the researcher.

Heidegger (1962), one of the pioneers of hermeneutic phenomenology, posited that individuals' realities are influenced by the world in which they live, or their lifeworld. Some



aspects of one's lifeworld include one's age, ethnicity, race, locale, nation of origin, political position, and culture. Additionally, within these experiences, individuals have situated freedom (Leonard, 1999), which is the notion that "individuals are free to make choices, but their freedom is not absolute; it is circumscribed by the specific conditions of their daily lives" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 729).

Another component of hermeneutic phenomenology is the use of expertise and prior knowledge (Heidegger, 1962) to help shape the phenomena being studied. As stated earlier, past research has focused on factors that contribute to Black men and persistence in community colleges (Wood & Williams, 2013); however, the same cannot be said for Black women in community college. Perhaps one of the most powerful components of a hermeneutic phenomenology is the notion of co-constitutionality—that meanings are derived by the researcher and the participants (Koch, 1995). Womanists, such as Wilson and Washington (2007), encouraged Black women to transform phenomenology by incorporating Afrocentric perspectives and communication styles, such as storytelling, into phenomenological studies to create a space for voices and experiences that have been muted. This notion directly connected to this study's epistemology and use of critical race feminism in that it held the researcher accountable to the participants and validated the individual and collective experiential knowledge that Black women possess.

By employing an endarkened feminist epistemology, which views research as responsibility and knowledge as contextual, critical race feminism values and acknowledges experiential knowledge, emancipation and intersecting identities, and a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, which takes into account the ways in which one's lifeworld shapes experiences, I provided a space for the experiences of Black women. Specifically, I

aimed to centralize their experiences and expand the conversation on the experiences and unique needs of Black women attending community colleges.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Boyd (2001) and Creswell (2007) claimed that having two to 10 participants is ideal for a qualitative study, as it allows for multiple perspectives of a phenomenon to be explored (Maxwell, 2012). Four participants were recruited through various programs and offices that may appeal to Black women at Aspen Glenn Community College (AGCC; pseudonym). After speaking with leaders at AGCC and getting Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendix A), an e-mail was sent to potential participants inviting them to be part of the study. In addition, I attended events on campus where Black women might be in order to invite additional women to participate.

### **Participant Selection Criteria**

Community colleges enroll students from an array of diverse backgrounds; thus, because this study focused on Black female community college students, I had to make sure that participants fit certain criteria to help narrow the scope of participants. Due to the focus of this study, participants had to identify as African American or Black and as female. Additionally, the participants had to have spent at least one semester at AGCC to assure that they had been acclimated to the college campus. Finally, because I was focusing on the experiences of Black women, participants had to be at least 18 years old, and in addition, they had to be intending to earn an associate's degree or credential. Thus, participants had to fulfill the following criteria: (a) identified as a woman, (b) identified as being of African descent, (c) intended to earn an associate's degree, (d) had completed at least 30 credits of coursework at the research site, and (5) was at least 18 years old at the time of the study.

## Methods

Data were collected through three modes: a biographical questionnaire, semistructured interviews, and a visual counternarrative. The biographical questionnaire focuses on demographic data, educational history, co-curricular activities, family history, and in-class and out-of-class activities. In addition to the questionnaire, I employed a series of three semistructured interviews during which I asked the participants to share counterstories (Berry, 2010; Collins, 2000a; Delgado, 1989; Wing, 2015). The first interview of the three interviews focused on the participant's life history and experiences with enrollment processes and in-class experiences. The second interview focused on the details of the student's experiences, as according to Solomon (1987), interpretive or hermeneutic research seeks to identify meanings in everyday experiences. Consistent with counterstories being multidisciplinary, I also asked participants to create a visual counterstory that showed connections between their experiences, retention, and persistence. The third interview focused on meaning making. Specifically, it focused on the ways in which the participants connected their educational experiences to the contexts of their lives, and on emancipatory insights for Black women attending community college.

The interview protocol was informed by phenomenological (Moustakas, 1994) and narrative biographical (Creswell, 2007) methods. Using a narrative biographical approach to interview questions helped get at the essence of who the participants were and situated their experiences within their cultural, historical, and personal experiences (Creswell, 2007). In addition, using narrative biographical interview questions allowed me to restory the participants' experiences and link them to the processes, policies, and practices employed at the community college.

## **Conclusion**

Black women utilize community colleges more than any other type of higher education institution. Although Black women are enrolling in community colleges at a high rate, the rate at which they are completing their credential is alarmingly low. As such, it is imperative that researchers and community college personnel begin to examine how Black women define their success and the ways in which the institution both supports and undermines their paths to success.

Many Black women attending community colleges live complex lives that include caring for dependents, enrolling part time, and delaying enrollment; their lives are complex, and it is important that their voices be heard. With the recent surge in attention and resources directed toward men of color, it is important that women of color, specifically Black women, are not left in the shadows. This study aimed to highlight the experiences of Black women attending community colleges to empower them both as individuals and collectively and to inform and transform organizational practices that both support and deter Black women from completing their credentials.

## **CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the functions of community colleges, current trends in Black women's enrollment and completion, current policies regarding community college completion, and retention and persistence models that help illustrate success rates of students broadly, and how they might not accurately model success trends for Black women.

### **Community Colleges Overview**

Community colleges serve as the inaugural postsecondary institution for many college students (AACC, 2016). Community colleges, unlike baccalaureate-granting institutions, have a mission centered on providing college access to all (Cohen & Brawer, 2008) by offering lower tuition than do baccalaureate-granting institutions (Phillippe & Patton 2000), by offering courses that meet the economic needs of the community, and by providing access to college-level curriculum to high school students via dual enrollment (Bragg, 2001). Community colleges are unique in that they offer diverse curricular opportunities such as career and technical education, certifications (e.g., electrician, dental hygienist, teacher's assistant), workforce development courses for companies, and courses that can be transferred to other postsecondary education institutions such as another community college or a baccalaureate-granting institution (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Community colleges have recently garnered national attention due to the rising utilization of the institutions. Specifically in 2014, community colleges enrolled 45 percent of all U.S. undergraduate students and 52 percent of Black students in higher education (AACC, 2016).

The transfer function is a vital component of the American higher education process, as it provides access to baccalaureate-granting institutions for some community college students. Current research on the transfer function focuses on articulation agreements (Lang,

2008), access to higher education (Bragg, 2001; Dougherty, 1994; Dowd, 2003), characteristics of students at the community college (Strayhorn, 2011), social and cultural adjustments or lack thereof (Napoli & Wortman, 1996), and transfer rates (Wassmer, Moore, & Shulock, 2004; Zamani & Laanan, 2001). Unlike students who traditionally enroll in a baccalaureate-granting institution immediately after graduating from high school, community college students who wish to transfer must identify courses that transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions. Advisors and other institutional actors can help students identify courses that will transfer; however, articulation agreements vary from institution to institution and may be confusing for students to navigate, particularly if she or he does not utilize an advisor.

The transfer process (e.g., application, financial aid, etc.) is facilitated through a myriad of political and institutional policies and processes, which offer both opportunities and challenges for students (Lang, 2008; Tobolowsky, 1998). The transfer process has the potential to help students transfer from a community college to a baccalaureate-granting institution; yet, a disconnect exists between students who indicate they want to transfer and those who actually do. For example, according to Horn and Nevill (2006), over one third of community college students stated they wanted to transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution; however, national trends suggest that only 29 percent of students that intend to transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution actually do (Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003). The National Student Clearinghouse Research (2014) found that, of the students who enrolled in a community college in 2006, only 15 percent completed a degree at a baccalaureate-granting institution. Juxtaposing the high enrollment of students in community colleges and the percentage who indicate they wish to transfer with the miniscule percentage

of students who successfully transfer illustrates the disconnect between students who wish to transfer and those who actually do.

Although community colleges provide access to higher education, specifically for first-generation and low-income students, women, and students of color, the transfer function has disproportionately inhibited individuals from the aforementioned communities from successfully transferring to a baccalaureate-granting institution. For example, Tobolowsky (1998) found that articulation agreements between community colleges and baccalaureate-granting institutions have become a complex web-like process whereby students must seek guidance from multiple institutions to gain a clear understanding of their transfer processes; these processes are especially detrimental for racialized minorities. Rendón (1993) stated her concern that

much of the community college leadership has responded to the controversy surrounding transfer from a colorblind point of view. . . . Underrepresented minorities are disproportionately affected by barriers to academic achievement because society has not prepared them well either to recognize or to take advantage of higher education opportunities. . . . When low transfer rates are reported and when few minorities are found to be earning bachelor's and graduate degrees, it is not surprising to find the community college transfer function at the heart of the debate between community college critics and proponents. (p. 4)

The tension Rendón (1993) identified is reflected in the disproportionate number of students of color in community colleges who successfully transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution. As previously stated, the enrollment of Black students in community colleges has increased; however, the percentage of Black students who graduate from

community colleges has remained constant. In addition, only 29 percent of all students who have indicated they wanted to transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution actually do, and this figure does not account for how race, gender, and/or sex are reflected in the number of students who successfully transfer. Although the percentage of Black female students who are enrolling in community colleges is at a high rate, research has suggested that for minoritized students, specifically racialized students, the journey from the community college to a baccalaureate-granting institution is met with institutionalized (Zamani & Laanan, 2001) and racial (Rendón, 1993) resistance.

### **Men of Color and Gender-Neutral National Policies**

Across the educational landscape there is a movement focused on addressing the needs of men of color. Vincent (2014) stated that men of color, specifically Black and Latino men, are in a crisis due to low rates of high school completion, college enrollment, and college completion, and other scholars (e.g., Williams, 2010; College Board, 2010; Center for Community College Engagement, 2014) have called for higher education institutions to turn attention, resources, and funding into supporting men of color. In addition, My Brother's Keeper (The White House, 2014), President Obama's initiative to create institutional and structural structures of support for men of color throughout the educational sector, has gained political support (Bidwell, 2015). My Brother's Keeper allocates financial resources toward research and programming to address the needs of people of color and also promotes mentorship and grassroots approaches to engaging men of color with the goal of increasing postsecondary participation and completion (The White House, 2014).

Additionally, through his America's College Promise proposal, President Obama proposed that community colleges have free tuition for students who are working toward a



degree (Bidwell, 2015; The White House, 2015). If passed, America's College Promise will provide free tuition for students who are enrolled at least half time, maintain a minimum 2.5 grade point average (GPA), and make progress toward a degree (The White House, 2015). Although the proposed initiative could be very promising for community college students, the question of how the proposal will fiscally help community colleges to support students working toward a degree has been much debated. Also, according to administration officials, it was estimated that states would be required to pay for 25 percent of the cost to put the initiative into action (Walsh, 2015), which has raised many questions about how community colleges would be funded given the large amount of financial support they receive from state appropriations and student tuition.

The president also unveiled a new proposal called the American Technical Training Fund, designed to increase the capacity of technical training programs to meet the needs for individuals with technical careers (The White House, 2015). The goal of this program is to meet local workforce needs by helping low-wage workers get training for middle-class jobs ("Obama Proposes," 2015; The White House, 2015). The American Technical Training Fund would initially fund pilot programs that bring together local employers and community colleges. If passed, community colleges that perform well during the pilot would be allowed to apply for larger grants to expand the technical training programs.

The president's My Brother's Keeper initiative targets racialized men, and the America's College Promise proposal for free community college initiative and the American Technical Training Fund targeting training for middle-class jobs are both race and gender blind. Thus, neither may bring about the types of institutional support needed for Black women to succeed as, once again, the needs of women of color broadly and Black women

specifically are muted. Although it is well documented that men of color, specifically Black males, attending community colleges are not faring well in education (Flowers, 2006; Hilton, Wood, & Lewis, 2012; Wood & Ireland, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011) the same cannot be said for Black women. Increased attention on men of color is warranted, but it should not be at the expense of silencing the needs of women of color, specifically Black women.

The political call to action for additional resources for men of color feeds into notions of patriarchy and mutes the needs of women of color, particularly Black women. Black students, male and female, have low graduation rates at public community colleges. The challenge then becomes how to broaden the discourse on Black students in higher education to focus on community college students—specifically Black women. As Crenshaw and Allen (2014) stated,

not only must the scope of these interventions be broadened to include girls [and women], but research and policy initiatives that address girls' [and women's] challenges must not be delayed based on the false interference that their needs are less pressing or that they are somehow thriving. (para. 14)

For example, looking at Black students who graduate within 150 percent of time of completion (3 years) for cohorts that began enrollment between 2006 and 2008, Black women graduated at a lower rate than did Black males (NCES, 2012). Moreover, those attending community colleges were also more likely to delay enrollment (NPSAS, 2012a), care for dependents (NPSAS, 2012b), and be enrolled part time (NPSAS, 2012d), all of which can negatively affect persistence and graduation rates. Where are the policies to address the needs of Black women in the dominant political discourse?

Both My Brothers' Keeper and America's College Promise ignore the specific conditions of women of color broadly and Black women specifically. Black women attending community colleges have lower completion rates than do Black men, and there has not been any call to action. This is not stated to put the needs of Black women above those of Black men but, rather, to say that both Black women and men are not completing their credentials within 3 years. Black women and men experience college differently, and it is important that policies be created that increase educational supports and outcomes for both Black women and Black men.

Three Black female U.S. Representatives have created a political space that explicitly and unapologetically focuses on the unique challenges and opportunities of Black women and girls. The CCBWG was founded in March 2016 by U.S. Representatives Bonnie Watson of New Jersey, Robin Kelly of Illinois, and Yvette D. Clarke of New York to give voice to the unique challenges and opportunities Black women face. As reported in chapter 1, Representative Clarke stated,

In many ways, 23.5 million Black women and girls are consistently left out of the national discourse on a variety of policies that will affect their lives. . . . This caucus will be purposed to ensure that the infrastructure of inclusion fully incorporates the varied and unique needs of Black women. Our [the founders] experiences must and will inform the direction we take as a nation and we can no longer afford to be excluded from important conversations. I am proud to stand with my colleagues at the inception of this caucus to be a vehicle for change and look forward to the great work that we will do. (as cited in Watson Coleman, 2016, para. 5)

Representative Watson explained that “Black women deserve a voice in a policy making process that frequently minimizes or altogether ignores the systemic challenges they face. This caucus will speak up for them” (Watson Coleman, 2016, para. 3). Although the CCBWG was established only recently, the issues and concerns it has prioritized trace back to the roots of Black women and girls in America.

The attention on men of color in higher education is warranted; however, the continued silencing of women of color broadly, and Black women specifically, in the political realm is an injustice. Moreover, the political call to action for additional resources for men of color can leave the experiences of women of color broadly, particularly Black women, uninvestigated, under resourced, and lacking support to help them successfully matriculate to their intended academic goal.

### **Black Women in Community Colleges**

According to a 2012 report by the NPSAS (2012d), 12.8 million students were enrolled in community colleges; 44.2 percent of those students identified as racial and ethnic minorities, of which one third (33.4 percent) identified as Black (16 percent of the total population). Although Black students represent only a small percentage of the student body enrolled in community colleges, it is important to understand the experiences of this population, as 37.6 percent of Black female college students are enrolled in these institutions (NPSAS, 2012b; see Table 1).

### **Institutional Type, Gender, and Differences in Graduation Rates**

According to the Carnegie Classifications (n.d.), there are various types of community colleges, and Associates colleges are “institutions where all degrees are at the associate’s level, or where bachelor’s degrees account for less than 10 percent of all

Table 1

*Percentage Distribution of Undergraduate Black Women, by Institutional Type, 2012*

Institution type	Percentage enrolled
Public 4-year	22.1
Private nonprofit 4-year	9.5
Community college	37.6
Private for-profit	21.7
Others or more than one school	9.2

*Note.* Adapted from: *Dependents: Has any dependents by race/ethnicity (with multiple) and gender, for NPSAS institution sector (4 with multiple) (Public 2-year)*” by National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2012b, Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

undergraduate degrees [and] excludes institutions eligible for classification as tribal colleges or special focus institutions” (Carnegie Classification, n.d.). There are 14 classifications, which include geographic characteristics (e.g., rural-serving, suburban-serving, urban-serving), size (e.g., small, medium, large), whether the institution is a single-campus or multicampus institution, and primary funding sources (i.e., for-profit or public institution). Associates colleges are also classified by unique characteristics such as “public special use” (i.e., military colleges, nursing, health sciences) and public 2-year colleges under universities.

Institutional types provide very different narratives on the academic successes of Black women in higher education broadly and community colleges specifically. Specifically, one institutional distinction that reveals a difference in graduation rates of not only Black women but also Black community college students in general is whether the institution is public or private. For example, when looking at the 2004-starting cohort of community college

students, Black women graduated at a slightly higher rate (25.2 percent) than did all Black community college students within three years. However, when the data are further disaggregated into 2-year public institutions, 11.5 percent of Black females—nearly 50 percent fewer than at all community college students—graduate within 3 years. In addition, as shown in Table 2, between 2004 and 2009 the 3-year graduation rate (150 percent of time) for Black females at all 2-year institutions increased by 4.2 percentage points; however, at 2-year public institutions, three-year graduation rates for Black females were significantly lower and increased much less over that same period.

Table 2

*Percentage of Black Students Who Graduated with a Certificate or Associate's Degree Within 150 Percent of Normal Time*

Starting cohort	<u>All 2-year institutions</u>		<u>2-year public institutions</u>	
	All Black students	Black females	All Black students	Black females
2004	22.9	25.2	11.5	11.5
2005	22.6	25.2	12.1	12.1
2006	24.5	27.1	12.0	11.8
2007	25.3	28.4	11.9	11.8
2008	27.7	31.0	11.8	11.7
2009	26.4	29.4	11.3	11.2

*Note.* Adapted from “Table 326.20. Graduation Rates of First-Time, Full-Time Degree/Certificate-Seeking Students at 2-Year Postsecondary Institutions Who Completed a Credential Within 150 Percent of Normal Time, by Race/Ethnicity, Sex, and Control Of Institution: Selected Cohort Entry Years, 2000 through 2009, by National Center for Education Statistics, 2014, *Digest of Education Statistics*.”

Because nearly 40 percent of Black female college students are enrolled in community colleges (NPSAS, 2012b), it is imperative that their unique needs are investigated. Additionally, although there is a growing body of literature on Black males in community colleges (Flowers, 2006; Wood & Ireland, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011; Wood & Williams, 2013), there is a dearth of literature that looks at the experiences of Black female community college students as a unique student population (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). Specifically, Black female community college students are commonly part of studies that focus on women and ethnic and racial minorities (Rose et al., 2014; Sontam & Gabriel, 2012; Townsend, 2007), high school students transitioning into a community college (Williams, 2009), students of color (Orozco, Alvarez, & Gutkin, 2010), and women of color (Jain, 2009).

### **Age and Delayed Enrollment**

The age at which Black female community college students enroll is vastly different from that of a traditional college student. According to NPSAS (2012a), 60 percent of Black female community college students are 25 years of age or older, 23.2 percent of Black women are between the ages of 30 and 39, and 20 percent of Black women are 40 years of age or older.

Aligned with the age distribution of Black women enrolled in community college is the length of time between secondary school and postsecondary enrollment. Approximately 51 percent of Black women delayed enrolling into community college by an average of 5.5 years (NPSAS, 2012a). Put another way, students generally graduate from high school at age 18; yet, more than half of the Black women and men enrolled in community college at age 23. This delay in enrollment may be connected to taking remedial courses and gaps in

technological familiarity and simultaneously connected to life experiences and experiential knowledge that may have served to expand their critical thinking and drive to persist to complete their desired credentials.

### **Financial Aid, Employment, and Family Obligations**

Many students enroll in a community college due its affordability (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). It is important to note, however, that although community colleges have lower tuition rates than do their 4-year and for-profit counterparts, lower tuition does not guarantee that institutions will provide relevant resources to increase student success among Black female students. Dowd (2003) asserted that rising tuition costs and curricular stratification occur within community colleges and can reproduce social and political inequities. As such, although community colleges offer lower tuition than do their institutional counterparts, tuition is just one equitable approach to access, and additional obstacles may be in play as they relate to academic success.

**Financial aid.** According to federal TRiO standards, low-income students are those who earn \$25,000 or less, and over half of Black community college students have that status (NPSAS, 2012e). Specifically, 65.3 percent of Black women attending community colleges are categorized as low-income students. Studies on financial aid and income have reached conflicting conclusions; however, understanding the financial obligations of community college students is important, as these obligations are associated with student success. According to Perna (2002) a disproportionate number of low-income and racially and ethnically diverse students do not attend college and/or do not complete their course of study after they are enrolled in part due to the lack of affordability of higher education. Furthermore, recent national financial aid trends show decreasing need-based aid, increasing



merit-based aid, an increase in loans and a decrease in grants. The proliferation of loans and merit-based aid coupled with decreases in federal grant funding and need-based aid significantly decrease the likelihood that low-income students and aspiring college students will enroll and complete their credentials (Goldrick-Rab, Harris, & Trostel, 2009; Perna, 1998, 2002).

**Employment.** College students, specifically community college students, are more likely to commute to campus and pay for housing accommodations while simultaneously paying for education-related resources such as textbooks, calculators, and computers (Bivens & Wood, in press). As such, many community college students are employed while earning their credential or degree. According to the NPSAS (2012c), 63.8 percent of Black women are employed while attending community college, 49.1 percent full time. Perhaps a unique characteristic of community college students is that approximately 20 percent of Black women attending community college indicated they were employed at multiple jobs while attending school.

