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BLACK COLLEGE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The Black College Student Experience at Four-Year Predominantly White Institutions and
Community Colleges: Non-Academic Factors for Consideration in Creating Sense of Belonging

A Dissertation Presented

by

Alison C. Handy

Submitted to the Graduate School of Education

Lesley University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Educational Leadership Specialization

The Black College Student Experience at Four-Year Predominantly White Institutions and
Community Colleges: Non-Academic Factors for Consideration in Creating Sense of Belonging

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Ph.D. Educational Studies

Educational Leadership Specialization

Approvals

In the judgement of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

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Dedication

I would like to thank God for carrying me through this journey! Overcoming the many challenges would not have been possible without His love and guidance. My heart belongs to you Lord!

To my family, I appreciate all of your support and encouragement along the way. The smiles, laughs, and hugs were an important part of me being able to endure and complete this major milestone – I love you all!

To my church family, friends, and colleagues, your prayers, encouraging words, and enthusiasm, were instrumental and helped me to stay motivated every step of the way. To those of you who called me “Dr. Handy”, long before today, your words were a constant reminder that this was doable – thank you!

To my committee members, I thank you for guiding and sticking with me. It took a little longer than I planned, but I am finally crossing the finish line. This was truly a marathon experience and I thank you for helping me to stay fit enough to run the race!

To myself – You go girl - You rock! Walk in the plans God has for you!

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Jeremiah 29:11 (New International Version)

Abstract

While Black students have gained increased access to college, the data reflect that there are fewer Black students completing or earning bachelor's degrees. Existing research reflects findings on various factors, both academic and non-academic, that influence student retention and success in higher education. Historically, theories on student retention and success have emphasized the importance of a student's academic ability and commitment to obtaining a degree. Scholars such as Vincent Tinto have developed theories on student departure and attrition that emphasize the impact of non-academic factors on academic and social integration and the student experience regarding student sense of belonging at an institution. Building on the work of Tinto and others, this phenomenological qualitative study was conceptually framed by six non-academic factors: (1) family relationships, (2) peer relationships, (3) faculty relationships, (4) financial aid, (5) race/campus climate, and (6) support services. A total of ten one-on-one interviews with both Black female and Black male participants was conducted via the Zoom virtual meeting platform. While some participants discussed experiences of transferring from four-year, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), all students were enrolled at community colleges at the time of the study. The findings of this study confirm that the six factors identified above influence Black student sense of belonging and reveal why some Black students transfer from four-year PWIs to community colleges. This study also shows the intersectionality of race/campus climate to peer and faculty relationships and institutional support services (e.g., Black student clubs, affinity groups, fraternities, and sororities). Additionally, the findings revealed nuances in Black student identity related to cultural distinctions among Black students of African American, Caribbean, and African descent in relation to the student-to-family relationship. Broadly, the implications of this research provide

insights into the impact of various relationships and institutional supports on Black students. This research highlights the importance of sense of belonging and the need for higher education officials to consider factors beyond academics regarding the retention and success of Black college students.

Keywords: Black, sense of belonging, non-academic, community college, students

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Chapter One: Introduction

The urgency to obtain a college degree is a core component of the “American dream”. This dream is heavily focused on individual and/or group economic prosperity (Wise, 2011). According to Wise (2011), “...access to college is access to economic mobility for the underserved populations...” (p.18). Based on this premise, Wise (2011) and Eakins and Eakins (2017) proposed that having a college degree would offer African Americans, as an underserved group in higher education, an opportunity to achieve the American dream of increased economic success and improved quality of life. In agreement, Tinto (1993) states, “Nevertheless, it is commonly recognized that a college degree, especially a four-year degree, is an important certificate of occupational entry without which access to prestigious positions in society becomes measurably more difficult” (pp.1-2). With this understanding of the benefits of earning a college degree, it is important to expand our knowledge of and insights into how Black undergraduate students make sense of their college experience, with the goal of helping to ensure their retention and success toward graduation.

Discussions in higher education contexts regarding student success are typically centered on the retention and graduation rates of college students. Whether at a two-year or four-year institution, increasing retention and graduation rates have become a high priority for institutions across the country. As a result of increased access, there are more Black students attending college today than in the 1990s. However, low graduation rates for this population remain a challenge. From 2010 to 2018, the overall average enrollment rate for all 18- to 24-year-olds was 41% of the U.S. college-going population. Of that group, 37% were Black students (NCES, 2019). Yet, in 2010, of students 18 to 24 years old who started at four-year bachelor’s degree-granting institutions, Black students represented 21% of the graduating cohort (NCES, 2019).

Furthermore, from 2019 to 2020, of the community college students who graduated within three years, 28% were Black (Camardelle, et al., 2022). That said, scholars posit that increasing the retention and graduation rates of Black students in higher education would result in increased employment rates of Blacks in America (Bivens, 2016; Camardelle et al., 2022). This would result in Black graduates obtaining better-paying jobs and increased economic stability that moves them closer to the American dream (Baker et al., 2017; Bivens, 2016; Camardelle et al., 2022; Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Tinto, 1993). With this logic in mind, an exploration was warranted to understand the reasons why Black students have low graduation rates. This study was necessary to determine how various factors can influence the Black college student experience and in turn graduation rates, for the purpose of ensuring that the higher education environment is conducive to the success of Black students (Bivens, 2016).

In today's job market, there is great demand for workers who have educational achievements beyond a high school diploma (Camardelle et al., 2022). For underrepresented groups in the U.S., the path to achieving a college degree can be challenging. The number of jobs requiring some form of a college education (i.e., associate or bachelor's degree) has doubled since the early 1980s. This is an indication that a lack of achievement in postsecondary education can significantly decrease a person's chances for upward economic mobility (Executive Office of the President, 2014). It emphasizes that increased demand for academic credentials in the workplace will require continued academic success, to ensure economic increase (Bivens, 2016; Eakins & Eakins, 2017).

Removing existing barriers within higher education that delay Black college student achievement and therefore advancement up the economic ladder should be a focal point of any institution. Understanding how Black students experience college sheds light on the external and

institutional factors that must be addressed to properly support their success. This study builds upon extant research by utilizing transparent testimonies of Black students enrolled at community colleges to highlight factors for institutional consideration that will inform and support Black student success more broadly (Burke, 2019).