**Family obligations.** Family obligations—specifically, caring for dependents—play a large role in the lives of Black community college students. Specifically, 55.6 percent of Black women attending community colleges stated they cared for dependents (NPSAS, 2012b). Moreover, 66.7 percent of the women indicated they had at least two dependents, and approximately one third of the women with dependents stated they had at least three children. Tinto (2006) stated, “The role of family context may help institutions more effectively configure their support programs for differing student situations and populations” (p. 6). Specifically, it is important to understand the role of family as both a support system

as well as the potential for negative consequences associated with caregiving and college completion.

Given the enrollment trends and intersectional demographic characteristics that many Black women attending community college possess, it is important that community colleges begin to understand these students' lives more wholly to develop support efforts that increase the retention and persistence of Black women. Many Black women juggle multiple familial roles, economic instability, and other obstacles while simultaneously working toward a college degree. Black female community college students also are resilient, as although their lives are complex, they continue to work toward fulfilling their educational goals.

### **Black Women and Racial Campus Climate**

One of the major injustices many students of color experience while navigating higher education institutions is through microaggressions. Microaggressions, “subtle and commonplace exchanges that somehow convey insulting or demeaning messages to people of color” (Constantine, 2007, p. 2), have been shown to be detrimental to students of color (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Solórzano and colleagues' (2000) qualitative study of Black college students and their racial campus climate found that Black students experienced microaggressions in various forms such as being ignored by instructors, battling low academic expectations from instructors, and experiencing overt and covert racial discrimination when they were required to perform group projects.

Black women are uniquely positioned to experience microaggressions, as the intersection of their identities as Black women make them susceptible to these experiences based on the combination of their race and gender. Lewis and colleagues (2013) found that Black women navigate “gendered racial microaggressions” rooted in negative stereotypes

about Black women. In addition, Black women may encounter gendered racism. Gendered racism, which refers to the way racism and sexism are intertwined, was coined by Philomena Essed (1991) as a means to understand the ways stereotypes of Black womanhood perpetuates dominant ideologies about Black women's race and gender. Common stereotypes projected onto Black women include being promiscuous, asexual, emasculating, or a welfare queen (Collins, 2000a). Stereotype threat (Steele, 1997) is defined as “the immediate situational threat that derives from the broad dissemination of negative stereotypes about one's group—the threat of possibly being judged and treated stereotypically, or of possibly self-fulfillment such as a stereotype” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 798).

The ways in which Black female college students navigate gendered racial microaggressions and stereotype threats can take many forms. Lewis and colleagues (2013) identified five strategies Black women have utilized to cope with these microaggressions in academic settings: (a) resistance coping by addressing the perpetrator directly as a means of reclaiming power; (b) resisting Eurocentric standards of beauty such as cultural, structural, and institutional messages that prompt microaggressions against Black women; (c) collective coping by intentionally relying on family members, friends, and partners; (d) self-protective coping by striving to embody the “strong Black woman” stereotype to portray an image of resiliency and strength; and (e) becoming desensitized and escaping. Although Black women are enrolling in institutions of higher education at a higher rate compared to prior years, it is evident that the successes of Black women's postsecondary education come with a cost.

When thinking about the ways in which Black women students navigate the community college campus climate, it is important to note that, although these women are

embarking upon a new educational journey, they bring with them a breadth of experiential and cultural knowledge that informs how they engage with educational setting.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This section provides an overview of current literature on retention and persistence for students attending community colleges and, when available, Black community college students. Notably, not many articles could be found that focused on Black female community college students. This section focuses on the following: (a) retention factors for Black community college students; (b) retention program models for Black community college students; (c) policies, community college policies, practices, and programs linked to persistence; and (d) persistence factors and models. In addition, this section discusses critical race feminism as a conceptual framework to help shape how this study was approached.

#### **Retention Factors for Black Community College Students (Institutional)**

Walleri (1981) suggested that retention can be defined using university-based measures and indicators such as on-time degree completion. Walleri also noted that this definition may not be applicable to community colleges, as some community college students do not aspire to earn a credential or degree. Because community college students are enrolled for academic, personal, and professional purposes, Terenzini (1987) suggested that retention should be measured as the extent to which students achieve their personal goals despite potentially not completing their academic program. What these definitions have in common is the centrality of the institution's obligation to meet the needs of students. As such, retention is deemed as an institutional measure in this study and defined as the extent to which the institutional practices and policies meet the needs of Black women attending community college.

What has been consistent in recent retention literature is the importance of understanding the context of the institution (Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Tinto, Russo, & Kadel, 1994), experiences of students from various backgrounds (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2002; Hernandez, 2000; Hilton et al., 2012; Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014), influence of in-class experiences with faculty (Tinto, 1997, 2006; Tinto et al., 1994), and the importance of aligning institutional practices to meet the needs of the student body. The challenge then becomes identifying a framework that addresses the intersections between institutional practices, programs, and policies, and the varied experiences of students from different demographic backgrounds when defining retention as it pertains to Black women attending community college.

Because Black men and women do not experience education in the same way (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014), it is important that scholars, practitioners, and policymakers are intentional in understanding what services and programs enhance the retention of Black female community college students. For example, Hagedorn et al. (2002) found that background characteristics, GPA, enrollment intensity, and certainty of major predicted the retention of Black men attending community colleges. Specifically, they found that younger Black males were more likely to be retained; having a high GPA in high school increased the likelihood of being enrolled in mainstream courses; low academic self-confidence resulted in decreased retention; and enrolling in college full time, having a high certainty of major, and high self-efficacy were predictive of an increase in retention. Although this information is important, it does not speak to the experiences of Black women enrolled in community colleges.

An example of how Black women and men attending community college experience education differently was illustrated in Strayhorn's (2012) study on the connections of Black men's satisfaction while attending community college and Strayhorn and Johnson's (2014) study on Black women's satisfaction while attending community college. Both studies utilized the Community College Student Experience Questionnaire, a survey instrument that was administered at 56 community colleges and had over 18,000 student responses.

Strayhorn's (2012) study on the retention of Black males attending community colleges, using Tinto's (1993) social integration model, found that student backgrounds affected student retention. Specifically, he found that older students were less satisfied than were their younger Black male counterparts and that grades, a measurement of academic integration, were minimally related to satisfaction. He also found that Black men were more satisfied when their family responsibilities did not interfere with schoolwork. Social integration, or interacting with peers, negatively affected Black men's satisfaction, perhaps due to variations in age among their community college peers.

Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) conducted a similar study that sought to identify and connect the satisfaction of Black women attending community college and retention, also using Tinto's (1993) model. The authors found that age was a predictor of satisfaction; specifically, that older women were more satisfied with their academic experiences. Positive and frequent interactions with community college faculty members positively affected the women's satisfaction, and GPA also was related to satisfaction and retention. They also found that the more that family obligations interfered with school, the less satisfied these students were with their academic pursuits.

Although the Strayhorn (2012) and Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) studies offer insights into how satisfaction, as measured by institutional support, institutional culture, and background characteristics of students, may affect retention of Black men and women, there are distinctions that further suggest that Black men and women experience college differently. For example, age negatively affected Black men's satisfaction but positively affected Black women's satisfaction.

The findings of Strayhorn and Johnson's (2014) study accounted for only 22 percent of the variance. The low variance suggests that there is more to be learned about retention frameworks that specifically address the needs of Black women and the connections between institutional type and culture, student background characteristics, and ways in which community colleges can support Black women. Additionally, it suggests that Tinto's (1993) model may not be aligned with the experiences of Black students broadly and Black women specifically.

### **Black-Student-Centered Community College Retention Program Models**

Most retention models related to Black students have focused on "fixing" the student rather than addressing inequities within institutional environments, policies, practices, and programs created to meet the needs of Black students (Love, 1993). For example, the Prince George's Community College Retention program (James, 1991) was developed for first-time, full-time Black students. The goal of the program was to increase the retention of Black students and other minoritized groups, increase the "sensitivity" and skills of faculty and staff when working with students of color, improve the adaptation of minoritized students to the campus environment, and develop a comprehensive retention program that was fully

integrated into the institutional structure. To meet these goals, Prince George's Community College developed a program with the following components:

- Each student was assigned a mentor,
- Systemized academic monitoring at predetermined times throughout the semester,
- Career assessment and planning opportunities were created for students,
- Personal-adjustment counseling was provided for students,
- Workshops on college survival skills were implemented,
- Tutors were made available for students,
- A parent/student/mentor orientation was coordinated and implemented,
- Professional development opportunities were created for faculty and staff, and
- Social and cultural activities encouraging retention were promoted.

Black students who participated in the program performed better academically than did their Black peers who were not in the program; however, they did not perform better than their White peers did. Specifically, 66 percent of the Black students in the program completed 100 percent of credit courses compared to 51 percent of their Black peers who were not in the program. Likewise, 80 percent of mentees returned compared to 73 percent of their non-mentored Black peers and 83 percent of White peers. Moreover, on average 81 percent of students in the program as well as their White peers completed their attempted credit hours compared to 70 percent of Black students in the comparison group. Finally, the average GPA for the program participants was 1.99 compared to 2.19 for their White peers and 1.58 for Black students in the comparison group. The challenge with this model is that it does not provide evidence of gender differences in how they experienced the program and it



focuses more on the “survival” of the student rather than putting the onus of change on the institution.

### **Persistence Factors and Models (Individual)**

The National Student Clearinghouse Center (2014) defined persistence as “continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any higher education institution—including one different from the institution of initial enrollment—in the fall semesters of a student’s first and second year” (p. 7). Many community college students “swirl” or attend multiple institutions at various times (Borden, 2004; Crisp, 2013; McCormick, 2003; de los Santos & Wright, 1990), thus making persistence difficult to measure at the institutional level, as students may juggle multiple institutional systems for a variety of reasons. Although institutional practices play a role in helping students persist, persistence is more strongly connected to the skills, networks, and experiential knowledge within and outside of the college experience. As such, the definition for persistence is the extent to which personal supports are in place for students to remain enrolled into college from one semester to the next. Persistence is an important measure of student success (Hagedorn, 2005b) and is applicable to community college students as it helps identify common trends in the ways community college students matriculate to the degree or credential.

Understanding what factors contribute to community college students’ persistence broadly and Black female community college students specifically is very complex and at times contradictory. The following section delineates what factors have been attributed to student persistence and commonly referred persistence models.

### **Persistence Factors for Community College Students**

There is little consensus on what community colleges can do to promote persistence for community college students in general (Bailey, & Alfonso, 2005) or Black female community college students specifically. When looking at current research on persistence, what became apparent was that institutional type, programs, academic and personal support systems as well as students' identities contribute to their persistence and that there is no "one size fits all" model. Bers and Smith (1991) also noted that research has shown mixed results when it comes to understanding what factors contribute to persistence and deter community colleges students from persisting.

The Lumina Foundation published an extensive review of research literature to investigate the "effects of institutional policies on community college retention and completion" (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, p. 7) and found that there were few solid insights that could help increase persistence at community colleges. Four problems emerged from published research on community college persistence, including:

First, most of the research is about four-year colleges. Second, available national (or even multicollge) data do not have good measures of institutional practices designed to promote retention and completion. Third, flawed methodology often thwarts efforts to properly assess institutional practices. Fourth, the dissemination and discussion of research reports on community colleges are inadequate. (p.7)

The Lumina Foundation put out a call to researchers to think more intentionally about the methodologies used, the applicability of findings on community college reform to increase retention and persistence of community college students, and ways to hold community colleges accountable for increasing retention and persistence by conducting

quality research. The authors also recognized that there is an urgent need to develop a “culture of evidence” (p. 27) within community colleges and that researchers, administrators, faculty, and students must engage in meaningful conversations about the implications of research at their respective institutions.

One of the policies that may increase the persistence of community college students is student-centered course offerings (e.g., offering day and evening classes). Capps (2012) conducted a qualitative study on the persistence of adult community college students and found that student-centered course scheduling positively impacted the persistence of adult community college students. Offering courses at various times may aid in the persistence of Black female community colleges students, as the courses have the potential to accommodate women who work, care for dependents, or for other reasons need flexible course offerings to complete a credential.

Academic advising also has implications on student persistence. For example, advising specifically at community colleges has been found to positively affect persistence (Orozco et al., 2010; Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, & Deil-Amen, 2014), and Wood and Williams (2013) found that, for Black men attending community college, regular interaction with an advisor had a positive effect on the men’s persistence. Capps (2012) also found that faculty members who are familiar with the curricula in their respective programs positively impact persistence. When faculty members are familiar with the courses offered in the department, they can serve as informal advisors or recommend additional courses to students. Faculty should advise students with caution so they do not recommend courses that take students off their path to a credential. Validation from community college faculty and personnel also has

a positive effect on college students broadly and community college students of color in particular (Rendón, 2002; Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

The type of academic credential a community college student is working toward and variations in academic supports also positively impact persistence. Students who are enrolled in vocational programs are more likely to persist than are students enrolled in courses with hopes of transferring to a baccalaureate-granting institution (Sorey & Duggan, 2008). Bers and Smith (1991) found that students taking courses that lead to a credential or to transfer were more likely to persist than were students taking courses for exploration, personal development, or job-related reasons. Additionally, internship programs (Stuart et al., 2014) and learning communities, specifically those that combine developmental education, college-level courses, and early alert systems for students in danger of failing a course, positively affect students' persistence (Capps, 2012).

Interestingly, Wood and Williams (2013) also found that using the Internet to access the library and extracurricular activities negatively impacted persistence of Black men attending community colleges. Although using the Internet to access the library may be counterintuitive, it may be explained by either the lack of access to the Internet at home or not being provided the tools to navigate the website. In addition, Capps (2012) found that mandatory developmental education courses in reading, for example, did not increase reading levels; however, these courses did help students develop a college-focused mindset, which promoted persistence.

Student-centered scheduling, advising, validation, academic program-based supports, and programs that promote a college-focused mindset have been found to positively affect community college students' persistence. These policies and practices may be particularly

beneficial to Black women attending community colleges, as they provide multiple ways for them to engage in the academic environment. Because many Black women attending community colleges delay enrollment and are employed, positive relationships with personnel, validation, and student-centered programming can be essential to their success.

Bers and Smith (1991) conducted a study that looked at how academic and social integration was different between community college students who persisted and those who did not. They found that the students' educational objective, intent to re-enroll in college, employment status, and precollegiate characteristics provided more insights into the persistence of community college students than did academic and social integration. Specifically, they found that educational objectives paired with the intent to re-enroll, precollegiate characteristics, and employment status combined were stronger predictors of a student's decision to persist or not. They also found that the more hours a student worked, the less likely she or he was to persist; however, students who were employed part time were more likely to persist than were those who were not employed.

When looking at factors that have negatively impacted persistence for community college students, most of the characteristics had to do with student demographics. Delayed enrollment (Nakajima et al., 2012), specifically delaying enrollment for more than one year from high school graduation, as well as not graduating from high school, having dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, enrolling part time, working full time, and being financially independent have negatively affected persistence (Welch, 2014). Additionally, the more dependents a student had, the less likely the student was to persist (Sorey & Duggan, 2008). Although these data may provide insights into what hinders the persistence of students, what is problematic is that what the findings suggest problematizes students and

not institutional policies, practices, or procedures in community colleges. These findings should be used with caution as to not problematize students but, rather, to provide a framework to think through how taking a student-centered approach, particularly for students with dependents and those who have delayed enrollment, might look like for community colleges.

There are also policies, practices, and programmatic elements that either have had no effect on persistence or have shown mixed results. The most commonly cited aspect of institutional support that has had mixed results has to do with financial aid (Baum, Little, & Payea, 2011). For example, Nakajima and colleagues (2012) found that receiving financial aid positively affected student persistence; however, persistence was negatively affected for community college students who took out loans after their first year; grants had no effect on persistence (Dowd & Coury, 2006). Subsequently, merit aid had no effect on persistence (Welch, 2014). Although many students attend community colleges because of their affordability, there mixed results regarding the extent to which affordability impacts persistence.

Students' identities and the extent to which students were integrated academically and socially into the community college campus life have affected persistence. In a study that looked at women of color attending community colleges, the women who had earned a 3.5 or higher GPA stated that creating social networks in class positively affected persistence (Rose et al., 2014). Similarly, Sorey and Duggan (2008) found that social integration positively impacted adult students more than it did traditional-age students. However, younger women attending community college resisted social interaction with peers as they did not want to be

seen as members of cliques (Rose et al., 2014), and thus, this was not a priority in connection to their academic endeavors

Faculty interaction and pedagogy has been found to have a mixed effect on the persistence of community college students. According to Nakajima et al. (2012), faculty interaction had no effect on persistence for community college students; however, Wood and Williams (2013) found that regular faculty interaction positively impacted the persistence of Black male community college students. What this suggests is that race and gender might play a role in how faculty can support students. In addition to the frequency of faculty interaction, Bailey and Alfonso (2005) found that pedagogy, specifically applied pedagogies, was positively connected to persistence for community college students.

Although there is a growing body of work on persistence of community college students, what is missing factors that were specific to Black women. Like research on factors that contribute to the persistence of Black men, adults, and women of color in community colleges, factors that promote the persistence of Black women also need to be uncovered.

### **Community College Policies, Practices, and Programs Linked to Persistence**

In her article entitled “Challenges and Opportunities for Improving Community College Student Success,” Goldrick-Rab (2010) asserted that the onus of student success is on community colleges, specifically by examining the effect of their institutional practices. Through a review of research on community college persistence, degree completion, barriers, and opportunities, Goldrick-Rab stated that understanding student success is complex and that solely measuring student outcomes can lead to false positives. Additionally, many community colleges focus on college going rather than college completion (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009), which may explain why enrollment of Black women in community colleges has

increased, and yet, nationally graduation rates have decreased. Increasing college enrollment meets a political and financial interest for community colleges, as many receive federal and state funding based on the number of students enrolled and for federal programs such as TRiO. The challenge though is that the funding community colleges receive rarely focuses on improving institutional performance (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009). Specifically, Goldrick-Rab (2010) outlined institutional practices and social inequities that affect the success of community college students.

### **Institutional Practices**

Institutional practices that affect student success include access to remedial and credit-bearing courses in one's major, pedagogy, the role of faculty, access to information, and decision-making processes of educational administrators (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). The lack of course availability has the potential to decrease student success as it can prolong the time needed to attain a credential. For working students, students with families, and students with other life circumstances, the lack of course availability can be a deterrent to completing their goal. Faculty also play a role in the educational experiences of community college students. Faculty set the tone for learning in the classroom.

Research has provided evidence that the pedagogy of faculty can validate or invalidate the experiences of students and plays a vital role in the campus climate. For example, one of the challenges of community colleges has been engaging students in courses that relate to real life. Adult students possess experiential knowledge and may seek to make meaning of their experiences. Because many community college faculty members are adjunct faculty, there may be a disconnect between pedagogical practices and student success.



**Institutional Programs**

It is believed that adult literacy programs, first-year transition programs, and learning communities increase academic aptitude; however, the extent to which they promote student success at community colleges is complicated. Goldrick-Rab (2010) questioned whether students who take part in these programs are more likely to progress toward a degree and called for research on how these programs affect students from an intersectional perspective.

**Institutional Policies**

Articulation agreements, merit-based scholarships, and emergency funding policies are examples of institutional supports meant to help students navigate their educational aspirations and life circumstances. Goldrick-Rab (2010) argued that the influences of these policies should be investigated in connection to student success. Although such policies may exist, there may be a lack of information about the existence of, access to, and application process for these services.

Institutional policies, practices, and programs have a direct impact on student persistence. For a Black woman attending community college, these opportunities may make the difference between whether she persists or drops out of college. Focusing solely on student characteristics ignores the responsibility of the institution to support students, specifically Black female students, to persist to a credential.

**Persistence Models**

Persistence models have been created to help explain various aspects of students' lives, both in and out of school, that encourage or dissuade them from obtaining a credential. Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Bean and Metzner's (1985) model, which

centered on the experiences of nontraditional students, have been used to explain attrition and persistence among college students.

Tinto's (1975) model of social integration focuses on the dropout process and the ways in which colleges and universities can engage students while on campus. Tinto (1975) asserted that the decision to dropout can be

viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout. (p. 94)

Included in this process are student characteristics (e.g., age, race, gender, etc.), precollegiate academic experiences and achievements, and family background, all of which, according to Tinto (1975) affect the decision to drop out or remain in higher education. Tinto (1975) further asserted that students' academic goals and the programs, policies, and supports that institutions have in place to support the students' goals must align with the student's goal to encourage the student to persist. Finally, academic integration on the part of the student and social integration on the part of the institution can positively or negatively impact students' commitment to reach their intended goal. This model suggests that the more students are engaged in the college environment, the more likely they are to persist. It further suggests that students must integrate into the social and academic systems in college in order to succeed.

One criticism of Tinto's (1975) model is that it focuses solely on relationships within the college or university (Stuart et al., 2014) and that it does not account for institutional

differences, particularly for community colleges. Because Tinto's (1975) model was created from a residential, university with students between the ages of 18 and 25 years (Wild & Ebbers, 2002), the limited applicability of this model to a community college may limit the extent to which it is applicable or complementary to the students and institutional policies and practices at community colleges.

Another finding from the review of the literature was that social integration negatively affects the persistence and retention of Black men in community colleges (Wood, 2012). Specifically, Wood (2012) found that involvement in extracurricular activities negatively affected persistence and retention of Black men. Social integration, as identified by the findings of Tinto (1975) and Wood, provides evidence that race, gender, and community college may play a role in developing a model of persistence for Black women in community colleges.

Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a persistence model as a means to address how students from different demographic backgrounds may experience persistence differently. Bean and Metzner claimed that the decision by nontraditional, part-time, and commuter students to drop out of an institution is reliant not solely on institutional factors but also on student characteristics (e.g., age, enrollment intensity, residence, ethnicity, gender, parental education level) and academic involvement (e.g., study skills, academic advising, major certainty, course availability), all of which have significant effects on student attrition and decisions to stay in college. Additionally, environmental factors (e.g., financial stability, number of hours worked per week, encouragement from significant persons, likelihood to transfer) were significant factors in determining whether adult students chose to remain in college. Social interaction with peers minimally affected student attrition because the

environment outside of the institution was found to be of greater importance than on-campus activities such as joining a student organization. This model may provide some insights into how community colleges can support Black women as they persist toward their educational goals.

Another persistence model that has the potential to contribute to understanding the impact of environmental factors and persistence was developed by Wood and Williams (2013) and suggests that environmental factors at the community college may be related to the persistence of Black men attending community college. In their longitudinal study of Black men attending community college and persistence, Wood and Williams found that the more hours Black men worked the more they persisted. Wood and Williams also cautioned against encouraging Black men to work more hours, as a deeper analysis found that working part time positively affected the men's persistence. They also suggested that working on campus might be ideal for Black men to reduce travel time to work and promote academic integration. The model also suggests that familial obligations, particularly the need to be a financial contributor, negatively affected persistence.

Although the models produced by Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985) offer insights into conditions that may promote and discourage community college students from persisting to their academic goals, neither address how the institutional policies, practices, and programs of the institution collectively impact students' decisions to persist.

Additionally, when these frameworks were operationalized in studies that focused on Black students in community colleges (Strayhorn, 2011; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014), the results only minimally explained the variance. Finally, although Wood and Williams (2013) provided insights into a persistence model for Black men, the literature has not addressed

institutional factors that promote the persistence of Black women. As such, the present study provides some insights into how institutions can support Black women within community colleges.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter explored relevant literature and gave a general overview of community colleges and their functions. It also discussed historical and modern-day policies that promote supporting community colleges and the absence of Black women in the national political discourse. Black women have begun to create spaces that intentionally and unapologetically focus on the academic successes of Black women and girls through initiatives such as the CCBWG and recent presidential sessions at the AERA, the largest research conference in the United States. To provide context for the complexity of the lives of Black women, data on Black women in community colleges were presented as was a discussion about Black women and the racial climate that Black women face on college campuses.

In addition to the overview of literature on community colleges and the Black women attending them, a conceptual framework for understanding retention and persistence at community colleges was outlined. When applicable, I explored community college retention and persistence programs that were developed for Black students and offered a critique of current understandings of retention and persistence models and how policies, practices, and programs have been linked to persistence at community colleges.

### CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design. As the focus of this study was how Black women describe and make meaning of their retention and persistence, the research design was situated in a manner that wholly centered their experiences as Black women. One of the core positions of good qualitative research is having a comprehensive research design (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Maxwell, 2012). According to Arminio and Hultgren (2002), “goodness requires the elements of meaning making process are illustrated; epistemological and theoretical foundations are linked to the selected methodology; and that the method of data collection and its analysis are clear” (p. 446). This chapter outlines the philosophical assumptions, epistemology, and theoretical frameworks that served as a collective lens through which I situated others and myself in this study. Specifically, the paradigm, epistemology, and theoretical underpinnings spoke to the life experiences of women of color in a way that was historical, intersectional, and emancipatory in nature. A social constructionist paradigm, which contends that knowledge is constructed and communicated through culture, history, and one’s truth and meaning making, was collectively generated (Crotty, 1998). In this study, social constructionism was used, as it allowed the focus to be on the interconnectedness of the women’s knowledge and meaning making through the processes, personnel, programs, and policies within a community college context. Endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000) is rooted in the cultural, physical, and spiritual intersection of coming to know. This form of coming to know as a Black female doctoral student has repeatedly been a part of how I have engaged as a human being and researcher. Additionally, an endarkened feminist epistemology positions research as a responsibility and thus held me accountable to the participants. Finally, critical race

feminism, which is rooted in the works of critical legal scholars who postulated that laws and policies create hierarchies based on class, gender, and race (Wing, 2015), served as the theoretical framework for this study. Critical race feminism also posits that intersectionality—namely class, gender, and race—simultaneously shape the experiences of women of color broadly and Black women specifically. The aforementioned components of the research design centered the union of self, culture, environment, and history as essential to the lives of Black women. Additionally, a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was used, as were participant selection, data collection, and data analysis frameworks.

The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. How do Black women attending community colleges describe their retention?
2. How do Black women attending community colleges describe their persistence?
3. How do institutional retention efforts impact Black women's perceptions of their ability to persist?
4. How can institutional programs, processes, and policies be transformed to support the retention and persistence of Black women attending community college?

### **Researcher's Connection to the Work**

Just as I have found it important to be transparent in my work as a researcher, I have also found it important to identify my connections to the work. I was concerned with the lack of attention and resources allocated to women of color attending community colleges broadly and Black women specifically. I often had found their experiences muted and not part of the larger discourse on student success, educational challenges, and opportunities. As the descendent of parents who earned credentials from community colleges, a sibling of community college attendees (all women), and a former community college student and

employee myself, I believed that research on Black women attending community college was part of my purpose.

Many times, I found myself wondering what resources deterred and promoted the success of my family members and myself and how community colleges can support Black women reach their goals. Persistence and retention, specifically, resonated with me because the literature has suggested, and my family history has confirmed, that persisting to a degree or credential, specifically while attending community college(s), is a very complex phenomenon. It was time for me to transition from asking questions to identifying solutions from the perspectives and experiences of Black women. I learned the value of a community college education from my mother, father, and sisters. I also had begun to identify how my family's knowledge of the community college experience affected my decision to enroll and planted a seed for me to ask deep questions about the generational knowledge that includes these educational experiences.

I entered this study wholly. Some of the core beliefs that I brought to the study included that Black women are capable of studying themselves without compromising who they are and how they come to know in the research process. It is through dialogue, songs, poetry, art, dance, and spirituality that Black women connect. Although Black women may differ with regard to experience, upbringing, religious views, nationality, or beliefs, there is a common experience, or rather a bond, that unites them. Throughout this research process, I was intentionally reflective.

One of the biggest strengths I brought to this study was transparency between the participants and myself. It is important that I share that I had a personal relationship with



Alice, one of the participants, before the study started. About a year prior to starting this study, I had met her through our work in the community.

Although some people believe that being objective or subjective is key to the research process, I posit that there is a place for both. There is space for learning through objectivity, whether it is through sounds, smells, or tastes, and through subjectivity, by way of beliefs, suspicions, and opinion; they do not work separately but, rather, are intertwined. It is through transparency and vulnerability that I built relationships with the participants, questioned my assumptions, and encouraged the participants to be themselves wholly.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Social constructionism suggests that truth and meaning making are the result of a collective approach to generating and conveying meaning (Crotty, 1998; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). As such, social constructs, such as culture, race, and the meaning or value of identities such as age and ability, influence how knowledge is generated, given value, and communicated to others. Utilizing social constructionism as a philosophical underpinning allowed me to investigate how the women's shared and distinct histories, cultures, and identities informed their understandings of persistence and retention.

One of my core beliefs of knowledge construction is that meaning is a cyclical process that includes cultural, familial, historical, and political positions as well as social identities. As social constructionism claims, learning is, in part, a collaborative process whereby the participants and the researcher learn together. This shared learning allowed for the participants and me to be intricately involved in the research process and center our truths in a holistic way.

## Epistemology

I want to make it clear: For now it may sound like a whisper but it should be understood that when novice and experienced researchers of color are teaching or taking those courses in research methods that do not appear to incorporate and reflect them and their worldviews, when they are conducting and analyzing fieldwork utilizing procedures that do not adequately or comfortably represent them and their participants, when they are emailing one another recommending and discussing the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Smith, Patti Lather, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Sandra Harding, and Renato Rosaldo, and when they are setting up those conference panels on Latina epistemology and on Black epistemology, they are in fact, “talkin’ bout a revolution.”

Wright, 2003, p. 199

The epistemological framework that aligned with my way of coming to know is an endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000). Dillard (2000) asserted that an endarkened feminist epistemology is derived from a culturalist view of Blackness and more specifically Black womanhood. As a critical-raced-gendered epistemology (Bernal, 2002), endarkened feminist epistemology speaks to the unique coming to know of Black women from the perspective of Black women, which includes their cultural, historical, physical, and social positions. Endarkened feminist epistemology combines the fundamental principles of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000a), standpoint theory (Harding, 1997), and Black spirituality (Palmer, 1983, 1999). Next, I describe the aforementioned theories and how they shape an endarkened feminist epistemology.

Black feminist thought is a critical theory that articulates the unique experiences and ways of knowing from the perspective of Black women and interrogates the intersections of race, gender, and other social identities Black women may possess (Collins, 2000a).

Founded by Black female scholars, Black feminist thought states that Black women hold two minoritized social locations—being Black and female—in addition to other intersecting

privileged and oppressed identities. Black feminist thought is antiessentialist, acknowledges collective experiences and group knowledge, and is emancipatory in nature (Collins, 2000a).

Black feminist thought utilizes three themes that frame the ways in which Black women navigate their social worlds (Collins, 2000a). The first theme is the acknowledgment that, although members of other groups may have documented the experiences of Black women, Black women produce it. Second, Black feminist thought states that, although the experiences of Black women are unique to each woman, there are intersecting and shared experiences among Black women. Third, although the lives of Black women have some commonalities, other identities, such as class, sexual orientation, religion, and age, shape the ways in which these commonalities are expressed. Collins (1986, 1998, 2000a) stated that Black women are positioned as “outsiders within,” whereby they are invited into spaces where dominant groups gather (e.g., higher education institutions); however, they are silenced within these spaces. Because Black women’s voices have been silenced, particularly the voices of those who attend or have attended community colleges, operationalizing an epistemology that centers the ways in which Black women come to know was appropriate.

The outsider within refers to the social location of Black women, which grants them access to a group or community (within), however, without the same rights and privileges as other members of the group due to their race and gender (outsider status) (Collins, 1986, 2000a). Collins (1986, 2000a) posited that the historical social locations of Black women are present today as hierarchies of power, whereby Black women’s class, race, and gender place these women within social locations created by unequal power structures. For example, a Black female graduate student may describe her experiences within her academic

program as an outsider because her voice and experiences were rendered void due to the history of Black women both as a whole and within her academic department. The outsider within concept has been used in the context of studying high school students who enrolled in a community college (Williams, 2009); however, the application of the concept has not been used to study the ways in which Black female community college students navigate their academic experiences. The application of Black feminist theory broadly and the concept of outsider within specifically is appropriate for this study as it provided a framework for understanding the raced and gendered experiences of Black women. Furthermore, although Black women are enrolling in community colleges at a high rate, they are not completing their respective fields of study and, thus for this study, the outsider-within framework provided insight into how policies, programs, and practices in community colleges both encourage and discourage Black women from reaching their academic goals.

Standpoint theory is a feminist theory that acknowledges how members in marginalized communities make meaning around power in their respective social and physical locations. Specifically, there are three claims at the core of the theory, namely (a) knowledge is socially constructed, (b) minoritized groups and individuals are socially positioned to be aware of inequities, and (c) research that focuses on power should begin with the perspectives of the marginalized group (Bowell, n.d.). Although standpoint theory originated from observations of gender and cultural differences in the scientific knowledge construction, the theory legitimizes the cultural and gendered lens through which women construct knowledge (Harding, 1997).

Standpoint theory also addresses issues of power and power relations among individuals, groups, systems, and institutions. Collins (1997) stated, “Standpoint refers to

groups having shared histories based on their shared location in relations to power” p. 367). She further asserted that women are socially positioned through multiple systems of power and oppression by way of race, class, and gender and that “groups who share common placement in hierarchical power relations also share common experiences in such power relations (Collins, 1997, p. 377). This viewpoint allows for issues of institutional and systemic forms of dominance to arise. Finally, standpoint theory highlights the significance of group consciousness, group self-definition, and the role of voice. This is particularly important as “within hierarchical power relations, it seems reasonable that groups disadvantaged by systems of power might see their strength in solidarity and collective responses to their common location and subjugation” (Collins, 1997, p. 380). Aligned with Black feminist thought, it is important to note that, although Black women may have shared experiences, their reactions to the experiences may vary (Collins, 2000a).

The final body of literature that informs endarkened feminist epistemology is Black spirituality. Palmer (1983, 1999) postulated that reality and how one comes to know is a spiritual and intellectual endeavor. Palmer (1983) stated that, within individuals, there is a tension between what the eyes see and the heart knows. The eye represents the mind and its quest for knowledge, whereas the heart represents the quest for God. There are times when the eye and heart are aligned and other times when they are disjointed. This is important, as teaching and learning are best suited when one sees wholly rather than solely through the eye or heart.

Another key component of endarkened feminist epistemology is acknowledging the importance of having a vertical relationship with God and a horizontal relationship with the community. For me, this means that my relationships with God and with others are always

intersecting. Although I continue to grow in knowing who God is, one truth that was recently revealed about me is the alignment of purpose. I frequently say to others, “I try to live with purpose, on purpose, and for purpose” recognizing that my purpose may change as I gain new knowledge of self, community, and God. Learning about others and myself requires that when I feel safe I am vulnerable mentally, emotionally, and physically. It is from that space that I learned that community is not something that one can make and control but, rather, a gift that involves risk (Palmer, 1999).

Endarkened feminist epistemology unites three bodies of literature that speak to the way in which I come to construct knowledge. Combined, Black feminist thought, standpoint theory, and Black spirituality create a tapestry that intertwines the social positions, the collective and individual experiences of Black women, and a sense of responsibility as directed by the Divine. Endarkened feminist epistemology also acknowledges that knowledge construction is socially and spiritually positioned and centers that power and privilege should begin from the perspective of Black women.

As such, Dillard (2000) avowed that an endarkened feminist epistemology has the following philosophical assumptions:

1. Self-definition forms one’s participation with and responsibility to one’s community.
2. Research is both an intellectual and spiritual pursuit—a pursuit of purpose.
3. Only within the context of community does the individual appear (Palmer, 1983) and, through dialogue, continues to become.
4. Concrete experiences within everyday life form the criterion of meaning—the “matrix of meaning-making.”

5. Knowing and research extend both historically in time and outward to the world; to approach them otherwise is to diminish their cultural and empirical meaningfulness
6. Power relations—manifest as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.—structure gender, race, and other identity relations within research (pp. 673–677).

An endarkened feminist epistemology is applicable in this study as it combines critical theory, a spiritual element of coming to know, dialogue as a medium for the construction of knowledge, and a commitment to social responsibility. It centers the co-construction of knowledge and allowed the study's participants and me to be ourselves wholly.

### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Feminism**

Critical race feminism is a critical theory that examines social structures of power and oppression and centers the lives and experiences of women of color within institutional systems. Although critical race feminism allows for the unique experiences of women of color broadly and Black women specifically to surface, it also provides a framework for understanding (a) how Black women describe their persistence and retention and (b) how institutional policies and practices affect the retention and persistence of Black women attending community college.

Critical race feminism is derived from critical legal studies, critical race theory, and feminist theory (Berry, 2010; Wing, 2015). There are several core beliefs that shape this theory. First, critical race feminism claims that racism and sexism are endemic in the United States (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003, 2015) and that many times Black women experience both simultaneously. The theory questions the ways in which power and

oppression are projected onto women of color in relation to the intersections of their class, gender, race, and other social identities (e.g., religion, ability). Second, critical race feminism acknowledges the experiential knowledge of women of color and values the use of narrative and storytelling as one means of communicating that knowledge. Third, this theory is anti-essentialist and provides a framework for understanding retention and persistence from individual, group, and institutional levels. Berry (2010) asserted that “[critical race feminism] theorists strive to center those who are considered socially and politically marginalized in the dominant culture; those whose cultural identities are often placed as other become centralized in time, space and place” (p. 23).

Scholarship that includes Black women attending community colleges has usually positioned them as women of color (Jain, 2009) or solely as women (Cox & Ebbers, 2010), but rarely has scholarship focused on Black women in community colleges (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014; Walpole, Chambers, & Goss, 2014). Because Black women have been positioned in the majority of community college scholarship as either Black or female, it is important to utilize a conceptual framework that captures Black women wholly.

Intersectionality, gendered racialized microaggressions, experiential knowledge, and praxis combined allow for both individual and institutional forms of power, privilege, oppression, resistance, and agency to come into play for Black women attending community colleges. To my knowledge, critical race feminism has not been used within the context of community college scholarship despite the fact that the majority of community college students identify as students of color and female. As such, by utilizing critical race feminism for this study, the experiences and voices of Black female community college students



assisted in learning how community colleges can alter and enhance retention efforts and potentially impact Black women's retention and persistence.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality originated from Black women whose lives were affected by their intersectional identities of being both Black and female (Collins, 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1989). Specifically, intersectionality looks at Black women's lives and the ways in which Black women are oppressed socially, systemically, and politically. Rather than looking at Black women as one-dimensional individuals, either Black or female, intersectionality suggests that it is neither race nor gender that positions Black women as marginalized but, rather, the combination of both identities.

As it related to this study, Black women attending community college may be in the crux of multiple forms of oppression, specifically, gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Collins (2000b) stated, "Intersectional paradigms suggest that certain ideas and/or practices surface repeatedly across multiple systems of oppression" (p. 47–48), and these practices and beliefs may contribute to the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. are mutually constructed. Although Black women are enrolling in higher education at high rates, the fact that they are not graduating, specifically from community colleges where the majority of Black women enroll in higher education, is a cause for concern. Additionally, because many times Black women have been studied using one-dimensional positions—either Black or female but rarely both—intersectionality provides a framework for understanding the complexities of how community colleges support or deter these students from persisting to graduation. By investigating the experiences of Black women from an intersectional perspective, the goal was to bring to the forefront these students' unique needs and strengths

and to identify ways in which community colleges can be held accountable for Black women's academic success.

Intersectionality also provides a framework for unveiling systemic forms of racism and sexism, albeit individual, institutional, and structural (Crenshaw & Allen, 2014). Given the paucity of published research on institutional retention and persistence support efforts aimed at Black women attending community college, understanding how these efforts impact their educational journeys may provide insights into ways to improve institutional practices, programs, and policies in ways that meet the distinct needs of Black women.

### **Gendered Racial Microaggressions**

One of the concepts derived from critical race theory is microaggression. Microaggressions, which are “subtle and commonplace exchanges that somehow convey insulting or demeaning messages to people of color” (Constantine, 2007, p. 2), take place on college campuses and have direct impacts on students' academic performances (Solórzano et al., 2000). A qualitative study on the racial campus climate from the perspective of African American students attending baccalaureate-granting institutions found that African American students experienced microaggressions through various means such as being ignored by instructors, battling low academic expectations from instructors, and experiencing overt and covert racial discrimination when students were required to perform group projects (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Black women are susceptible to experiencing microaggressions based on their race and/or gender. Gendered racial microaggressions are rooted in negative stereotypes about Black women (Lewis et al., 2013). Stereotypes such as the strong Black woman, Jezebel, Sapphire, and welfare queen, (Collins, 2000a) are intersectional stereotypes targeted at both

the race and gender of Black women. As such, gendered racial microaggressions provide an intersectional framework and language for the unique forms of microaggressions that Black women may face.

### **Experiential Knowledge**

Critical race feminism also values the experiential knowledge of women of color broadly and Black women specifically. Experiential knowledge is valued, as it is critical to understanding and meaning making and can expose deficit-informed and deficit-framed research and claims about people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Black women's knowledge of self and the world can be informed from a myriad of sources such as art, elders, poems, music, physical movement, griots, and narratives (Collins, 1997, 2000a; Dillard, 2000; Pratt-Clarke, 2012; Rodriguez, 2006). Experiential knowledge is not only a valid form of constructing and communicating knowledge; many times it is also a method of resistance to dominant ideologies about who a Black woman is in her respective geographic location, her value, and how she sees herself in the future.

### **Critical Race Feminist Praxis**

Within critical race feminist works, praxis has been defined as the combination of theory and practice (Wing, 1990). When situated in critical race feminist theory, praxis then is the combination of action, politics, and social transformation for the betterment of women of color. Praxis could be a transformational tool for the participants because it is a tool of empowerment to eradicate classism, racism, and sexism (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), as it allows one to “analyze, re-interpret, deconstruct, and reform educational settings” (Hughes & Giles, 2010, p. 41).

Praxis is particularly important, as it can serve as a call to action for community colleges. By bridging theory and practice, particularly for Black women through the use of an epistemology and theoretical framework that values the unique and shared histories and experiences of Black women, the potential to identify ways in which community colleges can promote retention of Black women from their perspective can be transformational. Rather than dispensing cultural, historical, or experiential forms of knowledge from the research process, it can be diffused throughout the development of solutions to address issues of retention and persistence for Black women attending community college.

### **Research Methodology**

Given the nature of this study, the research design used served to center the experiences of Black women attending community college. Because the goal of this study was to explain how retention and persistence efforts can be enhanced to support Black women, a hermeneutic phenomenological was employed.

Van Manen (1990) explained that “the aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experiences into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflection re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful” (p. 36). The goal of a hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe a phenomenon from the perspective of the people living it (Greenwald, 2004). The word hermeneutic is derived from Hermes, the Greek god responsible for clarifying and interpreting messages between gods (Thompson, 1990).

A hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was appropriate for this study because it allowed for the lives of Black women to be the source of knowledge and expertise, and a light to be shined broadly on the conditions of Black women attending community

colleges. Specifically, because Black women are grouped within other literary texts by race or gender, centering their experiences and the uniqueness of their being in an intersectional way through this methodology provided a space where participants could be actively involved in the knowledge construction and meaning making processes.

There are three core philosophical positions that inform a hermeneutic phenomenology: (a) One's lifeworld mediates how one navigates the world, (b) expert knowledge and presuppositions of the researcher are vital to the construction of knowledge, and (c) knowledge is constructed by the researcher and participants. The next section will outline the key concepts of a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology study and its connection to this proposed study.