Black Students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)

For some Black students who choose to enroll at PWIs, the journey can be challenging. Although PWIs may appear racially diverse, many of these institutions still confront barriers to retaining and graduating students of color (McClain & Perry, 2017). While some PWIs boast increased percentages of Black student enrollment and increased graduation rates, the reality is that these retention and graduation numbers are still low (Burtrywicz, 2011). A study conducted by Doug (2020) of a four-year PWI found the graduation rate was 36% for African American students compared to 63% for White students. This suggests that Black students, though admitted to an institution, are not staying to complete their degrees at these institutions. Factors such as race and campus climate, building relationships with faculty and peers, financial challenges and external support all play a role in the student experience and decision to stay or leave an institution (Baker & Robnett, 2012). Whether facing challenges related to microaggressions of racism and stereotypes, difficulties in building relationships with faculty and peers, or feeling disconnected from the institution, Black students must establish mechanisms for coping. If unable to cope with the anxiety and pressures of attending PWIs, Black students can become disconnected and may leave an institution in search of other opportunities for success (Benton, 2001; Tinto, 1993).

Sometimes when Black students leave a four-year PWI an assumption regarding their departure is that they are not as academically prepared as their White peers for the rigors of

college (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004; Lee & Barnes, 2015). Guiffrida (2006) characterizes this as an “academic mismatch” resulting from a lack of proper college preparation for Black students when they are in high school. Focused on the college admissions process, this *mismatch* suggests that Black students who are admitted to more selective institutions and do not achieve a degree are not academically ready. All high school students are typically considered college ready at the point of graduation. However, for Black students representing specific demographic cohorts (i.e., low income, first generation), there are lingering questions about their academic ability and whether they can be academically successful at selective institutions (Guiffrida, 2006; MacNear & Hunter, 2023; McGill, 2015).

McGill (2015) stated, “Over the past 20 years, Black enrollment in colleges and universities has skyrocketed.... But at top-tier universities in the United States, it’s a different story” (p.2). At these top tier universities, which tend to be PWIs, the Black student undergraduate enrollment averaged 6% during this time. According to McGill (2015), the number of Black students enrolled at top four-year schools, such as UCLA, Florida State, and University of Michigan, has declined during this period, and the success or graduation rates are low (McGill, 2015). Black students at PWIs will experience the day-to-day aspects of college differently than their peers at other types of institutions such as HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) or community colleges (Harris & Wood, 2013). For example, there are differences related to race or culture that impact the student experience (Sedlacek, 1999; Xu & Webber, 2018). With a deeper exploration of Black student PWI experiences, PWIs can implement best practices that specifically relate to the needs of Black students that can in turn influence an increase in Black student success.

Black Students at Community Colleges

Initially, community colleges were created to help prepare students to enter four-year colleges by offering associate degrees. The expectation was that students attending community colleges would be better academically prepared to transfer to four-year colleges and universities to pursue higher degrees (Wise, 2011). Today, these institutions are still a critical access point into higher education for Black students, preparing them to transition from either a terminal program into the workforce or to a four-year institution to obtain a bachelor's degree. With an open access model to enrollment, community colleges are institutions that have opened doors for more Black students to attend college. Considered non-selective institutions, community colleges tend to have non-stringent admission requirements including no application fees, SAT scores, or essays. This results in an easier, less stressful admissions process for students (Camardelle et al., 2022). Scholars have surmised that having this less selective college acceptance process has disqualified community colleges from acquiring status among the elite institutions (Bivens, 2016; Harris & Wood, 2013; Tinto, 1993).

Overall, community college institutions enroll a disproportionately high number of Black students (Biven, 2016; Wise, 2011). According to Bivens (2016), in the fall of 2014 community colleges across the U.S. had a total enrollment of 12.3 million students. This represented approximately 45% of all higher education undergraduate students. A more detailed disaggregation of the data revealed that Black students represented 52% of this enrollment (AACC, 2016). Regarding the awarding of academic credentials, community colleges award Black students more certificates than other ethnic groups. Additionally, for the 2019-2020 academic year, Black community college students were awarded 47% of the associate degrees awarded throughout the U.S (Camardelle et al., 2022).

For institutions like community colleges, there is an assumption that retention and persistence among minoritized student populations is higher. This assumption is related to community colleges having maintained an open access model for college enrollment (Bivens, 2016; Camardelle et al., 2022). However, overall graduation rates for Black students remains low throughout the U.S. except at HBCUs. According to Bivens (2016) the overall degree completion rate in 2012 at community colleges for Black students was 13.7 percent, which is the lowest for minority groups represented (i.e., including Latinx, Asian, and White). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showed that conferral of associate degrees for Black U.S. citizens and permanent residents in 2018-2019 was 12.4 percent, which is significantly lower than the 52.4 percent conferred on White students (NCES, 2020). The community college approach to success allows students the opportunity to pursue the path to college success at their own pace, and at a much lower cost than a four-year institution. This approach has made college a viable option for many Black students.

Research shows that completing a community college education can lead to profitable careers. Although the community college experience provides Black students more options and flexibility, obstacles remain that can delay or prevent student success. Understanding how these students navigate the community college environment in relation to non-academic factors bolsters understanding of the overall Black college student experience (Biven, 2016; Camardelle et al., 2022; Horn, 2006; Wiggins et al., 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore some of the non-academic factors that have been found to influence the Black college student's experience at four-year PWIs and two-year or community colleges. The six non-academic factors explored were (1) Family

support, (2) Peer relationships, (3) Faculty relationships, (4) Financial support, (5) Race/campus climate, and (6) Student support programs/services (Baker & Robnett, 2012; Beasley, 2021; Bivens, 2016; Johnson, 2013; Mwangi et al., 2019; Sedlacek 1999; Wiggins et al., 2022). These factors were all explored within the context of sense of belonging for Black students at PWIs and community colleges. While increased access and academic ability are critical factors for student success, there is an abundance of scholarship that emphasizes the impact of non-academic factors on the student sense of belonging (Beasley, 2021; Bivens, 2016; Cody, 2017; De Bruyn & Van Eekert, 2023; Sinanan, 2016; Snijders et al., 2021; Tinto, 2017). With increased sense of belonging, scholars believe that there is a greater likelihood of persistence and student success. Expanding our knowledge of how Black students experience the non-academic factors is key to better understanding how these students navigate the non-academic challenges on the path to degree completion.