### **Lifeworld**

A lifeworld speaks to the notion that an individual's reality is influenced by the contexts or world in which that person lives. Specifically, "the lifeworld of lived experiences is both the source and object of phenomenological research" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 53). Hermeneutic phenomenology posits that the individual and collective aspects of one's life are intertwined with the social conditions in which one lives. As such, the day-to-day aspects of an individual's life, including relationships, encounters, and occurrences, are part of that person's lifeworld (Van Manen, 1990) and influence the decisions and life conditions of that person.

Within an individual's lifeworld is another important component of that person's life called situated freedom. "Situated freedom is an existential phenomenological concept that means that individuals are free to make choices, but their freedom is not absolute; it is circumscribed by the specific conditions of their daily lives" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 729).

Situated freedom is an important notion, as it acknowledges the cultural, historical, gendered, racialized, and political contexts that are intertwined, informing how one makes meaning. This is particularly important as the social, cultural, and political standpoints of Black women are informed by the aforementioned social conditions (Collins, 1997). Additionally, it debunks notions of meritocracy and inadvertently allows for the manifestations of power and privilege to surface through daily encounters.

Another component of hermeneutic phenomenological methodology is the inclusion and infusion of prior knowledge into the research process (Geanellos, 2000; Patton, 2002). This notion was particularly vital to this study's research methodology, epistemology, and theoretical frameworks, as it speaks to the experiential knowledge I have obtained as a Black woman. It also reinforces that personal knowledge is not only useful but also is necessary throughout the research process. Perhaps the most meaningful component of infusing prior knowledge into the research process is that it makes the research process meaningful. Just as I viewed research as a responsibility and a spiritual pursuit, infusing prior knowledge held me accountable to being true to who I was just as I requested that the participants do the same.

Finally, a hermeneutic phenomenology methodology is centered on co-constitutionality. Co-constitutionality asserts that meaning is articulated through an interpretive process by the researcher and participant (Koch, 1995; Patton, 2002). According to Geanellos (2000), interpretation is situated by the individual and the intersecting "horizons" of both the researcher and participant. As such, this allowed for the participants and me to have individual truths and co-construct a shared truth without a hierarchy of truth.

Additionally, truth can be centered in the cultural, historical, social, and political positions of Black women.

Utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenology methodology allowed me to understand in an in-depth manner how retention efforts at a specific community college can affect the educational experiences of Black women. A hermeneutic phenomenology provided a framework for understanding how the women persisted and were retained through their experiences from their perspective. Additionally, aligned with endarkened feminist epistemology and critical race feminism, employing a hermeneutic phenomenology allowed for the participants and me to make meaning of their experiences without a hierarchy of truth or experience.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

This study focused on the experiences of four Black women attending an urban multicampus community college. Because this study had a clearly defined focus, purposive sampling was employed. Purposive sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) allowed me to select specific criteria for the participants in this study. As such, the participants in this study fit the following criteria: (a) identified as a woman; (b) identified as being of African descent; (c) intended to earn an associate's degree; (d) had completed at least 30 credits of coursework at the research site; and (e) were at least 18 years old at the time of the study. In addition, according to Boyd (2001) and Creswell (2007), having two to 10 participants is ideal for a qualitative study, as it allows for multiple perspectives of a phenomena to be explored (Maxwell, 2012).

Participants were recruited through an institutionally sponsored retention program, an academic and personal support program, and one student organization. In addition, I worked

with leaders at the community college to identify potential participants for this study. Once the participants were selected, they were asked to sign an informed consent document (Appendix B). This study sought to describe the experiences of Black women in a way that would highlight their individual and collective understandings of their retention and persistence.

### **Participant Profiles**

One of the strengths of this study is its use of narrative in explaining the people, places, and phenomena that affected the women's persistence and retention. Aligned with the scope of this work, I chose to introduce the participants in an illustrative manner in an effort to personalize the women and help the reader see them as people. Some of the women described their strengths at length, whereas others expressed how their past decisions continued to negatively affect their educational pathways. My goal was to be honest with how the women viewed themselves, their educational aspirations, and the complexity of their lives.

#### **Alice**

Alice walked into the room. She gently pushed her small, round glasses up the bridge of her nose. "Hi Glenda." I already knew Alice through her work as a community organizer, and she sat down with a smile, as we had not seen each other in a while. She calmly pulled out her multicolored journal—the one in which she recorded her innermost thoughts and made notes for herself. "I brought this in case I need to refer to it," she stated while taking out her pen.

Wearing her shirt with the names of prolific Black women, such as Alice Walker, bell hooks, Nina Simone, Angela Davis, and Audre Lourde, she sat in quiet nervousness,



anticipating what questions she would be asked. Alice was a second-generation community college student from financially humble beginnings; her mother had attended the same community college and was currently working on her bachelor's degree at a university in town.

Alice's hair was styled in jumbo braids, the kind with extensions and placed in a high bun. Her complexion resembled honey—not the homogenized kind but the kind that comes from raw honeycombs without any manipulation. At the beginning of our interview, she laughed when she was nervous, and throughout the interviews, she took intentional pauses to collect her thoughts. Her goal was to become a social scientist and filmmaker concentrating on exploring the untold stories of the Black diaspora. Alice had high academic standards for herself, and her learning disability had taught her to exercise patience as she embarked on new adventures.

When asked about her educational path, she stated,

I decided to graduate [from high school] a year early because . . . I wasn't getting any challenge; I wasn't being challenged; it wasn't a very good environment for me. And I had seen [my mom] go through community college and totally blow everyone out of the water and be able to make huge strides and get into [Prince University], and I felt like my chances of going to community college as opposed to a 4-year university first would be . . . a really smart decision, so I thought I'd go for it. And I had mentors who didn't feel like [attending community college] was safe for me. And it was really [my mom's influence] because . . . beforehand I would never have thought that going to a community college would be someplace for me just because I got into . . . the [negative] connotations or what it looked like for people to go to community

colleges. But I made that decision and it was all because of my mom had that influence.

Alice's first experiences at AGCC occurred through a summer youth employment program she partook in twice. She stated,

I actually did a lot . . . but I wasn't doing . . . lots of face-to-face work with people and, oddly enough, with my dyslexia, it's always been that . . . doing things with filing or repetitive stuff works for me, so it was an easy time, it was an easy job, and I got to have relationships with folks through that job and through those two internships and through the program as a whole.

One of Alice's priorities was learning in a space with Black students, particularly a HBCU. She declared,

I kind of wanted to go to a HBCU and I, of course, I wasn't able to do that and we don't have a shared type of, you know, cultural collective as Black people on the campus, so it's just basically being able to, again, have this independency while on campus. And I . . . watch other people be catered to, but learn how to navigate yourself. . . . I feel like [administrators, faculty, and classmates are] kind of tired of hearing about things pertaining to Black people, and yet, I feel like there's less of an urgency to help build things that are going to sustainably give the benefit for us as well as like cultural visibility on campus."

### **Raine**

Raine walked into the room carrying a heavy science textbook with tabs full of notes and what appeared to be a heavy backpack. Wearing her black and white Metallica t-shirt, she sat down with a warm smile. "Hi. I'm Raine," she shared. Her hair was styled in

medium-sized, shoulder-length extensions with gold clasps that cradled her warm brown skin. She put down her school materials and took out a pen in case she needed to write out ideas. “I was studying for my science exam before you came. I really like my science class and science teacher,” she explained.

“Who is Raine,” she stated while looking for words to succinctly explain who she was. She continued,

Someone called me an alternative Black girl the other day. I am not sure if I embrace it. I mean, I guess they said that because how many Black girls do you know that like anime and rock music. I had never had anyone call me that before. Maybe I’m alternative?

Raine was a second-generation community college student whose mother graduated from and was now working for the community college she attended. “I worry about the cost of college even though I don’t have to pay tuition because my mom works here,” she shared, continuing with, “My mom pretty much helps me with everything related to school.” She went on,

I enrolled in community college right after high school. I had an option to go to a 4-year but thought the community college would be better because my mom went here and it’s cheaper. I want to be a teacher, and a lawyer, and a lobbyist or politician—mainly because I didn’t have many Black teachers and I still don’t even now.

She explained with excitement, “I also want to be a lawyer and lobbyist to help make education and living conditions better for people.” She added, “I want to transfer to a HBCU or the teaching college in the state—it all depends on how much it costs.”

Raine noted,

My mom also works at [Aspen Glenn Community College]. I saw her go to community college here while I was growing up. I pretty much go to my mom for most of my school stuff—like picking classes and clubs and stuff.

She paused with a smile, and then added,

I don't know where I would be without my mom. She is . . . my biggest supporter. I literally wouldn't know how to find anything on campus without her. She is also very proud of me and I would never want to disappoint her.

Raine was from the Midwest. She had never lived in a house and talked extensively about moving from apartment to apartment throughout her life. Recently, Raine had been elected to a leadership role in her honor society, an accomplishment of which she was proud.

### **Tasha**

“Hi. I'm Tasha,” was how Tasha introduced herself in a somewhat monotone voice. She sat down and looked around the room noticing the clock, table, and tree peeking through the window. She stated, “I have a son, he's one of the smartest babies. I am graduating this semester and am excited about that.” Tasha explained,

I work and major in the medical field. College is expensive and I have my son, so I have to be an example for him so he can't say, “My mom never taught me that”—yes I did, and I want him to not be a stereotype.

Tasha recounted her community college career,

I can't really remember all of when I started college because that's when I was in the domestic violence situation and sometimes the times and years get confusing. Now, some of it's a little blurry 'cause . . . talking about all the abuse and stuff, but

sometimes I remember bits and pieces. I know this is my second—no third time at college.

She also described,

I've always . . . exceeded in everything I've done. . . . When his dad started getting worse with . . . the abuse and stuff . . . was . . . when I started going into college or . . . senior year of going into college, that's when . . . everything just started going downhill. . . . I wasn't doing good in anything . . . I didn't even look like . . . I don't know who that person was. . . . I was just living at the moment, like I wasn't living my life or what I wanted to live it for. I was . . . living for somebody else almost. And . . . once I broke free and I let go . . . with everything. . . . I start becoming that old girl . . . who got the straight As and was doing wonderful in school but, at the same time . . . I developed into something . . . I evolved into something even better because I learned from my experience and I'm a lot stronger from that.

Tasha explained with a smile on her hazelnut skin,

I would say now that I am graduating that I am extremely proud of myself for all that I overcame. And when I look at my grades I know I can achieve my dreams and no one and nothin' is gonna stop me 'cause I [have] already came this far and I know where I am going.

She added,

I guess you could say that my mom helped me see that I could go to college because she went to community college while I was growing up and I saw her and my dad somehow make it all work—raising kids, school, and work.

Tasha's mother, a nurse, and to some extent her father played a large role in supporting her as she transitioned out of her abusive relationship and focused on college.

She stated,

I have my parents and . . . my nurse from visiting nurses; she was helping me out and . . . she's still in my life today, even though . . . I'm not her client anymore, but . . . she still touches bases with me and she helps with whatever I need help with still.

[It's] like I have my little circle of my supporters who cheer me on.

Tasha's relationship with her visiting nurse validated her aspirations to go into the medical field. Although not required for her degree, she chose to work in the medical field to get hands-on experience and make sure her career path would be fulfilling. She was proud of her work, stating her patients

really appreciate that [personal attention] 'cause I take the time and I get to know them. I don't just treat them like a number like I see other people do; I treat them as an individual and I will sit in there for 20–30 minutes and have this little conversation with [them] and don't mind. So I mean I just make it really personal.

Tasha had completed the necessary hours for her to be a mid-level healthcare professional and aspired to earn a graduate degree in the medical field. She noted,

I'm going to follow my dreams regardless . . . I don't care if I was living in a box like or in some kind of shelter . . . I would do what I have to do to get myself where I want to be and I'm not going to let that stop me from going to school. . . . I [have come] too far to let something stop me now.

**Janet**

“Do you mind if we sit by the window? I have a thing about always being able to see my destiny,” Janet said as she walked in the room with an oversized hoodie while holding her keys in her hands. She continued, “There is something about it. I just have to see my destiny. Even in class I have to sit by the door or window.”

She described herself:

Who is Janet? I am a mother of two girls. I made good grades all throughout high school. My mom went to community college—she is almost done actually—and last year we had three generations at the same community college. I heard there is a social science program I can transfer to in town, but I just learned about it—that’s all I know about it. I guess I should find someone and ask them about it. I am a little worried because I am about to be out of financial aid, so I don’t know how I am going to pay for it.

Reflecting on her college career, Janet explained, “I can’t really remember all the colleges I went to or when I attended them. I first went when I graduated high school. I had my daughter, was runnin’ the streets and got arrested during midterms.” Janet and I talked through and mapped her college career to discover she had been in and out of college over the past 10 years, had attended a community college four times and a for-profit college, and she had enrolled in a public university but it “didn’t count” because she “went for the financial aid check.”

Janet spoke extensively about navigating her responsibilities as a student with a criminal past. She stated,

Well my [parole officer] didn't want me to go to school. . . . She . . . obviously knew I had the grades and everything . . . checked my attendance and all that so I don't know. . . . If the school could have done more, I don't know what exactly more they could have done but maybe persuade the [parole officer] like, "There'd be some jail time she could do afterwards, after she . . . finishes the semester before the next semester" or something. . . . So, maybe. It's like the only thing I can think of. But I do believe that if I hadn't [gone] to jail those two times, I would have passed the semester both times, I'm pretty sure."

She added,

Grades [were] all right [when I started college] and then . . . one day, I just woke up and . . . I didn't want to go anymore. I get good grades now. The problem is that, way back when I was in college but not focused, I made good grades but kept getting arrested near midterms or finals so it's basically like I am always starting over from square one. I need to get this piece of paper—whatever it means—so that I can get a job."

### **Site Selection**

Aspen Glenn Community College is a multicampus community college that serves a diverse student body. Fifty-five percent of the student body comprises women and, consistent with national trends, the majority of students are enrolled part time. AGCC was chosen as the research site because of its growing student body, its central location within the state, and its alignment between my interests and those of the administrators. There was a growing concern about how the community college could better support its students, and my research had the potential to help fill this need.



## **Data Collection**

Within hermeneutic phenomenology, it is the responsibility of the researcher to help illuminate the essence, or core meanings, and experiences of the phenomena being studied; therefore, I incorporated multiple data collection methods throughout this study. Informed by the research questions and research design, there were four forms of data used in this study: (a) a biographical questionnaire, (b) counternarratives using data from semistructured interviews, (c) a visual counternarrative, and (d) public documents and policies at AGCC.

### **Biographical Questionnaire**

A biographical questionnaire is “a self report data-collection instrument that research participants fill out as part of a research study” (Johnston & Christensen, 2008, p. 170). This form of qualitative data collection is especially helpful in understanding some of the nuances of students’ lives, such as membership in clubs and organizations and educational history, and when used in exploratory research or on a topic. A biographical questionnaire was used in this study to gain insights into the participants’ backgrounds. Some principles of a good questionnaire are that it match the research objectives and use language that is familiar to the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The questionnaire was developed from related literature and based on prior knowledge I had gained both from working at a community college and researching Black women. The questionnaire focused on six areas: (a) demographic data, (b) educational history, (c) co-curricular activities, (d) family history, (e) in-class activities, and (f) out-of-class activities. An outline of the questions that were included in the questionnaire is shown in Table 3 and Appendix C).

Table 3

*Demographic Questionnaire Focal Areas*

Demographic data	Educational history
Name	Number of semesters spent at AGCC
Pseudonym	Name(s) of higher education institutions attended (to include AGCC campuses)
Age	Course of study/major/certification
Occupation	GPA
Number of hours worked	Number of credits currently enrolled in
Pell Grant eligibility	Degree and career to which they aspire
Number of dependents (if any)	
ZIP code	
Enrollment intensity	Co-curricular activities
	List of co-curricular activities (e.g., honor's, African American Student Alliance) Campus leadership positions
Family history	Use of campus programs and services
Parent's highest education level	

**Interviews**

Wilson and Washington (2007) explicitly stated that there is a need for research methods in phenomenological studies to align with Black women's life experiences and ways of knowing. Blee and Taylor (2002) referred to an interview as a "guided conversation" (p. 92) during which the researcher "elicits specific types of information" (p. 92). A series of three semistructured interviews with each participant were particularly useful in this study, as they provided "greater depth of information [and] the opportunity to discover the respondent's experiences and the interpretations of reality" (Blee & Taylor p. 92). Semistructured interviews can be used to counter biased institutional written materials or data sources (Blee & Taylor, 2002) and highlight counternarratives from dominant groups. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix D.

The interview protocol was informed by phenomenological (Moustakas, 1994) and narrative biographical (Creswell, 2007) methods. Using a narrative biographical approach to interview questions can uncover the essence of who the participants are and situates their experiences within their cultural, historical, and personal experiences (Creswell, 2007). In addition, using narrative biographical interview questions allowed me to re-story the participants' experiences and link them to the processes, policies, and practices employed at the community college.

The first semistructured interview with each participant consisted of five sections: (a) life history, (b) retention, (c) persistence, (d) admissions processes and in-class experiences, and (e) the participant's perspective of how the community college could meet her needs. Drawing from critical race feminism and phenomenology, the aim of the initial interview was to begin to understand who the woman was, why she chose to attend a community college, and her experiences within the context of the community college.

The second semistructured interview with each participant built upon the first interview, focused on the details of her experiences, and included a visual component, thus making it a multidisciplinary counterstory. Each participant created two visual counterstories of the ways in which both her support systems and AGCC promoted persistence and deterred her from persisting. A visual counterstory (Spencer, 2011) is a visual representation of a space, thought, relationship, or idea. Visual counterstories allowed the participants and me to "see" the ways in which their support systems and educational resources aided and dissuaded the women from remaining in college and, for those who had stopped out, what encouraged them to re-enroll into college. These counterstories also provided insights into and context

for how the women understood and made meaning of their persistence and retention based on how they saw themselves and their worlds.

The women in this study each created two visual counterstories. Consistent with critical race feminism and the phenomenological methodology, counterstories, within the context of critical race feminism, are unique in that they are multidisciplinary (Wing, 2015) and allow for the researcher to infuse multiple forms of communication such as poetry, art, or music, to name a few (Wing, 2015). The first visual counterstory for each woman comprised her higher education journeys and important actors in her persistence and retention. The second visual counterstory was an illustration of support and motivations to return to college both during the semester the study was conducted and over time. Creating visual counterstories are beneficial because they allow for sense making and aid in cognitive processing, can personalize narratives and experiences, are a form of thick description, and provide evidence of existence (Spencer, 2011). The visual counterstories were also important data, as they allowed the participants to center their voices through visuals.

Counternarratives, sometimes referred to as counterstories or counterstorytelling, are powerful tools, as they allow individuals, such as Black women, to name their own reality, challenge dominant ideologies, build community, and transform belief systems (Delgado, 1989). Derek Bell (1987) used counterstories to illustrate legal inequities at the individual and systemic levels from the perspective of marginalized voices. Additionally, according to Berry (2010), “adherents of [critical race feminism] support storytelling or counterstory as a means of understanding multiple positionalities of individuals or groups of individuals, particularly those stories of socially and politically marginalized persons living at the intersections of identities” (p. 25).

To create the visual counternarratives, the women first reflected on the people, places, and spaces that impacted their educational experiences. The women then drew or jotted down words and images of their experiences (see Appendix E). The women then responded to two broad based questions about what they shared in their first interview. After they completed their drawing, I asked them to share the story of the illustration, and I asked them about the composition of their narrative, noting things such as order, size of images, connections, and colors. As the women spoke, they added more to their narrative, without any prompting by me, as they made meaning of their experiences.

The final interview concentrated on meaning making. Because the experiences of Black women attending community colleges is an emerging area of study, it was important that the interview process be designed in such a way that I could address the research questions at the individual, group, and institutional levels.

Drawing upon endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000), I used dialogue as an essential tool for knowledge construction, connecting Black women, and allowing for various perspectives on a specific topic to arise. Specifically, I asked questions about the meaning of their involvement in the retention programs and how their participation affected their larger educational aspirations.

### **Analytical Process**

To analyze the data, I began by reflecting on and journaling about my preconceived notions of Black women's experiences attending community college so that I was keenly aware of my own biases. After I completed each interview, I listened to the recordings repeatedly and had the transcripts transcribed. Horizontalization, the process of highlighting statements and stories that described how the women experienced retention and persistence,

was completed. During the horizontalization phase, all the data were given the same value unless a participant instructed me otherwise. Following horizontalization, I grouped the statements into clusters of meaning for each woman. To illustrate the experience of retention and persistence for each participant, I wrote a textual description of the women's experiences and imaginative variation, i.e., looking at the women's descriptions from various perspectives, which was used to provide additional context for the women's descriptions (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

One of the core elements of a hermeneutic phenomenological research methodology is the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle is a fluid analysis process that involves interpreting, writing reflective notes, and reading (Laverty, 2003). Qualitative research is an emergent process (Patton, 2002), and the resulting knowledge is constructed by the researcher and the participants (Koch, 1995). Throughout this process, it was important that I be transparent about how my experiences may have impacted the analysis of the study (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002).

### **Goodness and Trustworthiness**

Goodness and trustworthiness are essential to conducting quality research (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Patton, 2002). According to Arminio and Hultgren (2002), within a phenomenological methodology the essence of goodness should be embodied through a complementary research process. Specifically, the authors asserted that the essence of goodness comprises six intersecting components: (a) epistemology and theory that are complementary and theory that is used as a guide to narrow the scope of the study and (b) research methodology that grounds the study and is aligned with the epistemology. Additionally, the methodology is connected to the research methods, as follows: (c) the

techniques of data collection are outlined; (d) the researcher is reflective and mindful of power dynamics between the participants and the researcher; (e) meaning making is guided by the methodology, data collection methods, and is a collaborative process with participants; and (f) strong and purposeful implications are made in an effort to “improve the lives of others” (p. 450).

In concert with arguing the goodness of this study, in previous sections of this chapter I have outlined how the epistemology and theory were aligned, how the methodology complemented the epistemology, and how the data collection was aligned with the aforementioned components of this study. Additionally, the analytical process was aligned with the design of the study.

During the second and third round of interviews, I addressed interpretive validity with the women (Maxwell, 1992). Interpretive validity requires that the meanings of the experiences be captured according to the perspectives of the participants and the researcher. This allowed for discussion of my truths and the participants’ truths to surface as it related to the topic of persistence.

It is also important to reiterate that co-constitutionality, that is, meanings derived by the researcher and participants (Koch, 1995), took place throughout the research process. As such, while being mindful of power dynamics between the participants and myself, I provided brief summaries of the transcripts and findings of the study to the participants and asked them to provide further clarification on the findings. Finally, one of the core precepts of hermeneutic methodology is that my thoughts, experiences, and observations should be incorporated into the research process. Therefore, I created an audit trail through journaling, jotting down notes, and creating color-coded diagrams for each research question and plotted

out how the main themes arose (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). In addition, my entries in a reflexive journal after each interview and throughout the research process served to track my thoughts and interpretation processes (Rodgers, 2008).

Peer review is another tool I used to strengthen the goodness of the study (Merriam, 2009). A peer reviewer is a colleague who looks at the data and “assesses whether the findings are plausible based on the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 220). For this study, one of my colleagues, Dr. Carla A. McNelly, who holds a doctorate in Critical and Socio-Cultural Studies in Education, assisted in my verbal analysis of the data, reviewed the themes and supporting data for clarity, helped organize the data, and asked questions pertaining to how the data connected to my theoretical and epistemological frameworks. She and I also differentiated between what the participants said and my analysis of how they answered the research questions based on their responses.

### **Limitations**

Acknowledging the limitations of a study is another way to foster trustworthiness in the research process. This study provides insights into how Black women describe their retention and persistence, aligned with the central beliefs of both endarkened feminist epistemology and critical race feminism; however, the experiences of Black women were not homogenous. This study investigated the experiences of a small sample: four Black women. Because Black women are currently enrolling in college at a high rate, there is no implication that the experiences of these four women are somehow reflective of all Black women attending community college.

I was deliberate in sharing with the participants my understanding of their experiences and, together, we adjusted, reimagined, and questioned the meanings behind



their experiences to get at a collective understanding. I made every effort to represent the women's individual and collective experiences through the transcripts, analytic memos, and personal reflections.

Another limitation of this study is it focused on intersectionality, specifically race and gender. Intersectionality was an appropriate tool for this study; however, other identities such as the women's income levels, the length of their community college careers, and Janet's identity as a felon also played a role in how the women described their retention and persistence. Although I incorporated these identities into the findings of the study when applicable, I did not delve into the roles of being a felon, a domestic abuse survivor, or a member of the working poor economic class, as I did not want to exacerbate any negative feelings about the participants' current realities as they related to those identities.

This chapter focused on the research design of this study. Specifically, it focused on the study's epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, analytical framework, and participant profiles. Chapter 4 provides a presentation and discussion of the findings of this study.

## **CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to understand how four Black women described their persistence, retention, how institutional retention efforts affected their ability to persist, and how institutions could be transformed to enhance the academic success of Black women attending community college. This chapter is organized into two sections: (a) findings and (b) an analytical discussion of the research questions. The first section presents the findings of this study using the experiences of the women; it is organized by the five themes that emerged from the data and a summary of the themes. Each theme is named and supported with quotes from the participants. The second component of this chapter provides an analysis of the research questions using the data, findings, and literature; it is organized by research question, supporting data, and when applicable, literature and theoretical alignments. I chose to organize the chapter this way to show how the themes emerged from the participants' descriptions of retention and persistence in related but distinct ways, how their retention influenced their perceptions of their ability to persist, and how their experiences shaped their recommendations for institutional practices, programs, and policies.

### **Findings**

The findings of this study are presented under five major themes: (a) establishing rapport with faculty and decision-makers (b) advising and selecting courses, (c) connecting academics to life, (d) if time is money, why am I wasting both?, and (d) seeing myself in the curriculum. The first theme, establishing rapport with faculty and decision-makers, illustrates how the support of faculty in the personal and academic success of the women in this study affected their educational and personal goals. Within the first theme are two subthemes: interactions with faculty, which describes how faculty influenced retention, and

knowing decision-makers, which describes how knowing people in positions of power influenced the participants' persistence. The second theme, advising and selecting courses describes the role advisors and academic intervention professionals played in the decisions the women made when selecting courses. Within this theme is one subtheme, bridging gaps of knowledge, which describes how the participants and advisors navigated the educational landscape of AGCC.

Connecting academics to life, the third theme, is a representation of how the women in this study were both rewarded and punished for pursuing aspirations that connected their lives within and outside of college. Related to this theme is the subtheme, resiliency, which describes how the women embodied resiliency in ways that held AGCC accountable for the institution's actions. The fourth theme—if time is money, why am I wasting both?—focuses on the actors and conditions that shaped how the women progressed in their academic careers broadly. There are two subthemes related to this theme: time and money, which describes the immediate position of time, and short-term commitment to a long-term goal, which describes the long-term return on investment for the time and energy spent at AGCC. The last theme, seeing myself in the curriculum, serves to illustrate how the women sought to envision themselves on campus and the consequences associated with making spaces for themselves. Related to this theme is the subtheme pedagogy and intersectionality, which describes how the participants appreciated and fought for the inclusion of Black women in the curricula.

The women described their retention in the main theme of establishing relationships with faculty and decision-makers and subsequent subthemes. They also described their retention in the subtheme of time and money under the major theme of if time is money, why

am I wasting both? Finally, the women described their retention in the theme of seeing myself in the curriculum under the subtheme of pedagogy and intersectionality.

Furthermore, the women described their persistence in the two main themes of advising and selecting courses and connecting academics to life and also as a short-term commitment to a long-term goal, a subtheme of if time is money, why am I wasting both? (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Themes and Sub-Themes Related to Retention and Persistence*

Retention		Persistence	
Theme	Subtheme	Theme	Subtheme
Establishing relationships with faculty and decision-makers	Interactions with faculty Knowing the decision-makers	Advising and selecting courses	Bridging gaps of knowledge
If time is money, why am I wasting both?	Time and money	If time is money, why am I wasting both?	Short-term commitment to a long-term goal
Seeing myself in the curriculum	Pedagogy and intersectionality	Connecting academics to life	Resilience

**Establishing Relationships with Faculty and Decision-Makers**

Consistent with Strayhorn and Johnson’s (2014) study, the findings from the present study demonstrated that frequent and positive interactions with faculty members positively affected the women’s satisfaction in college. I expand on this notion to suggest that positive and frequent interactions with faculty not only influenced their community college experiences but were also one of the key reasons why the women returned to college. Although Strayhorn and Johnson provided insight into “what” can positively affect Black women’s retention, the women in the present study described “how” their relationships with faculty affected their persistence.

The professors described by the women were personally invested in the women's success, exhibited behaviors that supported their personal goals, and made accommodations for them to receive help with assistance that aligned with the women's availability. For Raine, Janet, and Tasha, the relationships they had with key faculty extended beyond the content of the course and reflected more of an investment in the women's personal and academic experiences.

Raine spoke highly of her science professor. Raine, a self-professed "teacher's pet" who never saw herself as a scientist or as excelling in science courses, explained that she was currently taking advanced science courses with the same professor. She noted,

I think [my science professor is] really happy to see . . . a minority student in their class. I have one chemistry instructor from last semester. He really likes me and I think it . . . some of it was because . . . he was happy that I was someone he had seen before succeed in his classes maybe.

Janet offered similar sentiments about her psychology professor and added that their relationship extended to her having her professor's telephone number so that she could connect with her outside of class time. She stated, "I got one psychology teacher I take for all my psychology classes. . . . I have her cell phone number [and] we talk off campus."

Tasha also stated that she had not only taken all of her psychology courses with one professor but also that the trust she had in him had changed her life. She had begun going to therapy and got to a point where her therapist could no longer assist her. She reached out to her psychology professor guidance and he responded. She explained,

I had [the psychology professor] a semester before and . . . then, when I was about three months pregnant, I started going to therapy and . . . by then . . . with that

therapist . . . I wasn't getting anywhere . . . and he helped me find a new therapist [who] would actually help me and so that's who I've been going to. So . . . I talked to him about everything. . . . He helps me with whatever I need help with. Like if I needed a babysitter or if I needed somebody to keep my son, he would keep him for me. . . . I trust him . . . with my whole life, I really do. . . . He's just been there for me.

The relationships the women had with their professors played a key role in their decisions to return to college the next semester and to advance in their respective disciplines.

### **Connecting Academics to Life**

Wild and Ebbers (2002) suggested that colleges should establish their own definitions of retention based on student aspirations, the state in which they operate, and intentionally created retention efforts that meet the needs of students. Janet, Alice, Raine, and Tasha all suggested that the course and program experiences that aligned with their career goals or life passions aided in their retention at AGCC.

Janet explained that her work–study job at AGCC had played a vital role in her retention, self-esteem, and validation that she was employable. She also explained that her work–study job expanded her knowledge of how to work effectively with different types of people. As someone who was working in the social sciences, learning these skills was beneficial for her. She stated,

That work–study job has saved me. Seriously. I meet people; I come across instructors, people [who] have been teachers [who] also work there. And I do my homework at the time . . . working on one of my assignments or something for classes—their input helps me out a lot.

Alice, a community organizer, spoke very candidly about the transformation AGCC was undergoing with regard to engagement in community events focused on race:

I was really happy to see AGCC try to put an emphasis on the race events because I've seen that would be something that they kind of stepped away from . . . or not wanting to do them because they're controversial, [and] this is right out of the mouth of AGCC staff. . . . In the past, they said that these things are controversial, so that's why they hadn't done them. So, I'm happy to see it being introduced now.

She further stated that, although she was happy that AGCC had intentionally engaged AGCC students in activities focused on racial inequality, in the past she was singled out for following her passion:

I think everything that they've talked about in terms of race, I've already either been included in or invited to. And so [it] just kind of makes me think about when I was trying to avidly support having discussions around race on campus with campaigns [and] they got shut down. But now they see that I'm capable of doing things outside of this school, and I'm very well versed in what's going on in the community, as in terms of things that are bridging race together within the community—so much so that I will be [the] one to e-mail them first about things or [a senior administrator] will say, “You know this is going on?” [and] I say “Ya, I'll be on a panel; can't wait to see you.”

Unlike Janet and Alice, Raine described how she was invited by a program leader to attend a legislative session. The event was one of the signature programs of the year, and she was honored that the administrator remembered that she wanted to be a lawyer, legislator and lobbyist. She shared,

I actually went to a legislative seminar recently and it was really fun. I got to meet . . . a lot of legislators and talk to them. I think the program was really good, and so it did play a role in me wanting to stay at AGCC. . . . I don't know if I would get [the legislative experience] anywhere else, like get these kind of experiences anywhere else. . . . So it was . . . a good opportunity to actually meet people [who] I wanted to work with eventually, 'cause I want to work in the House at the Capitol here, and I met people [who] do work in the Capitol, and so I asked some questions like "[what] were their daily . . . routines?" and stuff, so . . . I was glad I got that. And the only way I did get that is because another advisor recommended me. And so [a senior administrator] recommended me. And only a certain number of people could go. She thought of me.

Tasha shared that she had signed up to attend a trip to the flagship institution in the state, Flag University (pseudonym). During our first interview, Tasha shared how one of the opportunities AGCC provided through one of its signature programs was campus visits, especially to Flag University. Tasha was weeks away from graduating and had not yet decided if she was going to enroll in BeyDay University (pseudonym), Prince University (pseudonym), or Flag University to continue her education. She had shared with her advisor, the coordinator of the campus visit, that she was considering Flag University for her master's degree, which may have contributed to her being bumped from her spot. She explained,

I was supposed to go to [Flag University], right, for a college visit. . . . And then like the day before, I get [an] e-mail, "Oh, I'm sorry, we gave your spot to somebody else because we're only helping people who are looking for their bachelor's and you're going further but looking in your career." I'm sorry but [BeyDay University] is not



my set school yet. [Prince University] is still an open option, and [Flag University] does have a bachelor's program in the medical field as well. So therefore, why can't I go?

Obviously upset about not being able to attend the campus visit, she explained how it made her feel:

It made me furious. . . . I was really pissed off about it because . . . I signed up before you did. So therefore, if I chose to give up my spot, that's one thing, but I didn't choose that. Like you picked that option for me without even talking to me or confirming anything with me. You just made a decision, and I don't like that, and it's just like, okay . . . you may get like close to 100% of people graduating with their associate's degree, but how many people do you really get graduating from your program after you've helped them get into their bachelor's program?

The participants shared that connecting their personal goals and interests to the community college experiences not only validated their academic goals at the community college level but also connected them with regard to their greater goals associated with career exposure, skill development, educational aspirations, and community transformation. The women also shared some of the consequences they experienced when the institution's promises were not fulfilled and/or their passions were ignored.

### **Advising and Selecting Courses**

Alice, Janet, Raine, and Tasha all described, in detail, their advising experiences. The academic advisor and/or academic intervention professional for each of these women played a key role in their learning and decision-making processes.

Alice, who at one point in her career was on academic probation, described her experiences with her advisor. She was in a program for underrepresented minorities, the aim of which was to increase the retention and graduation rates of students who traditionally had not excelled academically. Alice had had three advisors in the program and, according to the program's requirements, she was not allowed to be advised by anyone outside of the program's staff. Alice shared what her experience with advising had been like:

My advisor . . . basically told me that I would never be able to finish school and that I would never be able to take on as many credit hours as I could and I would never be competent enough to excel in these classes. . . . Oh, I'm taking too many credits and that I'll never be able to finish. . . . She said I am incompetent; she said that I would never be able to excel in any of my classes. Same advisor who saw that I had all A's in the class . . . all spring semester . . . but . . . this was coming straight out of her mouth. . . . My advisor before her had me in the wrong classes, so it's taken a whole year to get those things done so I can have them aligned for the same college that I wanted to go to when she was advising me. This is time and money that I'm losing because of an advisor. . . . It makes me want nothing to do with her, but I can't . . . take that route, and it's sad because I have to stay in this weird spot just because I know that I'm gaining something . . . by [my] academic career. It makes me upset that she's the only person that I have to be advised by. It most certainly makes me want to go out and continue this route of independency that I've found myself on or within throughout my time at AGCC.

Janet did not have an official advisor throughout her academic career but, rather, described her academic intervention professional as someone who looked over the courses

she had selected and occasionally asked why she chose specific courses, but overall she was her own advisor. Janet had gone to the same academic intervention professional for over five years and Janet trusted her. She explained,

I still don't know the process [of picking classes] 'cause I haven't sat down with anyone because I'm so used to picking my classes. I just pick 'em, go in there, talk to [the academic intervention professional] about them. I pick those classes and, obviously, I'm doing something right because I think [that one class] was only one that she said something about . . . of the classes that I picked and [she] asked me why did I pick it.

Janet's lack of knowledge about how to select courses had direct implications for her mother and her daughter, whose courses she also was selecting. During the interview she began to identify that choosing courses alone may not have been the best decision for her in the long term. She noted,

I do my financial aid. I pick my mom's classes, so my daughter's financial aid, I pick her classes. . . . I just never really thought about [picking my classes]. I mean, I don't have a problem with doing it. I thought I was supposed to do it. But as far as knowing what to take that would transfer over, that's where now I'm having a problem.

Tasha had a similar experience navigating the selection of a major without the support of an advisor. She described how she identified and chose a major and selected her courses and how an advisor assisted her after she had chosen her path. Tasha also explained how there were various degrees and credentials she could take related to her major:

Because it's like they have the stand-alone programs, the diploma program, and they have like different programs in the medical field, and you have to know which one you're looking for and the stand alone was associate's degree in nursing. . . . [In] each program . . . there's a certain amount of terms you have to take. Like if you're doing . . . the [licensure program] one or the diploma one . . . there's certain classes you have to take, and it's just like "Why don't you just have one program?"

Tasha further described how she evaluated the multitude of programs in the medical field. AGCC had three programs in Tasha's chosen career path: the stand-alone program would earn her an associate's degree, and the licensure program and diploma programs were certificate programs and would have lower earning potential. She commented,

There's no point in doing a diploma program [and license program], and I'm like, "Just keep it simple, an associate's degree, that's all you can get." But it's not like that. It's like you have to really read it and really know what you're looking for. 'Cause at first, it took me a while to figure it out, 'cause I'm like, "Okay, what's the difference between this, this, and this?" And then I start reading it, and I was like, "Okay, I don't want the diploma, I don't want a [licensure program], I need an associate's."

Once Tasha figured out the differences in the degree types, she contacted advisors at multiple campuses in hopes of having an advisor confirm her understanding of the programs and answer her questions. She recalled,

And so that's when I figured out what the stand-alone program was and then I kind of had to keep asking questions to different advisors, and sometimes I'll get misled all over the place, and I'm like, "Okay, so you don't know what to do to help me" and . . .

. and they're like, "Well, we don't concentrate in that field." And I'm like, "I'm sorry, you're an advisor, you should be able to concentrate in all of the fields of any degree somebody's getting." . . . So then I have to call up to [different campuses] or somewhere and get . . . some questions answered. . . . [The advisors] could give me some accurate information, which I kind of did get some accurate information, but it wasn't too good at all to me. So I just kind of searched it out on my own. And then when I met an advisor . . . there really wasn't too much for her to do because I . . . had everything done. And so all I really had to do was just set out, make out my last two semesters for fulfilling the rest of my requirements, and I was done.

Raine had two advisors: one from a national student leadership organization and one from a national student success program. She aspired to transfer to a HBCU and, when she was asked about her overall view of the role of advisors, she stated,

One thing [my advisor] did do, the last meeting that I went with her or met with her, she called one of the [potential transfer] schools, the head of the social science department and really just like talked to them for like 25 minutes. . . . We talked to the chair. So maybe actually contacting schools a little more would help. I feel like especially for out-of-state schools, it's really weird because you don't know if your class is going to transfer, you don't know . . . what tests or whatever you need to take. So maybe trying to make it a little more personalized by actually going out and talking to other advisors on other campuses that the student wants to go to or the student wants to go to, I feel like maybe that'll help . . . advisor-to-advisor discussions about a specific student to make it easier to understand what that student needs to do to get there.

Tasha, who at one time was on academic probation, had had two advisors and one academic intervention advisor. She shared how navigating courses and advice from personnel could be confusing. In particular, she noted how she not only got conflicting information but sometimes the advisors did not take into consideration life implications for taking courses, such as travel time to various campuses to complete the coursework. She noted,

And I think the only thing that could be . . . a downfall is . . . sometimes you might get mixed messages from different advisors, depending on who you go to because they may not know . . . the ins and outs of that program that you're taking so that can be a downfall. . . . I had one advisor tell me . . . with the foreign language . . . she didn't tell me I had other options to take [different classes] for my humanities courses. . . . [Another advisor said], "You don't even have to do this. You can just take the history class and that fulfills that part." And I'm like, "Oh, really?" And so that made my life a lot easier 'cause . . . I don't have to travel. . . . So I'm like, ya, we'll figure it out but . . . regardless I'm going to pass either way 'cause I want to graduate so . . . I got to make it work. But that made it a lot easier 'cause I didn't know I could substitute that with a history class and so nobody told me that. But that's like a prime example of kind of you get mixed messages from different advisors.

Whether the women utilized an advisor or academic intervention professional, the guidance these personnel provided to the participants was directly connected to where the students currently were in their programs of study and their future aspirations.

### **If Time Is Money, Why Am I Wasting Both?**

The affordability of community colleges has been named as one of the key reasons students attend these institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), and financial aid can play a determining role in whether students continue with their education (Dowd, 2003; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Perna, 1998, 2002). For each woman in the study, there was a connection between the fees associated with staying in college, her knowledge of institutional practices, future financial planning, and lack of support from administrators. These factors posed challenges for these women to stay in college.

Tasha describes her decision to stay in college as a business decision:

I think it's crazy just to go for your [prerequisite courses] . . . when you could just get your AA and do everything in your AA, do all those medical requirements classes that you can get in that degree and then transfer over somewhere to like [BeyDay University] and be done in 2 years and you'd have your BSN instead of just an associate's. . . . I mean, it's kind of looking at it as a business decision to me personally. And then you make more money quicker; you're off in the field.

She elaborated on her point of time and money by sharing:

If I stayed at AGCC, it would take me 6 years to get my bachelor's all together . . . with my AA and all that. So that would be 6 years. If I go to [Prince University], it would take me 5 years. And if I go to [BeyDay University], it would take me 4. [BeyDay University] is cheaper. [Prince University] and [BeyDay University] are about the same amount of money, about \$24,000 a year. So if I go to [BeyDay University], I will be done in 2 years, if I go to [Prince University], 3 years. [BeyDay University] has better test scores than [Prince University] does, so that's leaning me

more toward [BeyDay University] and the fact that I'm saving a whole \$24,000. Ya, and that's like a big deal. . . . That's a lot of money. . . . That's a big difference when I could be going out there, working in the field, making that money and more. . . . No, I'll go the cheaper route. And I hear people go "Oh, I got kids and this and that" . . . I got a kid too. . . . I understand you got more, but if you think about it in the long run, that way's a lot cheaper for you to just go on and get your BSN instead of doing it in 6 years, and you're spending way more money. And by then, probably the school's going to go up anyway for tuition, so you might as well go on and do it while it's cheaper. So I'm like, "The price will go up."