While academic preparedness is an important criterion for student success, it is not the only factor to consider when examining the college student experience (Doug, 2020). In efforts to ensure that more underrepresented students graduate with stronger credentials and can enter and compete in the workforce, expanding examination of factors that influence the experience beyond college access is necessary (Executive Office of the President, 2014; Tinto, 2017). Consistent themes throughout existing research reveal that the student experience is influenced by various factors, many of which extend beyond academic preparedness. According to social integration theories, from scholars such as Tinto (1993, 2017) and Johnson (2022) these factors are related to the student's sense of belonging. Some critical points for consideration regarding sense of belonging include understanding how students experience relationships with faculty and peers, family support, financial support, and other aspect of how the student engages with the

campus environment (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciorski, 2011; Sedlacek, 1999; Tinto, 2017; Wood & Harrison, 2014). For Black students, frequently mentioned themes include the importance of retaining Black faculty and staff, having a racially diverse campus environment, peer interactions, and student engagement activities like affinity groups (i.e., Black Student Union) that help foster healthy student interactions and connection to the institution (Johnson, 2022; Love, 2009; Taylor, 2021; Xu & Webber, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

Advancing socioeconomically is a goal that many strive to achieve. One pathway to this accomplishment runs through the door of postsecondary education. However, while U.S. higher education has strived to improve opportunities for college access, barriers still exist which can inhibit college degree achievement for many students. Regardless of the type of institution a student attends, one of two truths emerges for all students related to student success: a student will either persist to degree completion and graduate, or encounter obstacles that eventually prohibit degree attainment (Taylor, 2021). While relishing the accomplishments of students who achieve a college degree, we must simultaneously increase the urgency associated with assisting those students who do not. For Black college students, typically referred to as an underrepresented racial group in higher education contexts, the journey to college degree attainment can be filled with experiences that delay or prohibit degree attainment. According to Bivens (2016), some members of this population include students who are working outside of the institution, caring for multiple dependents, and from low-income backgrounds. These characteristics become hurdles that these students must overcome in their quest for degree attainment. None of these characteristics necessarily prevents student success, but instead can delay completion.

For Black students who experience delayed degree attainment, completion typically occurs at a lower rate than their other racially disaggregated peers (Krogstad & Fry, 2014). For example, according to Camardelle et al., (2022) in 2019 -2020, only 28% of Black community college students graduated within 150% of the normal completion time (3 years) compared to Asians (44%), Whites (39%), and Hispanics (34%). Additionally, for students starting in 2010 at four-year bachelor's degree granting institution, the graduation rates within 100% of normal completion time (4 years) were lowest for Blacks (21.4%) compared to those of Asians (50%), Whites (45.2%), and Hispanics (31.7%) (NCES, 2019). This low rate of postsecondary degree attainment can result in lower earned wages in comparison to other racially minoritized groups in the U.S. (Camardelle, 2022). Recognizing the importance of having a college degree, and the degree's potential impact on a Black person's socioeconomic status, further exploration of how Black students are experiencing college is necessary.

Although degree attainment is typically seen as the culmination of an individual's ability to perform academically, research has indicated there is a correlation between academic and social or non-academic factors of student success and how the latter factors influence the student's experience (Johnson 2022; Love, 2009; Taylor, 2021; Tinto, 2017; Xu & Webber, 2018). This study focuses on how six nonacademic factors (race/campus climate, financial aid/support, family relationships, peer-to-peer relationships, faculty-to-student relationships, and student support services) shape the Black undergraduate student experience.

Background of the Problem

According to data from the U.S. Department of Labor, in 2008, the average weekly full-time salary worker's earnings for Black employees was \$529 compared to \$742 for White employees. This results in approximately a \$11,076 annual income disparity for Black

employees (Lee, 2010). Based on Lee (2010), this gap in economic equity is reflective of the gap in education and college degree attainment, which contributes to significant socioeconomic disparities among Blacks and Whites. In order to improve the socioeconomic status of Blacks in society, obtaining an undergraduate college education is vital (Camardelle et al., 2022).

Decreasing the economic equity gap for Blacks requires a simultaneous decrease in the college degree attainment gaps for Blacks. As such, institutional priorities and strategies must progress beyond simply increasing access to college. McGill (2015) suggests that more Black students are attending college today than in the 1980s. While access to obtaining postsecondary credentials has increased for racially underrepresented minority groups, it is not enough to overcome the existing gaps in socioeconomic status (Tinto, 2017). With increased opportunities for access, an increase in retention and graduation rates would be expected. However, this is not the case as Black college student retention and graduation rates have remained low in comparison to other racial and ethnic student populations (Johnson, 2013; NCES, 2019). Higher education must bolster efforts to support Black student persistence toward academic success and degree completion.

A report in 2008 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showed that at four-year predominantly White institutions, Black student enrollment was 14% compared to 68% for White students (Johnson, 2013). In 2016, the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, released a report that compared the college enrollment rates for Black and White students during the 1990-2013 academic years. This report reflected the total enrollment rate for 18 to 24 year-olds enrolled in two or four-year colleges and universities immediately after high school graduation. For White students the enrollment rate was 42%, which was higher than the 34% for Black students (NCES, 2019). There was a similar enrollment rate reflected for 18- 24-year-olds

in 2020, with the statistics associated with Blacks (34%) and Whites (41%) showing minimal change within the previous seven years. Research data also reflects that Black college student graduation rate averages have been significantly lower than those of White college students (NCES, 2023). In 2012, while Black students represented 14% of the total enrollment for college students ages 18 - 24 in the U.S., they earned only 9% of the total bachelor's degrees granted (Krogstad & Fry, 2014). While the importance of degree attainment has focused on increasing a person's economic status, there are other underlying benefits suggested in research. A report from Education Trust (2018) suggests that some of the social benefits associated with increased economic status include a lower likelihood of crime and incarceration, better health, and less reliance on public assistance programs. All of these outcomes not only benefit the individual but also society as a whole (Education Trust, 2018; Krogstad & Fry, 2014).