Even though Tasha thought of her educational plan and finances congruently, she also shared how the actions of a teacher had had financial consequences for her. She shared an interaction she had with a professor:

Last semester, I came into the semester really sick. . . . I e-mailed the teacher 'cause I missed 2 weeks, and I e-mailed him, and I was like, "What do I need to do to stay caught up 'cause . . . besides my reading, is there anything I'm missing?" Didn't get . . . one reply back from this teacher. Then when I do come to class, then I even asked a student for notes, and they never sent me the notes and all that like they were supposed to and . . . I can only do so much.

As described by Tasha, the remaining exchanges with this faculty member went as follows:

Faculty: "First you got to get a doctor's excuse."

Tasha: "Okay, I'll get you a doctor's excuse excusing me for all them days 'cause I've been sick and how much antibiotics I was on."



Faculty (after she submitted the doctor's excuse): Okay, well now you got to come back, you got to set up a meeting with me to get the notes.

So Tasha set the meeting up with him to get the notes.

Faculty: "Oh, you can't get the notes from me; I don't give out my power points."

Tasha: "So what was the point of me coming?" That . . . was the point of this meeting. I just said, "You just wasted my time."

Faculty: "You need to go to your fellow students and do it."

Tasha: "I tried that but I didn't quite get anything; actually I didn't get anything, not quite, I didn't get nothing from them."

Faculty: "Well I asked you a few times just to send me the e-mails that . . . didn't get sent to me."

Tasha: "No you didn't, you just asked me now. And I even asked you do you, and I showed you on my phone all the e-mails I sent you." And so . . . he was giving me a problem.

Tasha: "You know what, you wasted my time. . . . No, you don't have to give me the notes, but you could give me . . . an overall review of what we . . . I'm not asking chapter from chapter what . . . details from details; I'm talking about just a general, overall summary, that's all I'm asking on what we did. I'm not asking for nothing else."

Faculty: "Well, I'm not doing that to you."

Tasha: "Okay, and why is that? Well I gave you everything you wanted; you got the doctor's note, you obviously [have] seen the e-mails that I sent you, and you did not reply back to not one of them. So . . . I did my part, you did not

follow up on your part and you help me out as a teacher and you get me caught up and you help me.”

Tasha noted, “He didn’t want to do that, so I went to the provost and I talked to him about it. And so basically, they got me out of the class and I got put into an online class.” Although she was removed from the face-to-face courses and placed in an online courses, she was forced to pay a fee. She shared,

All they did was place me in an online class and then I had to pay \$100 fee for . . . doing an online class. And really, I shouldn’t have had to pay \$100 because I was not at fault; he was at fault because he was too lazy to help his student out ’cause he was on his high horse too much.

Tasha later shared that she asked one of her Black male classmates in the courses if the teacher had made accommodations for him and the teacher had. She attributed the teacher’s actions to male dominance, power, and control.

Janet shared a similar experience in which the actions of a faculty member had financial consequences for her. She stressed that she could not afford to fail a course because she was on academic and financial probation, so part of her ability to continue her education lay in the willingness of faculty members to submit their grades by AGCC’s deadlines. She explained,

Then I had another incident where I was awarded a scholarship but, because my teacher didn’t do her job and get her grades in on time, I lost that scholarship. Ooh, that would have helped, you know? And I didn’t see how I . . . was punished for that. I’m not understanding how AGCC [punishes me]; that’s a AGCC problem. That has nothing to do with me. I did my part.

Janet then detailed the conversation she had with administrators at AGCC to explain why she had an F in the course.

Janet: “Everyone in the class failed because she didn’t get her grades in, so [now] she turned in the grades, and . . . I’m telling you I’m passing this class. I don’t know if I have . . . a B+ or a C+, but I know I’m passing it.”

Administrator: “Well, you can’t have the scholarship because you’re not eligible anymore because you failed the class.”

Janet: “No, I didn’t fail the class. What can I do about that? Can I do anything about that? The instructor didn’t get all the grades in, so everybody in the class got an F.

Janet continued,

So I got this nice little letter from AGCC saying you have been dropped, and we have to take away your scholarship for the semester because you didn’t pass your class, which you owed. Oh, it was just all bad. And so I had to write to the instructor, “Hey, you didn’t get my grade in, they dropped me, and I can’t afford to be dropped because it was everything and this and that.”

The faculty member calculated her grade and e-mailed it to her. Janet continued detailing her conversation with the administrator:

Janet: And so she brought up the grades and . . . she told me I was going to have a B+ in there so I got a B+.

Administrator: “No, that’s a F.”

Janet: “But it says everybody [has] F’s. So you think everybody in the class has [an] F?”

Administrator: “Well we can’t do anything until the instructor puts the grades in.”  
Because of this, Janet noted, “I wasn’t able to go to school for that semester.”

Alice also shared an experience that cost her time and money. For Alice, the time and financial investment she put forth in college was compromised in web-blended, online courses and external homework websites. As someone who had a fear of mathematics, she was proud of herself for mastering the content, only to have her joy taken away due to a glitch in technology. As she put it,

It happened in my math class last year where I was doing my math homework, and I understood everything; I was getting 100% every time in a row. [I] didn’t know how to access my homework online . . . or my homework grade for that math class. [My grade] went to shit. And I tried to talk to somebody. . . . I talked to my advisor, and I told her, ’cause we had the same discussion about . . . my foreign language class and . . . I don’t know if this is on my end. I’ve talked to tech support, they said that there’s nothing wrong, but I’m doing my homework, I have proof of my homework because I’d taken notes every time I do my homework, and I’m not getting my grades. And my advisor says, “You need to take that up with the teacher to see her grading policy.” I know her grading policy. This is not a point of grading policy—this is a technical difficulty. This is not on my end so, wow, I forgot all about that.

When asked how AGCC responded to her inquiry about her grade and the technology blunder, she explained they responded as follows:

I talked to tech support after being asked to do so by faculty and by the advisor. . . .  
We got things checked out, we made a point of that there was something wrong . . .  
with my server, and guess what it was? I was using the wrong Internet Explorer or

the wrong Internet engine search thing. It was something as simple as that . . . I started to use a different one and the problem still came up for math class. . . . I reached out to [tech support] because . . . it made me panic because I didn't know how to work around this because now here I am with a 92 in math—brilliant because math is hard for me. This class is challenging and it gets dropped to a 58. That's [an] F in a matter of seconds. I didn't know how to make that up, but the most I can do is continue to work online and get one point every 72 questions, that I do so 72 questions are done and I'm at a 59. Another 72 . . . it's just this slow process and it's disheartening.

Alice explained how these experiences left her feeling powerless as a student and someone who was paying for the experience:

You know, these are things that are hindrances but aren't being done or aren't being worked on by the teachers and faculty or faculty or people who are aware of the problems. Make the problem aware to teachers they feel like [students] need to work around it. "Well sorry, there's nothing I can do on my end," but you're having us work out this homework, and it's very irritating, and you feel powerless because this is your grade. . . . You are supposed to make sure you do whatever you can to maintain a good grade, and when you do that and you have these forces working against you and nobody there to help you, it's just you feel . . . it sucks because you can't say that you're not doing what you can and things are still not turning out the way they should.

Although Raine did not have any direct experiences with how time and money were connected, she did share the need to hold advisors accountable for students' time and money, saying,

I should never be confused about my life. . . . That's kind of a huge, huge statement there, but . . . I know a lot of people who have advisors who literally steer them in the opposite direction they need to go. . . . It's hard to explain, so okay, I'll just give an example I guess. There's a girl in my speech class. She was telling me how she has to retake some math course and, because she took like [remedial] math, like all the classes you need before the actual classes that were for credit but . . . she started way too behind for her, like her skill level was here but her advisor made her take classes that were way below. . . . So she's going to be here for another semester because she has to . . . catch up. She has to get to a certain level. So I think if advisors got to know our skills, our weaknesses, our strengths a little bit more, they would be able to help us a little better, because most of the time, they don't really know you that well and they've got so many other people to worry about so they're like, "Oh, you are thinking about being a nurse; okay, here's this program, do all these classes" . . . they should be accountable. . . . They should make good use of their students' time here. 'Cause nobody has time to waste, so make sure they're actually getting the most out of their time here. So when a student has to retake a bunch of classes or a student has to be here for an extra semester because you told them something wrong; yo, that's not cool. I don't know what the consequence should be, but folks shouldn't be having that.

All four of the women described how their time, money, and effort were compromised due to institutional actors or technology.

### **Seeing Myself in the Curriculum**

All of the women in this study spoke of the importance of seeing themselves in the curriculum, particularly because they did not see many Black students in their classes. This particular finding was not present in the literature on retention and persistence for community college students broadly or Black female community college students specifically. The women described the measures they took to make sure the experiences of Black women were included in their studies and how they inserted themselves into the curriculum.

Alice described an experience she had in a course on feminism that she found problematic:

Well the paper we wrote about . . . [in a] class for gender and sexuality and the media [was] taught by a White lady. . . . The class is a majority of white women and . . . I kept hearing feminism, and there's no intersectionality in that, and I got really upset because . . . I was like "This is gender and sexuality, and you don't talk about race, of course, you don't." . . . We were talking about all the popular White feminists, feminism as it pertains to White women, and what that has looked like . . . not one time have they talked about bell hooks? Alice Walker? Nobody? . . . How do you talk about feminism and not [mention these Black women]? And that just happened, and it happened at AGCC, and I paid for this classroom, you know, so it hurts. 'Cause in real life, I wouldn't pay for anything like that, no way. But I have to.

Alice also shared an experience she had in her English course. Specifically she problematized the notion that her African American vernacular is problematic.

So [in] my English class, from the very beginning, I had a problem with how she formatted English, like grammar being the supreme way to talk because I speak African American vernacular, growing up speaking African American vernacular, and it's hard for me to hear her talk about how dialects are not only improper but a myth, so I made sure that I did a project about . . . humans' abilities to evolve language and this is my dialect that I feel the most comfortable and you don't have a right to call it improper. And that was that. Got points docked, but that was my outlet.

Raine also shared her sentiments on the lack of representation of Blacks, Asians, and women in the curriculum and how it made her feel:

I mean, it's almost like so we talk about history, right, and . . . American history is the entire textbook, but then it's . . . this one chapter about Black people and minorities . . . about Blacks and Asians and women. That's what I feel like. That's the separation I'm seeing, like here's all of us [minorities] and then there's like [White events] also happening. I don't know.

I asked Raine how this separation made her feel, and before I could finish my sentence, she cut me off and stated,

[Like] going to therapy. . . . It makes me wonder if every White person has that same mentality, like . . . there's everyone else and then there's just like others. . . . I wonder sometimes if [White people] all kind of see it that way, and I guess it makes me feel like . . . things that I might have had to deal with is completely irrelevant to them.

That's what makes me feel, it's irrelevant.



Janet also spoke of a speech instructor of hers who she enjoyed learning from: Miss Mary. Miss Mary was active in the community, and the staff at AGCC had spoken very highly of her. Janet had taken two speech courses and failed them prior to enrolling in Miss Mary's course. She also asked her advisor if Miss Mary was Black, because the speech courses she had with White professors were unfavorable to her. She described,

[I took Miss Mary's class] twice because I liked her. Because I went to jail there [during the] speech [course], which was interpersonal and small group communication. I went to jail when I tried to take it the first time. Second time is when the instructor and I couldn't get along in a common way—the lady from Europe or whatever. And so I know my advisor had told me you just try to get . . . 'cause I have some . . . classes [that] are Fs so I have Fs on my transcript [on] my record for me trying . . . [to go] back to school and in school the first two times I tried.

Tasha took a different approach to seeing herself in the curriculum. As someone who was aspiring to work in the medical field, she took it upon herself to look into the requirements to advance her academic and professional career and adjusted her educational plan accordingly. After taking some courses at AGCC, she realized that she was not acquiring the hands-on learning that she needed to have a competitive edge when applying to transfer institutions. Although the courses did not count toward her degree, she found value in working in a field that helped her bridge the gap between textbook content and valuable work experience. She noted,

They want you to have . . . your first 75 hours CNA [certified nursing assistant]. . . . They like you to have that coming in, and most programs actually require you . . . at least to take the classes, not necessarily work in the field, but I chose to go on and work in it because

that's what I'm really going to have a hard . . . if this is something for me . . . if I can handle all the food and the pee and the mucus and all the bodily fluids, then I'm good to go, which I can.

For all the women, seeing themselves in the curriculum was an important component of their education, even if the faculty and course plan did not reward them for their efforts.

### **Analytical Discussion of the Research Questions**

The women in this study provided valuable insights into what and who affected their retention and persistence while attending community college. The participants' experiences, both inside and outside of the AGCC campus, in particular as they related to issues of power and powerlessness, voice, experiential knowledge, race, and gender, provided tangible examples of how community colleges positively and negatively affected them as they worked toward their academic goals. The experiences of Alice, Janet, Raine, and Tasha expanded the knowledge and conception of how I, and potentially others, can reconceive what it means for Black female community college students to be retained and to persist through a community college career.

The data from this study revealed that, in many ways, AGCC was both supportive and an obstacle, particularly through the actions of professors and advisors or academic intervention professionals. Race and gender also played a role in how the women navigated their experiences at AGCC, which further validated that critical race feminism was an appropriate theory for this study. Five themes emerged from this study: (a) establishing rapport with faculty and decision-makers (b) advising and selecting courses, (c) connecting academics to life, (d) if time is money, why am I wasting both?, and (d) seeing myself in the curriculum. The five themes illuminate how the women described their retention and

persistence. Using the four tenets of critical race feminism (Wing, 2003) as an analytical tool for this study—intersectionality, gendered racial microaggressions, experiential knowledge, and praxis—and current literature, this section uses the theoretical framework, current literature, and data from the participants to address the research questions.

### **Research Question 1**

Research question 1 asked: How do Black women attending community college describe their retention? Wild and Ebbers (2002) developed a student and institutionally centered definition of retention that proposes that colleges should establish their own definitions of retention based on (a) student aspirations, (b) the state in which they operate, and (c) intentionally created retention efforts that meet the needs of students. They also suggested that it is the responsibility of the institution and institutional personnel to identify students' goals, adjust and verify the goals periodically, and measure how students are working toward their goals.

Understanding how Black women attending community college describe their retention is particularly important, as many of the retention models are based on data from students attending baccalaureate-granting institutions and do not specifically identify how race and gender may contribute to the student's definitions of what it means to be retained at a community college. As Hagedorn (2005b) suggested, traditional frameworks for retention do not take into account the complexities of community college students' lives. As national policies are being developed that promote the success of community college students in particular, it is important that the knowledge of Black women attending these institutions be incorporated into these policies.

**Interactions with faculty.** Overwhelmingly, the women in this study described their retention through their interactions with faculty. For these women, connecting with a faculty member who acknowledged who they were, referred them to resources and professionals outside of the institution, and honored the knowledge they brought into classroom experiences was at the core of their decisions to stay enrolled in a course and to continue with their program of study. This was most clearly illustrated by Janet, Raine and Tasha's decision to advance their understanding of the discipline with the same professor. The positive experiences they had with faculty added to their experiential knowledge (Berry, 2010) of how positive relationships with faculty can transform their educational experiences. This finding aligns with some of the scholarship on persistence (Capps, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Wood & Williams, 2013).

**Pedagogy and intersectionality.** In addition to the women having meaningful interactions with faculty members, Alice, Janet, Raine, and Tasha also described how intersectionality and pedagogy played roles in their decision to stay at AGCC. Goldrick-Rab (2010) asserted that faculty interaction and pedagogy affects student success. Berry (2010) and Collins (2000a) went a step further and proclaimed that, for Black women and members of minoritized groups, counterstories through engaged pedagogy can be rewarding, as they validate the experiences and knowledge of Black women. Specifically, they asserted that it was not only the relationships that they had with faculty members that influenced their decision to stay in college but that also applying pedagogy and creating learning opportunities that included Black women contributed to their decisions to stay in college. It is within this finding that intersectionality is not only named by Alice but also illustrated in

the experiences described by Janet, Tasha, and Raine, making space for the knowledge Black women possess to enhance their learning.

For example, Alice discussed a gender and sexuality course she took and how intersectionality (Collins 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw & Allen, 2014) was not addressed and Black feminists were not part of the curriculum. In addition, she stated that she would never pay for a course that omitted the knowledge and voices of Black women; therefore, she took it upon herself to add Black feminists to the curriculum. Raine had a similar experience, which was illustrated in her description of how in her history course there was a distinct difference in the extent to which the faculty explored the contributions to history and knowledge that Whites had made in comparison to racial minorities and women. Raine also asserted that faculty and advisors should be held accountable for their students' time and money as they learned the curriculum. Alice had a similar experience: She noticed that she did not see herself in the medical curriculum. She took it upon herself to complete courses outside of her major, but directly connected to her career path, to make space for Black women in her construction of knowledge.

For Alice and Raine, the lack of intersectionality was viewed as an assault on their understanding of Black womanhood and the contributions that Black women have made to academic disciplines. It is also important to note that the women who expressed this sentiment did not call this gendered racial microaggression (Lewis et al., 2013) as they were not sure of where the line was between a macro-assault and micro-assault.

Janet also sought to see herself in the curriculum. She intentionally asked if Miss Mary was a Black woman teaching the speech course, as she had had negative experiences with non-Black female teachers in that specific subject. Janet's relationship with Miss Mary

is one illustration of how experiential knowledge (Berry, 2010) and intersectionality (Collins 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw & Allen, 2014) can be combined and can result in a positive learning experience for Black female students when they have Black female professors.

**Time and money.** Retention also was described through the immediate notion of time and money. In particular, when the women were enrolled in advanced STEM courses or social science courses in which Black women were not included as part of the curricula, they questioned whether the course was worth their time and money. They deemed that the curriculum of the course was not aligned with the value they placed on their financial and time commitments, and they enacted their own form of praxis (Hughes & Giles, 2010; Wing, 1990) through resistance to enhance their learning of the subject in a way that was meaningful for them. Having this outlook was especially beneficial for the women, as it affirmed that they were capable of mastering content matter and were developing valuable work experiences, and it gave them a reason to return to class.

This finding counters some of the research on retention in community colleges. The decision by the women in this study to enroll in advanced STEM courses and social science courses had less to do with the subject matter, especially with STEM courses (O'Brien et al., 2014), and had more to do with how they perceived the quality of the instruction (Tinto, 1997). Wood and Williams (2013) claimed that frequent interactions with faculty members had a positive effect on the persistence of Black men. The women in this study suggested that it was not the number of times they met with faculty but, rather, that the quality of their interactions with faculty was measured, in part, by the extent to which the curriculum honored and included the contributions of Black women regardless of the subject matter.

This finding further supports that Black women and men do not experience college in the same way (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

**Establishing relationships with faculty and decision-makers.** The women in this study stated that knowing who had the power and influence to correct an error, particularly one for which a faculty member was at fault, aided in their retention. For example, when Tasha was advised by a senior administrator to take the online version of a course instead of the face-to-face version, she was intentional in seeking out support from an educational leader with power to resolve her issue. The online course fee of \$100 was a cost that Tasha believed she should not be responsible for paying because it was her professor's actions that caused her to have to switch to this course. This example also provides insights into the unexpected costs of being retained in a course. The same pattern can be seen in Janet's experience with the faculty member who did not submit her grade on time, which resulted in her losing her scholarship and not being able to return to college the next semester. Alice also had a similar experience in her mathematics course when she spoke with the technical support team, her advisor, and the faculty member to inquire about the root cause of her points not being documented in the computer system.

**Summary.** Retention for the women in this study was the sum of collective experiences they had had with faculty, particularly faculty members who had acknowledged and valued their experiential knowledge and who had connected them with resources outside of the institution. The participants also described how these faculty members created spaces for Black women in their curriculum via asserting their knowledge of Black women's contributions to the subject matter, seeking out Black women to learn from, and expanding the curriculum to include Black women even if they were punished for doing so. The

interaction of pedagogy, time, and money was illuminated as the women wanted to own their learning and sometimes took drastic measures to do so. Alice, Janet, Raine, and Tasha also learned the power structure to hold faculty accountable for their learning as part of their retention. Finally, the women enacted their own praxis through resistance. They took courses that were not aligned with their degree plans to enhance their applied knowledge of the curriculum and inserted Black women's knowledge into course assignments when they felt the financial risk or investment was worth the time and effort.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked: How do Black women attending community colleges describe their persistence? Literature on persistence is conflicting to say the least (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005); however, persistence has been connected to understanding the needs of the student body (Welch, 2014; Wood & Williams, 2013), the educational experiences and knowledge students possess, and the quality of institutional policies, practices, and programs (Goldrick-Rab, 2010) at community colleges. Persistence was described by the women in this study as continuing their education in spite of the mistakes and obstacles advisors and faculty made them endure. Furthermore, persistence was connected to creating a new family legacy and reaching their goals despite the lack of support they received. Persistence was described and enacted in how the women navigated power structures to meet their goals.

According to the literature, advising has been positively associated with persistence (Orozco et al., 2010; Stuart et al., 2014; Wood & Williams, 2013). Goldrick-Rab (2010) further asserted that institutional practices and programs that include access to information can affect the success of community college students. Perhaps the participants in the



aforementioned studies had positive advising experiences; however, the women in this study countered this finding, as their advising experiences at AGCC left much to be desired. It is important to note that Alice, Raine, and Tasha had the same advisor at one point in time and that Janet was selecting her own courses. In fact, throughout their academic careers at AGCC, many of the women had multiple advisors. Specifically, Tasha and Raine had two advisors, Alice had three advisors, and Janet had an academic probation professional review her course load as part of her eligibility requirement to stay in college due to her being on academic and financial probation.