During the 1994 – 2013 period, four-year PWIs (whether public or private) experienced a shrinkage in their Black student undergraduate enrollments (Krogstad & Fry, 2014). This decrease in enrollment rates translated into low graduation rates, which significantly decreased the potential for Blacks to earn higher wages, therefore limiting the possibility of increasing their economic stability (Camardelle et al., 2022). A 2016 Hechinger report revealed the top ten states in the U.S. with the widest gaps in college degree attainment, between Black and White undergraduate college students. This report focused on public two-year and four-year institutions. As shown in Table 1, the percentage point gaps between Black and White student degree attainment for each state ranged from 18 to 24 points, with White student degree achievement percentages always being higher (Kolodner, 2016).

Table 1*Top Ten States with Widest Gaps in Black and White College Student Degree Attainment*

State	Black Students	White students	Point Gap
West Virginia	24%	48%	24 points
Wisconsin	22%	45%	23 points
North Carolina	28%	50%	22 points
Connecticut	29%	50%	21 points
Massachusetts	32%	53%	21 points
Minnesota	27%	47%	20 points
Colorado	34%	53%	19 points
Ohio	24%	42%	18 points
Nevada	24%	42%	18 points
California	33%	51%	18 points

Note. Degree holders were counted in their state of residence, which is not necessarily the state where they attended college. These data were taken from the Young Invincibles Project, 2016 Report Card, Lumina Foundation. (Kolodner, 2016).

Recognition of the inequities in degree attainment by institutions of higher education is the first step in addressing the changes needed to better support the Black college student's experience and increase their chances of success. The differences in degree completion rates among Black and White college students are drastic. Hence, understanding reasons why some Black students have more challenging experiences than others is critical to responding and effectively supporting their journey through college (Taylor, 2021). In the fall of 2007, among first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their degree at a four-year institution, 21% of Black students and 43% of White students graduated within four years. Of that same

cohort, 41% of Black students and 63% of White students graduated within six years (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; NCES, 2019). These differences in degree completion rates not only highlight the educational disparities between Black and White college students, but they also convey the urgency of the issue: too many Black students do not make it through college.

The juxtaposition of increased college attendance rates of Black students with the decreased college completion rates of Black students leads to the question: what are the non-academic factors that challenge Black students' success or graduation rates from college? To assist Black students in successfully navigating the challenges of college access, persistence, and degree completion, institutions must have a holistic understanding of the Black college student experience (Wood & Harrison, 2014). Having a more comprehensive view of how Black students experience PWIs and community colleges provides insights into strategies that better support student success. These strategies will assist in preventing Black student departure and removing hurdles that can cause delays in Black student degree completion.

Methods

This study is a phenomenological exploration of the lived experiences of ten Black undergraduate male and female students. These students attended a four-year PWI and/or a two-year or community college. This form of research methodology provides an opportunity to learn about the common or shared experiences of Black undergraduate students. Participants at the time of the study had not completed an undergraduate degree. As is characteristic of phenomenological research, these participants were interviewed regarding their college experience. In an effort to better understand their journey, this study provided an opportunity for Black college students to share their experiences at the various institutions they attended. The six non-academic factors explored in this study were (1) Family support, (2) Peer relationships, (3)

Faculty relationships, (4) Financial support, (5) Race/campus climate, and (6) Student support programs/services (Baker & Robnett, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Sedlacek 1999). Based on these six factors, participants shared stories that included their successes, challenges, strategies for coping, and shared suggestions for institutional improvements.

Guiding Research Questions

The following research questions provided a roadmap for examining the Black college student journey.

1. What are the non-academic factors that influence the Black college student experience?
2. How do Black college students make sense of the non-academic factors that shape their college experience?
3. How do Black college students describe the challenges and successes on their journey to college completion?

These questions acknowledge the many layers and dimensions of the higher education journey and the importance of the Black student voice. These questions also focus on finding solutions that will assist administrators at PWIs and community colleges to more effectively support Black students.

Significance of the Study

Increasing knowledge about the influence of non-academic factors on the Black college student experience is vital. The significant differences in retention and graduation rates among races suggests that further exploration of this phenomenon was warranted. Increasing Black student success will require the help of many professionals both in and outside the field of education. Findings from this research benefit educators at both the pre-college and college levels. For precollege/high school staff (e.g., administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors),

this study provides important information regarding factors influencing the successes and challenges when attending a four-year PWI or two-year/community college. Although these professionals are familiar with the college preparation process, there is a tendency to highlight mainly how these factors can be barriers for Black students, which can result in a deficit-focused view of how to support Black students (Taylor, 2021). Based on the stories of the study participants, it appears that knowledge about both successes and challenges can help precollege/high school staff to formulate a more balanced perspective and dialogue. This would place more of a focus on institutional obligation rather than on Black student's assumed deficiencies and unpreparedness.

This study also equips higher education professionals, including admissions, recruitment, and advising personnel, as well as faculty and administrators at four-year PWIs and two-year or community colleges. It informs these professionals about potential programs, services, and best practices to properly support Black students during their college journey. The insights gleaned from this study highlight various ways that one can effectively support Black students to increase the persistence and retention rates of this student population. The stories shared by the study participants are a window into some of the experiences that are part of the Black college student journey. They bolster the rationale and framework for developing or enhancing services for these students.

For Black college students and their families, these findings provide insight into what prospective Black college students can expect to experience, should they decide to attend a four-year PWI or two-year or community college. Additionally, this research benefits community organizations who partner with these institutions to provide support services for Black college students. Having an increased knowledge and awareness results in a better institutional

understanding of the needs of Black college students. This additional knowledge will in turn increase the likelihood that effective and efficient student support services will be provided. The overarching expectation is that having appropriate services will enhance the Black college student experience. This, in turn, will increase the likelihood of retaining and graduating more Black students in higher education (Eakins & Eakins, 2017).

Assumptions and Limitations

For this research study, there were two main assumptions made about the Black student participants. The first assumption is that all participants were open and honest about their experiences at PWIs and community colleges. Typically, discussions dealing with “taboo” topics such as race have the potential to yield reluctant responses. That is, the participants may make efforts not to judge or offend others. Sometimes respondents are afraid that their comments and identities will be revealed, resulting in potential backlash (Grier-Reed et al., 2008).