**Bridging gaps of knowledge.** Persistence for Alice, Janet, Raine, and Tasha was most clearly described when they detailed how they had to bridge their gaps in understanding how the institution worked and the role of their advisors or selecting courses. For example, Tasha got mixed responses from advisors on program requirements and what courses would transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution. Because the advisors gave her conflicting information, she invested a lot of time and energy into figuring out what courses would transfer to help her reach her academic goal.

Alice went through a similar process of identifying solutions to the gaps in the knowledge of advisors and faculty as revealed in her description of the online homework sites for her math and foreign language courses. Experience had taught her to keep written evidence that she had completed her assignments (e.g., detailed solutions to math problems and outlines of written responses) and to be vocal with professors and her advisor about her academic progress when using virtual teaching platforms. Although she had evidence that she was completing her assignments, and her advisor, teacher, and the technical support staff person diagnosed the technical problem, the teacher did not restore her grade.

Raine learned from a classmate the consequences of not being proactive in advocating to be placed in appropriate-level courses. Specifically, she learned that if she did not maintain a healthy relationship with her advisor, that the advisor had the power to delay her time to degree and transfer.

Janet's experience with selecting courses also illustrated how gaps in understanding the institution's systems had detrimental implications on not only her experience but also on those of her family. Janet did not know how to select courses, did not know how to find an advisor, did not know about articulation agreements, and did not begin asking questions about those processes until I interviewed her. She also did not question the role of her academic intervention and its connection to her long-term goal of getting a bachelor's degree, as she saw it as her responsibility to learn how to advise herself and her family. In this case, the lack of experiential knowledge (Collins 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw & Allen, 2014) had negative consequences.

**Resiliency.** Adrienne D. Dixon stated during a 2016 American Research Association session, entitled *#AERABlackGirlsMatter: Public Scholarship Engaging with the Race/Gender Interaction in Schools*, that scholarship on Black women must "define resilience in a way that holds the state accountable" (Personal communication, April 11, 2016), and the women in this study affirmed this sentiment. Resilience can be both a means to create accountability and a tool for understanding how to create transformational learning spaces for women. Resilience has also been connected to adult learning theory, specifically women's transformative learning (English & Irving, 2012). English and Irving (2012) suggested that a transformative learning theory, specifically for women, would include five components. First, the authors suggested that it is important to know how race and class

impact learning and experience. For Black women, there are numerous social, emotional, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to the ways Black women learn (Collins, 1998). The authors also suggested that, for women, having quality relationships is important to learning. For example, for Black women attending community college, faculty and mentors can be a source of support if the student is transitioning to being a student after working for an extended period of time. Third, transformative learning theory suggests that emotional learning is imperative to transformational learning. Specifically, because women are systemically in an oppressed position and Black women must navigate two minoritized identities (Collins, 1998), naming and using emotions as part of the learning process can help them be successful as they make meaning of their lives and educational experience. Fourth, English and Irving posited that learning should go beyond rationale, cognitive learning and allow for noncognitive forms of learning to take place through the body. Finally, they suggested that creativity and the arts can be part of transformational learning, proposing, for example, that photographs and storytelling can be transformation in how adult women learn.

Alice, Janet, Tasha, and Raine also described their persistence in terms of being resilient in a way that held the faculty and advisors at AGCC accountable for their actions. Persistence for the women in this study was embodied by their unwavering decisions to challenge institutional policies, practices, and programs that AGCC had claimed to provide support for its students broadly and for Black women like themselves specifically.

Ultimately, the women in this study refused to let anyone or anything deter them from reaching their goals, and they used what they knew about challenging systems to stay enrolled in AGCC. For example, Janet's experience losing her scholarship due to a faculty member not submitting her grade did not deter her from fighting to remain eligible and

persist toward her goal; but this incident also serves as an example of how she attempted to hold her professor and a senior administrator accountable for her academic viability. Janet did not allow the decisions of the administration or faculty deter her from continuing her education in the long term, although the actions and decisions of the faculty and administration did make her ineligible to enroll in college the following semester.

Tasha had similar sentiments when she discussed how she would not let her history professor's behaviors deter her from her goal. The administration charged her \$100 to change courses, and Tasha questioned why she had to pay for the "solution" to her problem when she was not at fault. Alice also shared the same sentiment in her knowledge of what administrators had power and influence over at the institution and who could make positive changes on campus.

Throughout these experiences, the women in this study made meaning of the power relationships (Harding, 1997) and worked toward dismantling barriers to their success. Although they were able to learn who was in power and had influence to address their concerns, the administrators' responses to these infractions did not provide cost-free solutions; on the contrary, the administrators' responses cost the women additional college expenses and had implications for their ability to return the following semester. The literature reviewed for this study did not mention the role of administrators in the persistence of community college students' broadly or Black women specifically.

**Short-term commitment to a long-term goal.** The participants described their own persistence as a short-term commitment with implications for a long-term return on their investment of time and money. The decision by Alice and Raine to stay at AGCC until they earned their associate's degree was connected directly to their educational aspirations of

earning a degree at a HBCU. Alice's experiences of being verbally assaulted by her advisor who called her incompetent and, early in her academic career, being discouraged from attending community events focused on racism and racial reconciliation served to fuel her decision to complete her degree so that she could later attend a university that would support her. Although these occurrences could be named gendered-racial microaggressions (Lewis et al., 2013), Alice did not call it that. She considered it an assault, something she dealt with routinely with her advisor, and she was hesitant to place a value (micro or macro) on these experiences.

Raine, on the other hand, had the same advisor as Alice at the time but had a very different experience. Raine and the advisor called one of the HBCUs she wanted to attend and spoke with the representative for 25 minutes. This advisor's attentiveness validated for Raine that the advisor was invested in her personal growth and understood the value of attending a college where the intersections of her race and gender could be validated (Collins 2000a, 2000b; Crenshaw, 1989; Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Tasha literally calculated the cost of attending AGCC compared it to how her time and money would be invested if she chose to transfer to Flag University, Prince University, or BeyDay University. Attending AGCC was a short-term goal with implications for her long-term plan for herself and her son. Janet had a similar description of persistence through her employment as a work-study student. In many ways, Janet's criminal past compromised her ability to have stable employment. Although work-study did not pay her adequately to support her family in the short term, she valued the experience, which increased her confidence that her education and experiences would have long-term impacts on her earning potential. Her theory that college would increase her earning potential allowed her to

operationalize her own form of praxis through her work–study position and by utilizing the resources at her job.

**Summary.** Alice, Janet, Raine, and Tasha had different experiences yet had similar descriptions of their persistence. Bridging their gaps of knowledge was operationalized via navigating mixed messages from advisors, using their experiential knowledge to keep record of not only their progress on assignments but also documenting repeated errors in technology, and the process of selecting courses. Persistence was described as not allowing the choices and actions of administrators, faculty, and advisors to deter them from reaching their goals. In essence, the women were resilient and diligent in holding the leadership at AGCC accountable, even if the results were not favorable to them being retained or persisting toward their degrees. Finally, persistence was described as a short-term commitment for a long-term return on their investment. The participants in this study aspired to transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions, to connect their work in the community to their experiences on campus, and to continue to persist toward their goals with the hopes that their education would have a positive financial outcome for their families.

### **Research Question 3**

Research question 3 asked: How do institutional retention efforts support or hinder Black women’s perceptions of their ability to persist? Tasha, Raine, Janet, and Alice described retention through knowing the decision makers, time and money, pedagogy and intersectionality, and interactions with faculty. All of the women routinely took courses with the same professor if they believed the instructor was invested in their learning and was open to including the experiences of Black women in course dialogue and assignments. Janet, Alice, and Raine also questioned the quality of the instruction and pedagogy if faculty did not

incorporate the experiences and knowledge that Black women had contributed to the field of study. All of the women in the study wanted their time spent in class and completing assignments to be valued and reflected in their grades and ability to stay enrolled in AGCC. In addition, the women described how learning who on campus had power and influence played a role in them being retained, particularly when they were faced with an error that had the potential to negatively affect their decision to stay in a class.

Persistence for the women in this study was enacted through bridging gaps of knowledge, resiliency, and acknowledging that their enrollment and success at AGCC was a short-term commitment for a long-term return on their investment. Bridging gaps of knowledge was described as their ability to identify inconsistencies in advice from advisors, finding solutions to technical errors in online homework websites, and using their experiential knowledge to address their concerns. Resilience was defined in a manner that held AGCC accountable for missteps that were not of their own making. This was done intentionally as to not allow the choices of the administration, faculty, and advisors to deter them from their educational, professional, and personal goals.

The women in this study also viewed their educational careers at AGCC as a short-term commitment for a long-term return on their investment. Specifically, the participants looked to their advisors to help them select the correct courses so that they could transfer to their desired baccalaureate-granting institutions and to help them bridge the curriculum they learned with the impacts they wanted to have on their broader community, and they looked at their choices to stay enrolled as a business decision.

Although retention and persistence are different, they are connected and have implications for students' success (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Hagedorn, 2005b). The women

described three ways that their retention supported their decision to persist and three ways that retention hindered their perception of their ability to persist. When faculty members affirmed the experiences, knowledge, and contributions Black women made to the discipline, it affirmed that the women, their knowledge, and their experiences were valued. Seeing themselves in the curriculum, whether Black women were intentionally incorporated into the curriculum or the women took it upon themselves to include their experiences, was something that they valued as they pushed back against the invisibility of Black women in a course. This tension of seeing Black women and being seen as Black women in their courses contributed to all of the women's decisions to stay enrolled at AGCC. Establishing relationships with faculty was one of the greatest institutional influences on the women's decisions to continue their education. These learning experiences also bridged their academic interests, life passions, and circumstances.

Advisors positively contributed to the women's perceptions of their ability to persist. Specifically, when advisors were accessible, provided guidance, and helped find solutions to problems, the women in this study valued the time and money they had invested into their education. Advisors were influential as they helped women actively work toward their goal of transferring and earning a bachelor's degree. Although the quality of the advising experiences for some of the women in this study varied, they continued to seek out the assistance of advisors to help them navigate the power structures at AGCC.

The final retention effort that positively influenced the women's perception of their ability to persist was the various learning opportunities offered that connected with the women's passions. For example, Janet employment at a work-study job affirmed that she was employable and trustworthy and that she could have another chance at a financially



stable life through employment and education. For Alice, being part of a community program centered on race and racism and having her work acknowledged by administrators positively affected her persistence, as it provided a framework to have intentional dialogues with people in power about her educational experiences. Tasha described this interaction as when her professor referred her to a new counselor to help her cope with her trauma so that she could persist toward her academic goal of graduating from AGCC, earning a bachelor's degree, and working to improve her mental health. The aforementioned experiences were part of how the women described both their time and financial investment in their education and themselves.

The participants also described two ways that retention efforts hindered their perceptions of their ability to persist. Specifically, the women stated that there was an emotional price they had to pay for the lack of guidance they received and that, at times, the support they received was not adequate or did not resolve the issue. The emotional price the women endured throughout their educational experiences was partially a result of their interactions with advisors, administrators, and faculty. For example, Raine stated that the lack of women and racial and ethnic minorities in her courses made her feel like she needed to go to therapy. Similarly, Alice lost points when she included African American vernacular in her English course assignment and argued that it was a legitimate communication form. Janet had similar sentiments about her process of selecting courses, as she did not know that there was an academic plan she could follow to make sure she could transfer to a university. Tasha described the same sentiment when she was required to pay \$100 for the online version of a history course she transferred to when it was not her fault that she had to

transfer. Tasha was not only angry, she felt pushed out and, like the other women, questioned if the investment in her education was worth the time and money.

The women also questioned what it meant to stay in a course and remain in college long term without support. For example, Alice's incident of her advisor calling her incompetent even though she had straight A's the prior semester led her to question the integrity and professionalism of the woman who was supposed to be part of her support system. Tasha and Janet also questioned what it meant to be supported when they went through the process of choosing a major and selecting their courses. There were no clear guidelines on how to select courses, and advisors gave them conflicting information. To Tasha and Janet, the lack of support when selecting courses had direct repercussions for their persistence.

**Summary.** There were institutional retention efforts that both supported and hindered the women's perceptions of their ability to persist. The retention efforts that positively affected the participants' perceptions of their ability to persist were operationalized through their relationships with faculty members, specifically when faculty members included Black women in the curriculum and were open to the participants expanding the curriculum by infusing their experiential knowledge into the course assignments and discussions and, also, through the tension of seeing Black women in the curriculum and having Black female professors.

Advisors also played a positive role in the participants' perceptions of the ability to persist when they were accessible, provided the women with useful guidance, and supported the women as they sought to resolve challenges with coursework. The women's retention positively affected their perceptions of their persistence when their learning in and out of the

classroom was valued. Work–study, attending community events on race and racism, and referring students to resources outside of AGCC that could offer them the support they needed to academically and personally succeed all positively affected the women’s perceptions of their ability to persist.

The women described two ways that retention efforts negatively affected their perceptions of their ability to persist. The emotional price of being verbally assaulted by advisors, losing points for inserting Black women’s contributions to academic disciplines, not getting transferrable academic credit for taking hands-on courses related to their field of study, and the absence of Black women and minorities in the curriculum hindered their perceptions of their abilities to persist. The women spent a lot of time rationalizing and justifying their emotions when these incidents took place. Directly related, but distinctly different, was the notion of continuing their education without the support they needed. Making decisions, such as what courses to take and what to major in, particularly when there were multiple related yet distinct majors, made the women question if the institution valued the time, money, and effort they were investing in their education.

#### **Research Question 4**

The fourth research question asked: How can institutional programs, processes, and policies, be transformed to support the retention and persistence of Black women attending community college? The Lumina Foundation research of literature investigating the “effects of institutional policies on community college retention and completion” (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, p. 7) found that there were few solid insights that could help increase persistence at community colleges. The participants in this study offered tangible advice on how the

institutional programs, processes, and policies could be transformed to support the retention and persistence of Black women attending community college.

**Programs.** The women in this study offered four ways community colleges programs could be transformed to support the retention and persistence of Black women. First, programs can be transformed by connecting the learning experience inside the classroom with the educational aspirations and passions of Black women. Research suggests that internships can positively affect students' persistence and retention (Stuart et al., 2014). However, the women in this study expanded that notion to include bridging academic and personal goals through events as well. The passions of Alice and Raine were linked to their desire to see change for Black community members through both community presentations on race and racism and exposure to a legislative session. Both of these events aligned with their personal, academic, and political desires to create systemic change through education.

The second recommendation the women had was for advisors to personalize their experiences with students. To them, personalizing the experience meant advisors learning what students' aspirations are, recommending faculty whose teaching style may be aligned with students' learning style, providing adequate support for Black women when they encounter challenges in the classroom, and supporting them through the transfer process. In essence, the women recommended that advisors look at their job more holistically rather than checking off courses as students completed them.

The third way the women suggested that programs be altered to increase their persistence and retention was creating individual business plans that forecast the cost of college at AGCC and their desired transfer institution. This tool could be used to show how many courses the women needed take each semester to help them see how long it would take

to reach their educational goal. It would also allow them to more easily make long-term decisions that factored in time and cost. Because time to degree and affordability are key reasons students attend community college, this tool may be helpful if used by an advisor who personalized experiences with their students.

The final recommendation by the women was to enhance programs by having multiple advisors in each program or discipline and have them trained on which courses transfer to universities. As Alice, Tasha, and Raine illustrated, at one point they each had the same advisor and not everyone had a good experience with her. All of the women aspired to transfer; however, they had received conflicting information on what courses were aligned with articulation agreements at the various transfer institutions. Advisors' lack of knowledge on articulation agreements may come from what Tobolowsky (1998) called a web-like process; however, the women in this study asserted that it is the responsibility of advisors to know how to navigate the transfer process at any institution.

**Processes.** Alice, Janet, Tasha, and Raine described three ways institutional processes could be improved to increase the retention and persistence of Black women. The first way the women suggested that institutional processes are transformed was through faculty and students getting to know one another. Faculty were viewed as teachers and the possessors of knowledge, whereas advisors were viewed as institutional navigators. The women suggested that faculty and Black women develop professional relationships while being mindful that teachers have power over the academic success of Black women. This is aligned with both the situated freedom (Leonard, 1999; Lopez & Willis, 2004) and the experiential knowledge (Berry, 2010; Wing, 2003, 2015) the students bring into the classroom, which is enhanced throughout their educational experiences.

The second process transformation the women suggested was creating an academic roadmap for advisors and students to use when selecting courses toward graduation or completing a credential. The women further recommended that the course map be placed in visible locations such as the website, on doors, study areas, dining areas, and other places students congregate. The ultimate goal of the roadmap would be to create accountability and synergy between what courses advisors recommend students take and their academic progress.

Related to the roadmap but distinct in its purpose, the final recommendation the women had was for advisors to develop a clear pathway for students to transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution. The women discussed how this tool should include the time to degree for students and/or when they would be eligible to transfer. In essence, the women asked that the transfer map be created to allow students to physically see how their time and money is moving them toward their transfer goals. It could also be used to help students make financial decisions on where to transfer.

**Policies.** The women in this study described two overarching categories for transformational policy recommendations. The first policy recommendation was connected to the accountability of faculty, advisors, and administrators. Because of the mixed messages they had received from advisors; the lack of support from faculty; and the lack of administrative intervention when faculty and advisors did not honor the time, financial investment, and learning of the students, they called for a clear policy that outlines how students can report faculty and advisors. They also recommended that administrators be more proactive in their interventions toward resolving disputes. For example, one way administrators could be more intentional in creating equitable solutions would be to reinstate

scholarships that are lost due to faculty actions or inactions (such as not submitting grades on time) and waive fees when students are placed in online courses because of an uncooperative faculty member. The women also recommended that, just as they document their own progress, advisors also should be reviewed to see if there are any trends in their behaviors or decision-making processes that negatively affect students. Finally, the women suggested that there should be a policy for students to be refunded their money or given a semester free of charge when advisors place them in the wrong courses.

The second policy recommendation the women had focused on transparency of their course options. Specifically, there should be mandatory, clear, student-centered descriptions of degree options outlining if courses are transferrable and if a student in a particular discipline would be working toward a certificate, licensure, or associate's degree. In addition, this information should be posted in various locations and be part of the advising process for all students so that students know exactly toward what credential they are working.

**Summary.** Alice, Janet, Tasha, and Raine offered distinct ways institutional programs, practices, and policies could be transformed to support their retention and persistence. Specifically, they called for shifts in pedagogy, connecting academic experiences to life passions in intentional ways, creating clear transfer and advising pathways for students and putting them in visible places, and finding ways to hold administrators, faculty, and advisors accountable for student learning.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to share the participants' responses as they related to the research questions. Specifically, this chapter aimed to illuminate how the women

described their retention and persistence, how institutional retention efforts impacted their ability to persist, and how institutions could be transformed to enhance the academic success of Black women attending community college. Each theme was described, presented with evidence, and contextualized within existing literature when applicable.



## **CHAPTER 5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to describe and highlight the unique experiences of being Black, female, and a community college student to inform institutional practices, policies, and procedures from the perspective of four Black women in the midst of their postsecondary education. At the time the study was conducted, all four women were attending AGCC, a multicampus community college in a rural state. Data were gathered through verbal and visual counterstories, member checking, and an audit trail that included written and visual reflections. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Black women attending community colleges describe their retention?
2. How do Black women attending community colleges describe their persistence?
3. How do institutional retention efforts support or hinder Black women's perceptions of their ability to persist?
4. How can institutional programs, processes and policies, be transformed to support the retention and persistence of Black women attending community college?

### **Conclusion**

The participants' responses addressing the first research question provided evidence that establishing relationships with personnel, such as faculty or administrators, played a large role in the women's persistence. Raine, Tasha, and Janet took courses with the same professor over a number of semesters, and all four women were intentional in establishing proactive relationships with administrators and advisors. They described their retention both as a personal pursuit to complete courses and as learning about and utilizing the current

power structure so that their needs are acknowledged. Furthermore, the women described their retention as the immediate or current notion of time and energy and as the tension to see Black women and themselves in the curricula, whether through the teaching style of the professor, seeking out Black female professors, or expanding the curriculum to include Black women in assignments and classroom discussions. These efforts were met with resistance from administrators, faculty, and advisors. Some of the women lost points on assignments or scholarship money for courses or had to pay additional fees to be placed in online courses.

The women in this study described their persistence in terms of advising or selecting courses, connecting their academic learning to their life circumstances, and as a short-term commitment toward a long-term goal. In particular, the women spoke of the role of official and unofficial institutional advisors as playing a significant role in their persistence. All of the participants described being misled by an advisor and not knowing how to identify courses that would support their desires to transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution. The women spent a lot of time and energy contacting multiple campuses to find answers when they received conflicting information from their advisors. The theme connecting academics to life illustrates how the women were rewarded or punished for infusing their college education and community involvement and passions in an intentional way. Related to that theme is the notion of resiliency. Resiliency for the women in the study was described as how they held AGCC accountable for correcting and addressing their issues with faculty, advisors, technical support, and other institutional agents.

The findings related to the third research question demonstrated how the women's descriptions of retention and persistence were intertwined. Specifically, these descriptions illustrated the positive aspects of having relationships with faculty, access to advisors to

provide guidance, and using various learning opportunities, such as community activism or work–study, and how these aspects positively affected the women’s ability to learn and persist toward their goals. Findings related to the third research question also demonstrated the negative emotional toll their efforts had on their education and how they continued to press toward their degrees without the support they needed.