The second assumption is that the experiences of these Black students are different from the experiences of their White peers – White students who have also attended PWIs or community colleges. In exploring the various factors associated with low Black student retention, it is important to keep in mind the potential for generalization. That is, some of these factors under investigation may be considerations in overall student retention among other ethnic groups, as well. However, while there are similarities in factors and barriers to student success among underrepresented groups, the retention data for Black students consistently reflects a lower level of college retention and achievement among this cohort (Bivens, 2016). This study provides an exploration of individual college student experiences. This will bolster the rationale for improving support services for Black students in college.

Defined Terms

As the U.S. has developed into a racially diverse entity, the preferred designations of various racial or ethnic groups have evolved (APA, 2019). It is important to utilize clearly defined terms in our conversations. Throughout the literature reviewed for this study, the authors varied in their usage of the terms African American, Black, and minority. For the purposes of this study, all three terms are representative of language used to define various student demographics within higher education. Recognizing the potential for varied meanings, the terminology defined in this section is intended to align the reader with the language of this document and of the topic under study.

Throughout this writing, the terms African American and Black were used interchangeably. Additionally, the term minority, at times, was used in an aggregated way to discuss multiple underrepresented populations in the research characterized by racial/ethnic group, sexual orientation, gender, socio-economic status, and persons with disabilities. In some of the literature cited, there was no clear distinction regarding who was included in the use of the above terms. It is uncertain why a more detailed designation was not used to identify students in the research. Efforts to disaggregate minority student data at times proved to be a challenging task. In an effort to preserve the authenticity of the cited literature and research findings, when appropriate, the above-mentioned terms are used interchangeably. For the purposes of the study, key additional terms are defined below.

Academic and Social Integration

A model of student retention that posits the interaction between the student and the academic and social systems of the institution which are important for a student to feel connected to the institution. This sense of connectedness therefore results in persistence to graduation.

Integration included interactions with peer groups, faculty, and other surrounding factors (Tinto, 2017).

African American

African American was defined as “an American who has African and especially Black African ancestors”. (Merriam Webster, 2016).

Black

For the purpose of this study, Black refers to any person(s) of Black descent whether U.S.-born or immigrating to the U.S. from outside. A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (NCES, 2023).

Community College

This type of institution is a public two-year college that offers associate degrees but not bachelor’s degrees (CCRC, 2021).

Completion

A college student graduating either: (a) in the time designated for the degrees or certificates offered, (b) after the time designated for the degrees or certificates offered. While these definitions focus on the completion of a degree program, it should be emphasized that institutions vary on how they define completion (Tinto, 1993, p.8).

Minority

Defined as a part of a population thought of as differing from the rest of the population in some characteristics and often subject to differential treatment. Minority was initially used to categorize racial or ethnic differences of persons in our society. However, over time, the definition of the word has expanded to include persons of other groups including LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), veterans, and women. This term is defined in this study

as a part of a population thought of as differing from the rest of the population in some characteristics and often subjected to differential treatment (Merriam Webster, 2023).

Predominantly White Institution (PWI)

An “institution whose population has historically been White and whose student population remains predominantly White [50% or more]” (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004, p.96).

Persistence

This term is defined as a college student’s continued enrollment from year two until graduation (Burke, 2019).

Retention

This term is defined as the continued enrollment of a college student from year one to year two (Burke, 2019).

Sense of Belonging

An essential characteristic of student persistence where a student “comes to see themselves as a member of a community of faculty, staff, and other students who value their participation, and that they matter and belong” (Tinto, 2017, p. 258).

Summary

This exploration of low Black student retention addresses the urgent need for improvements that enhance the Black student experience in U.S. higher education. In efforts to present a comprehensive view of the problem, this study highlights some of the participation trends of Black students in higher education. Chapter Two will provide further exploration of this topic through a review of existing literature. It will provide a contextual background of the Black college student experience and describe the conceptual framework that served as a foundation for this research study. Chapter Three will outline the details of the methodology

used to execute this study. It will explain the strategies used to gather the student data, including considerations given due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Chapter Four, real-life examples of Black undergraduate students' experiences are presented. These examples, provide a glimpse into the challenges and successes of Black college students. Findings from the student interviews are presented and grouped to help show themes and connections that emerged in the data. In addition to some brief demographic data points, the student voice is the centerpiece of the discussion in this chapter.

Chapter Five provides a discussion of the study findings against the backdrop of the literature reviewed for this study. The discussion also includes the implications of these research findings as they relate to practice. Chapter Five concludes with recommendations, including possible strategies for higher education institutions in their continued efforts to enhance the Black college student experience.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This review of literature is a journey through the annals of the Black student experience in college, specifically at Predominantly White four-year Institutions (PWI) and two-year or community colleges. This chapter explores current theories, perceptions, and understandings found in the scholarship regarding the Black college student experience in U.S. higher education. While not dismissing the importance of academic factors (i.e., grades, testing), this study is an emphasis on some of the critical non-academic factors found to influence the college experience. The six factors that were explored in this research are (1) Family support, (2) Peer relationships, (3) Faculty relationships, (4) Financial support, (5) Race/campus climate, and (6) Student support programs/services (Baker & Robnett, 2012; Cody, 2017; Johnson, 2013; Lee & Barnes, 2015; McCabe, 2023; Sedlacek, 1999; Wood & Harrison, 2014).

This review highlights some of the existing theories on the college student experience that center on social integration, student departure, persistence, and student success. Specifically, these considerations are reviewed as they relate to non-academic factors that specifically influence Black college students' experience. It focused specifically on Black students and the similarities and differences in their college experiences at four-year PWIs and two-year or community colleges. This exploration of research was guided by a desire to better understand how non-academic factors can positively or negatively impact Black college students as they persist towards degree attainment (Baker & Robnett, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Lee & Barnes, 2015; Xu & Webber, 2018).

In an effort to preserve the authenticity of the research cited, it is important to note that the terms “Black” and “African American” are used alternately throughout this review. In the literature reviewed, the use of the term “Black” sometimes reflected the inclusion of other

ethnicities besides African Americans, such as Black persons representing various international populations (e.g., African, Caribbean). This distinction is important as it acknowledges the presence of these other ethnicities. It is also a reminder of the need to consider other ethnic cultural norms and expectations that inform the lived experiences of Black college students (Bivens, 2016; Brooks, 2015; Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023; Leath et al., 2022; Thelamour et al., 2019).

Black Student Trends at Community Colleges

As explored in Chapter One, the initial purpose of community colleges in the U.S. was to prepare high school graduates for entry into the four-year university system. However, two-year/community colleges have become an appealing option for many prospective undergraduate college students desiring greater economic stability, but who are not likely to pursue an education at a four-year institution (Bivens, 2016; Camardelle et al., 2022). Historically, research on college student persistence, retention, and success has typically focused on the four-year college and university student experiences. As a result, college completion data have mainly reflected the trends of first-time, full-time student populations at four-year colleges and universities, thereby excluding the progress, trends, and experiences of two-year or community college students (Bivens, 2016; Stuart et al., 2014; Tinto, 2017).

While having a bachelor's degree typically propels a person's earnings beyond that of a community college graduate, the attainment of an associate degree or certificate can also increase a graduate's potential for higher earnings. Unlike four-year institutions, community colleges have an open access mission that affords general college acceptance to almost all persons who apply (Camardelle et al., 2022; Krogstad & Fry, 2014). Community college curricula provide both traditional career program opportunities and a plethora of technical education programs

(i.e., in aviation, precision machining, etc.) that can lead to recognized credentials. With perks including lower cost tuition, primarily non-selective admissions to many programs of study, and transfer pathways to bachelor's degree granting institutions, community colleges have been a gateway to meeting the higher education needs of underserved communities (Bivens, 2016, Camardelle et al., 2022).

The open access model of community colleges plays a key role in the annual enrollment numbers for these institutions. That is, community colleges for many years have enrolled a significant portion of the college student population in the United States (Bivens, 2016; Wise, 2011; Woods & Harrison, 2014). For example, of the total undergraduate student population enrolled in the fall of 2014 at U.S. institutions, 45% of the students (12.3 million) were enrolled at community colleges (Bivens, 2016). According to Bivens (2016), although these data are reflective of all races and ethnic backgrounds, the tendency to enroll at community colleges was most prevalent among Black students. Specifically, racial disaggregation of enrolled students at U.S. community colleges showed that more than half (52%, roughly 6.4 million students) of this total were Black students (Bivens, 2016). Over the years, Black student enrollment has fluctuated and recently during the COVID-19 pandemic reflected a decline. In the fall of 2021, the total community college enrollment was 5,736,736 students, with 43% of that total (roughly 2.5 million) representing Black students (Fink, 2023).

Based on Osbourne et al., (2021) an institution that exhibits a greater level of diversity (like a community college) is a place where Black students are more likely to feel like they belong. However, with the overrepresentation of Black students at community colleges, there are important points for consideration regarding the characteristics of Black college students. For example, scholars have found that Black community college students are more likely to be

parents of young children, be age 25 or older, and tend to be characterized as low income (Camardelle et al., 2022; Taylor, 2021). While these characteristics do not signify an inability by Black students to complete college, the intersectionality of these characteristics can compound the challenges to a Black student's academic success. It is imperative that higher education leaders understand how Black students are experiencing the college journey at community colleges in order to more effectively serve this population (Bivens, 2016; Camardelle et al., 2022; Wiggins et al., 2022).

Black Student Trends at Four-Year PWIs

Conversations regarding four-year institutions have typically been at the core of higher education discussions on student success. For high school graduates, deciding what type of academic institution to attend next is a decision that involves the consideration of many factors. These factors include location, cost, and campus racial climate. However, another factor for students and family to consider is the name and the academic reputation of the institution. For many students, whether because of family, peers, or other societal pressures, the initial inclination is to select and attend a four-year institution over community colleges (Harris & Wood, 2013).

While there are various types of four-year institutions that serve specific groups of diverse populations (i.e., HBCUs and HSIs – Hispanic Serving Institutions), most four-year institutions tend to be predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Education Trust, 2018). Some of the characteristics of four-year PWIs include higher tuition/fees costs, selective admissions, mostly full-time students, and on-campus housing. In the fall of the 2020-2021 academic year, four-year institutions enrolled approximately 60% (10,579,567) of all undergraduate college students in the United States. When disaggregated, the Black student enrollment rate was only

12% of this population. This has historically been one of the smallest student populations by race represented at four-year PWIs (NCES, 2023). It is important to note that these data reflect an aggregate of four-year institutions including HBCUs, suggesting that the Black student enrollment at PWIs could have been even lower.

The transition to college can be challenging for all students regardless of demographic characteristics or socioeconomic background. However, for Black students, this challenge is compounded by the various aspects of social integration and feeling a sense of belonging at PWIs. Although PWIs are sought after by Black students, many of whom do enroll and graduate from these institutions, a concern is that the Black student graduation rates from four-year PWIs are low (Leath et al., 2022; Lee & Barnes, 2015). A report by the National Student Clearing House Research Center (2017) showed that the Black student graduation rate in 2017 was 45.9 % at four-year public institutions. This percentage also included Black students who graduated from HBCUs.

Research shows that in preparation for attending college at PWIs, Black students typically may feel like they do not belong, like the institutions are not for them, or they will experience what Osbourne et al., (2021) calls “feeling othered”. The term, “othered”, refers to an inability to feel like one fits into the particular campus environment or dominant racial group. Learning how to socially adjust at PWIs will at times require that Black students deal with experiences of racism, lack of same race relationships, stereotypes, and assumptions. This is needed in order to cope and maintain the necessary self-efficacy to complete the college journey and graduate (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Lee & Barnes, 2015; Tinto, 2017).

Without the proper supports in place to assist them in persisting through college, scholars suggest that Black students at PWIs are more likely to drop out than their peers from other racial

groups (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Osbourne et al., 2021; Tinto 2017). To increase Black student graduation rates at four-year PWIs, and with the acknowledgment that Black students have indeed been successful at PWIs, it is critical that higher education professionals continue to examine the many factors that contribute to the Black student experience and persistence. (Taylor, 2021).