The findings related to the final research question offered tangible solutions to how programs, practices, and policies at AGCC can be transformed to support the retention and persistence of the women in this study and others like them. The women specifically called for programs to have multiple advisors, for educational leaders to personalize their experiences to meet the needs of individual students, and for the creation of individual academic plans that highlight the potential costs and time needed to transfer to their desired baccalaureate-granting institution. With regard to processes, the women stated that faculty should take the time to get to know their individual students, that there should be clear transfer processes that are easily accessible for students and advisors to use, and that advisors need a roadmap to follow if they or a student has a question about another major. Finally, the policy recommendations the women shared to increase their retention and persistence were to create a pathway to hold advisors accountable, for professors to be accountable when they do not accommodate students, for administrators to reinstate denied scholarships and waive fees incurred because of infractions by faculty, and to have a clear description of academic majors on the college’s website.

### **Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research**

This study was aimed at expanding empirical research and scholarship on Black women's retention and persistence while attending community college. The findings led to the following implications for practice, research, and policy.

#### **Implications for Practice**

The women in this study posited that administrators and faculty should be held accountable for their learning. As the political climate shifts toward creating clear pathways to postsecondary educational and economic development through community colleges, it is imperative that the responsibility for academic success lie not only on the shoulders of the students but also on those of administrators and faculty, who have an obligation to assure that the learning environment is conducive to the success of students broadly and Black women in particular. Administrators and faculty should be cognizant of how racism and sexism are embedded within their institutional behaviors, policies, and practices, and they should actively work to dismantle them.

Second, this study provides evidence that there needs to be an emphasis on student learning theory broadly, and adult learning theory as well as racialized and gendered ways of learning and teaching specifically. AGCC should provide professional development opportunities that focus on applied teaching methods to transform the pedagogy of its instructors. Moreover, AGCC should intentionally create professional development opportunities for faculty and advisors that focus on student success for students of color broadly and Black women specifically. Just as faculty are responsible for ensuring that the learning environment and assignments are conducive for learning, it is also important that faculty, adjunct and full-time, are equitable in their grading practices. In addition, evidence

from this study suggests that there is a great need for professional development around student learning styles and ways to hold students accountable without creating additional barriers to academic success. Because the women in this study led complex lives, providing opportunities for students to ground their academic pursuits and personal passions could be beneficial to their academic and personal success. In my current role with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, I facilitate a workshop series titled “Navigating Difference” (Deen, Parker, Hill, Huskey, & Whitehall, 2014). Although created for extension and outreach professionals, the lessons of the series are transferrable to many educational spaces, including community colleges.

Third, this study provides evidence that the use of technology to complete assignments may not meet the needs of students. It further shows that administrators and advisors are not educated on how to support students as they attempt to address technical issues. Although technology can be a tool or medium to enhance student learning, it can also be a barrier to academic success. Technology, such as homework sites and Black Board, should be used with caution and faculty, administrators, and advisors should allow time for students to master this form of knowledge and instruction and enact solutions to remedy technical obstacles when they arise.

A final implication for practice is the need to assess whether student services meet the needs of Black female learners. Perhaps another way to frame this issue can be unpacked by establishing what an assessment tool might look like if it measured the academic success and support for Black women students specifically and students in general. As evident in the findings of this study and previous studies, there is myriad conflicting information about what supports and what hinders the persistence and retention of students broadly and Black

female students specifically. As community colleges continue to be the most highly utilized postsecondary educational institutions, it is important that community colleges assess the extent to which faculty, administrators, programs, and policies are meeting the needs of its students.

### **Implications for Policy**

The findings of this study also prompted the consideration of how federal financial aid policies may have hindered the retention and persistence of the Black women in this study. Current federal financial aid policy states that if students are not making satisfactory progress toward their degree 66 percent of the time, they may have their financial aid revoked. This policy is aimed at students who withdraw or have an incomplete, D, or F in a course, resulting in a higher risk of losing financial aid. Although this policy is understandable, the rationale for this policy and its implementation may have negative consequences for students who are attempting to rebuild their lives. Specifically, students who are sick, in abusive relationships, or have a criminal history may not be able to complete their coursework in a timely manner due to their life circumstances. Future research should look into financial aid policies and investigate how students with these types of circumstances can continue working toward their education without additional financial consequences.

This study provides evidence that institutions and legislative bodies should look into funding advising positions on community college campuses. Given the current political state of higher education and the expanding role of community colleges, funding for advisors at the institutional, state, and federal levels may help support community colleges meet their missions and help students succeed.

In terms of institutional policy, it is highly suggested that AGCC and community colleges broadly re-evaluate their policies on charging fees to students when a particular change is meant to be a solution to a problem not of the student's making. These fees, although part of the economic fabric of AGCC, created unnecessary barriers for the participants. They literally and figuratively had to pay to resolve issues and challenges they did not create.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Although community colleges have an open access mission (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), access should go beyond welcoming everyone to attend a community college. Instead; access should be extended to include an assessment of how community college can make their resources more accessible to nontraditional students including those who work full time or have multiple jobs, who have children or care for dependents, and who are formerly incarcerated individuals. In seeking to address this need, this study provided an in-depth analysis of how four Black women described their retention and persistence. Additional studies are needed to create a more cohesive understanding of college access in a community college context. Aspects to be considered in these studies are the location of the community college and whether it is a minority-serving institution. Moreover, the experiences of women of color broadly and Black women specifically need to be studied in the larger context of higher education and community college scholarship.

One of the challenges of exploring retention and persistence is that there is no consistently accepted definition of the terms. As such, community college researchers should develop constructs that align with community college learners. The women in this study came from very different backgrounds: some were mothers, all were second-generation

community college students, one had a criminal history, and two had disabilities. When investigating how persistence and retention might be defined, researchers should consider the various students' demographics and identities to help advisors, administrators, and faculty inform their practices with research.

Finally, this study provides evidence that advising and the role of advisors need further exploration and research within the context of community colleges. Because community colleges enroll larger number of students, the demands on them can be overwhelming if the institution is not equipped with enough supports for advisors and students alike to help guide their educational processes. As the women in this study described, advisors played very important roles in their retention and persistence. Unfortunately, the women also received conflicting information, were verbally assaulted, and had to invest a lot of time and energy in selecting a major and their courses without the support of an advisor. Research should be conducted on how best to serve the myriad student learners including online learners, adult learners, and learners from minoritized identities.

### **Concluding Reflection**

As I reflect on this study, I am overwhelmed with gratitude. I am grateful that Alice, Janet, Tasha, and Raine were willing to share their experiences, be vulnerable, and trusted me and the research process. Individually and collectively, the participants in this study affirmed my sense of urgency in learning more about how Black women reach their educational goals and validated that this work is valuable, contributes to the literature, and has the potential to transform institutions and lives.



When I began this study, I questioned if the research design chosen would be valued by my colleagues in academe and if the experiences and truths the participants and I co-constructed would be valued. Now I know that the participants were validated throughout this research study and that my passion for increasing the retention and persistence of Black women attending community college is not in vain. If anything, the participants taught me, or rather reinforced, that what God has for me is for me and that His vision for my life is purposeful.

Alice spoke with boldness, Raine spoke with innocence, Tasha spoke with determination, and Janet spoke with affirmation. All of these women were vulnerable yet assertive; complex yet humble; and devoted to themselves, their families, and their communities. Their academic journeys, like mine, were fueled by their desires to honor the sacrifices of their ancestors and wanting better for themselves and their families. There were times when we agreed and moments when there were varying views; however, through dialogue we came to shared understandings.

For me as a researcher, this study was a challenge. Outside of the institutional processes and scheduling logistics, this process pushed me to think deeper about the meaning behind my own experiences. The third interview in particular was challenging, as it signaled the end of the study and a transition in the relationships I had with the participants. This process also resulted in some unexpected gifts. Janet shared with me a college-related business plan she created after our second interview, Tasha stated she was willing to participate in future studies, Alice has kept me informed of her progress, and Raine shared that the research process was rewarding to her in ways she had not imagined. This study

affirmed that I have a place in the academy and, more importantly, that the knowledge Black women possess can be transformative.

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## APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4566  
FAX 515 294-4267

**Date:** 10/15/2015

**To:** Glenda M Bivens  
Carver 329

**CC:** Dr. Larry Ebbers  
N256 Lagomarcino Hall  
Dr. Lyn Brodersen  
11110 Extension 4H Building

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

**Title:** Persisting to the Goal: Black Women's Account of Support at a Community College

**IRB ID:** 15-439

**Approval Date:** 10/14/2015      **Date for Continuing Review:** 10/5/2017

**Submission Type:** New      **Review Type:** Full Committee

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- **Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study**, when documented consent is required.
- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes** to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems** involving risks to subjects or others.
- **Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses**, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- **Complete a new continuing review form** at least three to four weeks prior to the **date for continuing review** as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.



## APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT

ISU IRB # 1	15-439
Approved Date:	14 October 2015
Expiration Date:	5 October 2017

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Title of the Study:** Persisting to the Goal: Black Women's Account of Support at a Community College

**Investigators:** Dr. Larry Ebbers, Dr. Lyn Brodersen, and Glenda M. Bivens, M.Ed.

**Introduction:** The purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of Black women attending a community college. Your participation in this study will not affect your status as a [REDACTED] student or your ability to receive services through the Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Families.

**Description of Procedures:** Participants will take part in two one-on-one interviews; each will last between one and two hours depending on how much you share. Participants will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and create a diagram to show connections between your experiences. Additionally, all the participants will gather for a group interview.

During the interviews you will be asked open-ended questions about your experiences at the community college(s) that you attended. The interviews will be audio recorded. At any time during the study, you may skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity and that of [REDACTED] and any other entity named in the interviews.

Diagrams created will be included in the final report, however, all names and identities will be removed.

You will be emailed a summary and transcripts from our interviews. You may then edit the transcripts if you would like for clarity or to redact any statements you are uncomfortable having shared in the final report and subsequent disseminations.

**Risks:** Although minimal, participants may experience emotional discomfort recounting stories related to your past experiences. There could be adverse impacts of the information you share such as embarrassment or harm to your reputation should your identity be deduced. Some of the protections against your identity being deduced include conducting interviews off-site, removal of your name and other identifying data, and specific information about where you attend school will not be included in any reports. As a participant, you may refuse to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

**Benefits:** If you decide to participate, there may be no direct benefit to you. Your participation in the study has the potential to help educators, and college employees better serve Black female students attending community college. It is hoped that through your participation in the study that you build networks with women that have had similar experiences as you.

**Compensation:** Because your time is valuable, you will receive a \$10.00 gift card at the conclusion of the first, second and group interview. As such, you can be awarded up to \$30.00 for your time.

**Costs:** There are no costs associated with participating in the study.

**Participants Rights:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Confidentiality:** As researchers, we are committed to protecting your identity. In the event you share personal and unique story information, we will withhold specific information such as your legal name. In addition, any information about third parties such as teachers will not include their name.

ISU IRB # 1	15-439
Approved Date:	14 October 2015
Expiration Date:	5 October 2017

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information. Your name, schools, and any identifying information will be removed from all documentation to assure the confidentiality of your participation.

Although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, we will do our best to make sure your identity is protected.

**Questions:** For further information about the study contact Lyn Brodersen at [REDACTED] Larry Ebbers [REDACTED] or Glenda Bivens at [REDACTED]. If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

**Signature:** Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered.

Participants Name (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_ (Participants Signature)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (Date) \_\_\_\_\_

### APPENDIX C. BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Name	
Chosen Name for Research	
What is your age?	
If you are employed, what is your job title(s)?	
On average, how many hours per week do you work?	
Did you receive a Pell Grant in your financial aid?	
Do you have any children?	
What is your ZIP code?	
Are you enrolled Full Time (12+Credits) or Part Time?	
What was your GPA last semester?	
Academic Goal (e.g., transfer, AA, AS, Certificate, taking class for leisure)	

Mother	Father	Self	
			Did not finish high school
			Graduated from high school
			Completed some college
			Completed an associate's degree at a community college
			Completed a bachelor's degree from a 4-year university

How many semesters have you been enrolled at AGCC? \_\_\_\_\_

How many community colleges have you attended? \_\_\_\_\_

Please list the name of the college(s) you have attended and the year(s) you were enrolled.

Name of College	Year(s) Attended
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

What is your major/field of study? \_\_\_\_\_

What are your educational goals?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What are your career goals?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Please list any clubs/organizations you are a member of and your position (e.g., president, member, etc.).

Name of organization	Position
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Please list any offices/resources on campus (e.g., Academic Success Center, student counseling, library) that you have used and found essential to staying in college.

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## APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Script:

Thank you for participating in this research project. The intended purpose of this interview is to learn from your academic experiences while enrolled in community college. During this interview, you have the right to decline answering any questions that you are uncomfortable with. I am recording our conversation for the purpose of generating data for this research. Your responses are confidential and I will use pseudonyms in the report to protect your identity.

What questions can I answer for you?

### Biographical Questions

1. Please choose a pseudonym, a name that represents you in this study for publications and presentations. Why did you choose that name?
2. Tell me a little bit about yourself
  - a. Where from
  - b. Family
3. Why did you decide to go to college?
4. Was there anyone that influenced your decision to go to college?
  - a. Whom?
  - b. How did they influence you?
5. When did you first enroll into college?
6. What was your major when you first enrolled?
  - a. Are you currently in the same major?
7. Why did you decide to enroll into [REDACTED]?

### Experiences and Retention

8. What has it been like being a Black woman at this community college?
9. How aware are you of your race and gender on campus? Or the race and gender of others around you?
10. How would you describe your experiences as a [REDACTED] student?
  - a. Is there a story or experience you can share that helps illustrate your experiences?
11. Was there a specific professor, program, student organization, or other service that played a role in your decision to return to college this semester?
12. Is there a specific professor, program, organization, or other service that played a role in your decision to stay at this community college?
  - a. Who/what and how did it influence your decision to stay at [REDACTED]?
13. What made you come back to college this semester?
  - a. Did anyone in particular contribute to your decision to come back this semester?
  - b. If yes, how did that person impact your decision to come back this semester?

14. Did any of the academic programs, services, or classes that [REDACTED] offers impact your decision to return to school this semester (for example learning communities)?
  - a. If yes, how did it impact your decision? What about the program/service/classes influenced your decision to return to college?
15. What is your academic goal?
  - a. Is there anyone on campus that is helping you prepare for your career after graduation?
16. What has been your biggest accomplishment so far in relation to your enrollment at this institution?
17. Was there anyone that supported you in fulfilling that accomplishment?
  - a. What is your relationship with that person (mentor, instructor, TA, classmate)?
18. Is there anyone or an office on campus that has helped or supported you academically? Please explain.
19. What are some of the hardest things at being at this college?
20. If you could go back in time, would you still choose to attend this institution? Why or why not?
  - a. If not, what institution would you choose? Why?

#### **Persistence**

21. What keeps you in college?
  - a. (If attended multiple colleges) Thinking back on how you enrolled into different colleges, what motivated you to stay in college?
22. What role did your support systems (refer to people and offices identified earlier) play in your decision to stay in college?
  - a. Is there a story or experience you can share to help illustrate how your support system impacted your decision to stay in school?
23. Are there people in your community or family that serve as support for you to stay in college?
  - a. Whom?
  - b. How?

#### **[REDACTED] Experiences**

24. What was your experience like registering for classes?
  - a. How did you learn how to register for classes?
25. What was your experience like applying for financial aid?
  - a. How did you learn how to apply for financial aid?
26. What has been the most challenging part of being a Black woman in your major/classes?
  - a. Do you think being a Black female student impacts how you navigated the experience? If so, how?
27. How would you describe the way people within your major/classes treat you when it comes to class projects, or their willingness to study with you?
28. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities? For example, student orgs, honor societies, are you involved with? How do they support or detract from your academic goals?

29. Thinking back on your experiences thus far at [REDACTED] has there been an instance where you felt like you could be your whole self? Please explain.
30. Do you think attending [REDACTED] empowered you?

**Advice for institution**

31. What advice would you give incoming Black females attending this institution?
32. What do you wish you had known before coming to [REDACTED] that would've helped in your transition to this institution?
  - a. Is there an experience you have had that stands out or captures your overall feelings about attending [REDACTED]
33. What policies or resources do you think are needed to help you and/or other Black women stay in college?
34. What do you want people to know about being a Black woman attending a community college? Academically? Socially?

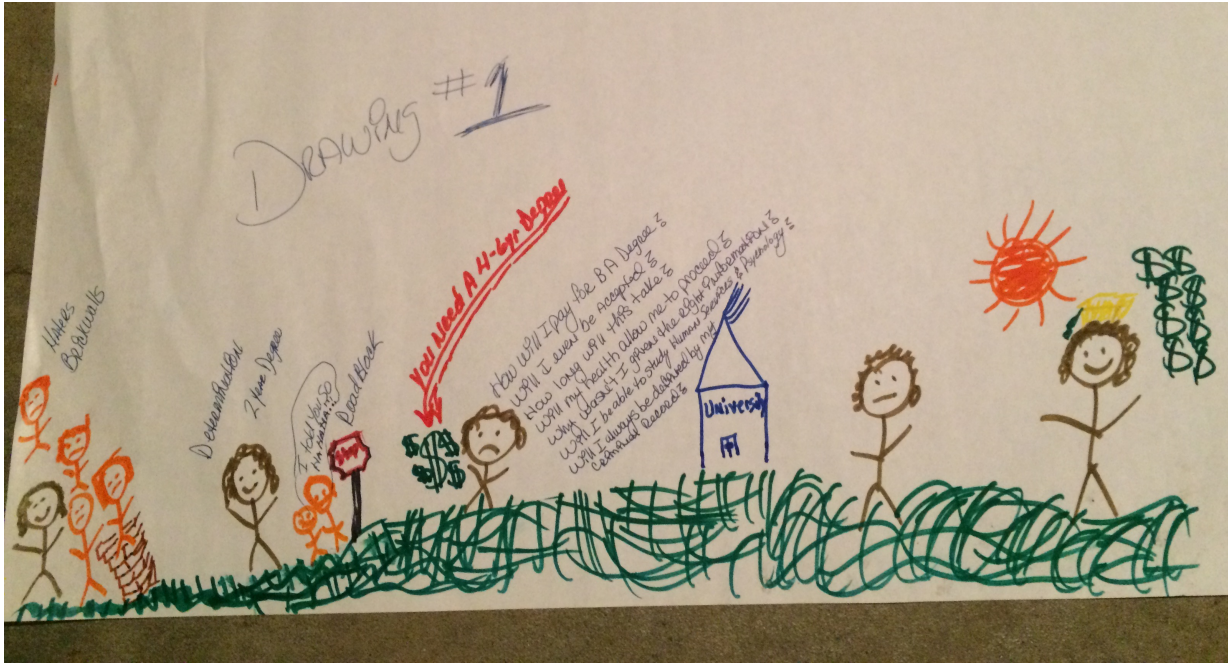


APPENDIX E. COUNTERNARRATIVE ILLUSTRATIONS

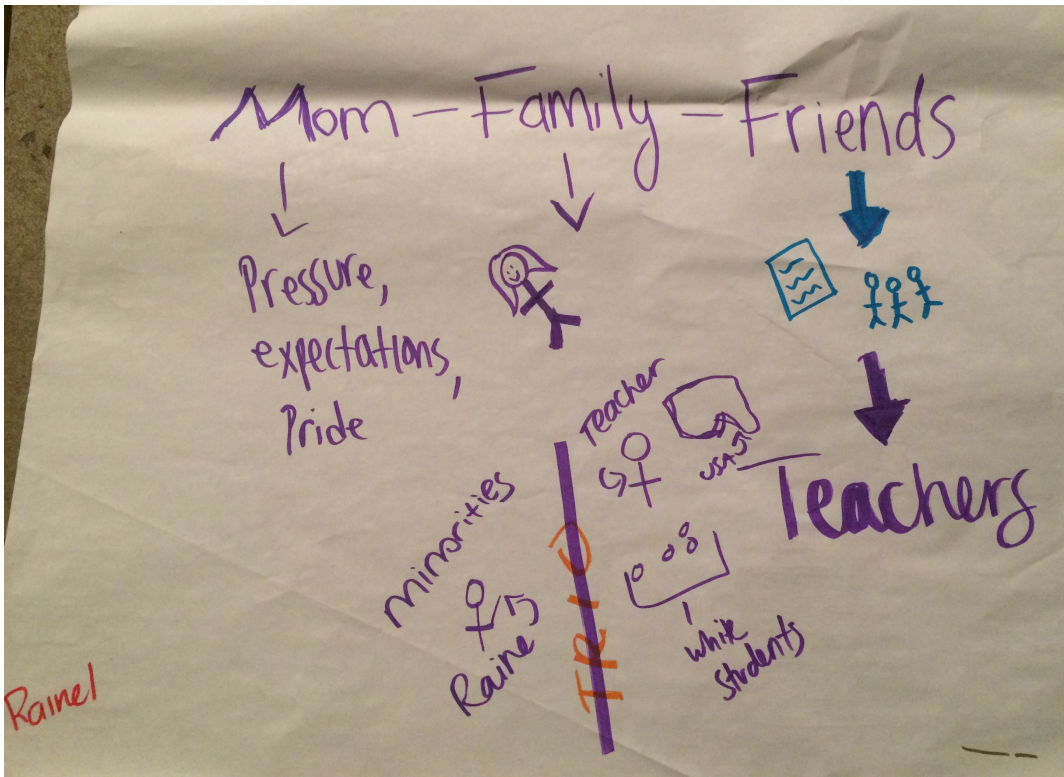
Alice's counternarrative



Janet's counternarrative



Raine's counternarrative-1





Raine's counternarrative-2



Tasha's counternarrative