Student Persistence and Success

In considering the student experience and expectations of the college journey, persistence is highlighted as a key indicator of a student's ability to complete a course of study. According to Bivens (2016), persistence as defined by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NCRC) as "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" (p.6). Bivens (2016) also suggests persistence "is the extent to which personal and institutional support are in place for students to remain enrolled in college from one semester to the next" (p.6). That said, in order for institutions to provide effective support, they must continue to explore and dissect the student experience and the core factors that influence persistence and retention.

The adjustment to any institution requires a student to learn how to navigate the college culture to interact with peers, faculty/staff, and the policies and processes that are a part of the institution. Traditional perspectives on student success have typically resulted in the institution questioning the individual student's desire, will, commitment, and or assumed academic ability to achieve a degree (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004; Burke, 2019; Tinto, 2017). The ability to graduate and achieve a degree or other credential is seen as an overall demonstration of the student's academic capability. If unable to achieve academic success, research shows students

will exhibit a decreased motivation to persist, and many eventually drop out of school (Burke, 2019; De Bruyn & Van Eekert, 2023; Tinto, 1993, 2017).

Throughout the evolution of college student success research, the academic ability of students of color has been challenged and debated many times over. An initial assumption has been that Black students are ill-prepared academically and unable to keep up with the rigors of college work (McCulloh, 2022; Tinto, 2017; Wiggins et al., 2022; Wood & Harrison, 2014). According to Brower and Ketterhagen (2004), while it may seem that Black students are academically ill-prepared, the challenge to achieve academic success is more a result of an institutional *mismatch*. At PWIs, the authors highlight that Black students must navigate and adapt to many *formal* and *informal* rules and expectations in order to succeed. For Black students, having to adapt to larger campuses can complicate the transition. Some research affirms that learning how to adapt to the institutional cultures and methods of functioning can be disruptive to Black student success at PWIs. This adaptation requires intense support (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004; McCulloh, 2022).

Vincent Tinto (1993) stated that “to fully understand the factors influencing the college student experience, we must first understand our prevailing view of this topic” (p.1). Tinto (2017) later references how higher education has a tendency to primarily focus on what he calls institutional action. This view focuses on the question, “What can institutions do to retain their students?” (Tinto, 2017, p.254). Though critically relevant, as we consider areas for improvement in education, this question can at times overshadow the importance of the individual student experience. That is, from this perspective, the institutions’ efforts to improve student support and success mainly focus on the benefits to the institutions. Searching for solutions to barriers typically takes place without much direct input from the students

themselves. At times, this approach can result in very minimal improvement in the student experience. This is an experience that Tinto suggests is key in understanding reasons why students leave or stay and persist through college (Tinto, 2017).

Exploration of issues surrounding student retention has resulted in the development of various theories around student departure. Much extant scholarship on increasing college student retention and completion rates and supporting sense of belonging focuses on the social integration and engagement aspect of the student experience (Bivens, 2016; Leath et al., 2022; Tinto, 2017). Tinto (1993, 2017) in his theories of student departure and academic and social integration and Burke (2019) suggest that a student who is integrated into their institution both academically and socially is more likely to persist and graduate. Both authors emphasize a correlation between the student's level of social interaction with the institution and the student's sense of belonging.

To help students better integrate into the culture of the institution, Tinto (2017) and Burke (2019) remind us that all students come to college with unique pre-college characteristics and experiences. These elements help determine the level to which a student becomes integrated into the culture of the institution. The list of pre-college attributes includes family background, socio-economic status, race, gender, age, etc. (Bivens, 2016; McCulloh, 2022; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Wood & Harrison, 2014). The more a student becomes integrated socially and academically at the institution, the greater the likelihood of institutional commitment and graduation. Having a better understanding of how these characteristics influence the day-to-day lives and decisions made by the student is critical. This understanding will help the institution to create an environment that will support the student and increase the potential for student retention and persistence (Tinto, 2017).

Scholars posit that this focus on social integration is more applicable to four-year institutions and less critical for the non-residential community college structure. The reason for this is that community college students generally spend limited time on campus, reducing the intensity of potential social interactions and integration (Stuart, et al., 2014). Instead, other factors are suggested as being more critical to community college student persistence and success. These factors include academic advising and discussions with family or peers that help students formulate strategies to achieve career goals. This distinction underscores the importance of other kinds of relationships in the student experience (Bueno et al., 2022; Cody, 2017; Leath et al., 2022; Stuart et al., 2014).

Similarly, Xu and Webber (2018), in agreement with Tinto's academic and social integration theories, emphasize the importance of other less-obvious factors. Such factors include peer and faculty relationships, campus engagement and the intersectionality in how institutions provide support to students. However, recognizing the generalities of Tinto's (1993) initial integration theories, Xu and Webber (2018) caution colleges and universities officials against assuming that the issues of underrepresented minority students (like Black students), are identical to those of majority or White students. Such assumptions, they warn, can lead to presumptions that result in "one size fits all" solutions. Additionally, it is interesting to note that Tinto's (1993, 2017) social integration theory does not focus on the relationship of financial support as a factor or condition for consideration in student retention.

McGill (2015) in an article on Black student enrollment trends stated the following: "Over the past 20 years, Black enrollment in colleges and universities has skyrocketed.... But at top-tier universities in the United States, it's a different story. There, the share of students who are Black has actually dropped since 1994" (p.2). Considering McGill's statement, which

references the decline of Black college student enrollment, the tendency in much of the existing scholarship suggests many Black students are unprepared or underprepared for the rigors of the college journey. Therefore, questioning the academic aptitude of Black students (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004; Camardelle et al., 2022; Lee & Barnes, 2015; McGill 2015; Stuart et al., 2022; Wood & Harrison, 2014). Although applicable to some Black students, this tendency toward deficit thinking regarding Black student persistence and student success negates the fact that Black students can and have achieved academic success at all types of higher education institutions. With this fact in mind, Tinto's theory of social integration highlights the importance of looking at factors beyond a student's academic ability in examining factors contributing to student retention and success (Taylor, 2021; Tinto, 1993, 2017).

COVID-19 Pandemic

An additional point of consideration is the impact of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic on students, specifically Black students. In March 2020, efforts to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak caused a widespread disruption in day-to-day functioning across the world (De Bryun & Van Eekert, 2023; Hartzell et al., 2021). Once the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global health crisis, governing officials all over the world ordered the closing of all schools and non-essential businesses. Abrupt closures of dormitories, social distancing mandates to remain six feet apart, the need to wear protective masks, and a shift to remote learning were all changes that signified a "new normal" for the world (Bisconer & McGill, 2023; De Bryun & Van Eekert, 2023).

This drastic disruption to the way of life resulted in challenges, stressors, and concerns for future health and well-being. While the impact of COVID-19 is still in the early stages of investigation, research shows that COVID-19 did not affect us all equally. According to a recent

study by Hartzell et al. (2021), one of the racial groups that was most heavily impacted by COVID-19 was the Black community. Based on recent scholarship, Black Americans were 2.6 times more likely to be infected by the virus. Additionally, Black households were more likely to experience job and income loss during the pandemic. Furthermore, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has had reports of increase levels of anxiety and depressions among the Black community, because of the disproportionate economic and health effects of COVID-19 (Landertinger et al., 2021). As the world continues to regain its stability and higher education attempts to rebound from the increased number of student departures, there is a greater sense of urgency to consider non-academic factors in student success (Bisconer & McGill, 2023; De Bryun & Van Eekert, 2023).

Conceptual Framework: Beyond Academic Factors

The task of ensuring equal access and opportunities for everyone in education has emphasized the need to “level the playing field”. Attempts to better understand Black students’ persistence, retention, and success have expanded beyond examining only the influence of academic factors such as student SAT scores, IQ tests, grades, and placement testing scores (Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Lee & Barnes, 2015). In efforts to better understand why students leave or persist through their academic journey, scholars suggest having a more comprehensive view of the student experience, which includes studying non-academic factors.

Researchers such as Museus et al., (2020), Taylor (2021), Tinto (2017), and Wood and Harrison (2014) are calling for a deeper exploration of factors beyond academic preparedness. Their focus is on the students’ ability to socially-integrate with their academic institutions, which increases the development of a student’s sense of belonging. The current study was an exploration of six specific non-academic factors that scholars have found to influence the student

experience (Baker & Robnett, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Lee & Barnes, 2015; Tinto, 1993, 2017).

The six non-academic factors explored in this study are: (1) Family support, (2) Peer relationships, (3) Faculty relationships, (4) Financial support, (5) Race/campus climate, and (6) Student support programs/services (Baker & Robnett, 2012; Cody, 2017; Johnson, 2013; Lee & Barnes, 2015; McCabe, 2023; Sedlacek, 1999; Wood & Harrison, 2014). All factors were specifically explored within the context of the Black college student experience. This study explored how these factors contribute to Black student sense of belonging, causing Black students to persist and graduate from their respective institutions (Baker & Robnett, 2012; Beasley, 2021; Bivens, 2016; Johnson, 2013; McCabe, 2023; Mwangi et al., 2019; Sedlacek, 1999; Tinto 1993, 2017; Wiggins et al., 2022).

Existing knowledge of how Black students experience college continuously reflects that social, economic, and the racial campus environments can all significantly influence Black student sense of belonging. Which can result in potential barriers to the academic progress and success of these students (McCabe, 2023; Nagbe et al., 2020; Thelamour et al., 2019). With this consideration of the social factors for student success, we must reevaluate our system of higher education to effectively serve and support Black students throughout their college journey.

Family Support

Every year, millions of high school students enter college and are faced with a myriad of challenges. These challenges require them to navigate new surroundings, roles, and responsibilities in their quest to develop autonomy and independence. Some of these challenges include acclimating to new environments, incurring loan debt, and having to function without the usual family support and guidance (McCulloh, 2022). The experiences of a student once (s)he enters college, particularly during the first year, can have a significant effect on his/her success

(Baker & Robnett, 2012; Bivens; 2016; Tinto, 2017). The adjustment from high school to college is an important step in an individual's psychosocial development. For example, Workman (2015) stated that "the foundation for career decisions begins long before a student enters college" (p.23). For many students, their decisions about college and career choices are heavily influenced by family both prior to and during the college journey (Bueno et al., 2022).

The transition from high school to college also signifies a transition from familial dependence to greater independence. However, although mature in some aspects of adulthood, students still rely on the support of family members. The first year of college can present several stressors (i.e., paying for college, developing new relationships, adapting to a new learning environment) which can both directly and indirectly impact the student's ability to succeed academically in a college setting (De Bruyn & Van Eekert, 2023; Yan et al., 2022). For Black students, the role of family support both prior to and during the first year of college has been found to be an important factor for success. Within African American/Black culture, having strong familial relationships is central and considered a strength that is sometimes overlooked in the research (Brooks, 2015). Sandoval-Lucero et al., (2014) carried out a study regarding African American and Latino community college students. In their study, familial relationships were found to be a contributor to student success in college. Families showed their support through efforts such as assisting with financial obligations (i.e., paying tuition and other expenses), emotional support and encouragement or providing counsel/advice (Bueno et al., 2022; McCulloh, 2022; Onuma et al., 2022). Additional outpourings of family support are expressed in instances of family members enrolling and attending classes together at the same institution. All of these examples highlight ways that minority families support their children's aspirations to go to college (Baker & Robnett, 2012; McCulloh, 2022; Onuma et al., 2022).

In a study of Black students attending a four-year institution, one student shared, “not working is a lot of help...I have more time and am able to just focus on school...” (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014, p.529). Findings from this study show that family support both encouraged and empowered minority and specifically Black students to persist through fears or concerns they might have had as they journeyed through college. Additionally, in African American/Black families, because of the willingness to persist in their academic endeavors, these students were seen as role models for friends and younger family members (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014).

Edelman (2013) conducted a study that examined the effects of parental involvement on the college student’s first year transition. In Edelman’s study, six college freshmen were interviewed using questions pertaining to the student-to-parent relationships, and the parent’s level of involvement in the college preparation process (i.e., filling out applications, financial assistance, visiting colleges). Edelman explored whether these students felt their parents’ involvement contributed to their college transition experience. All six of the participants had close relationships with one or both parents. Edelman found that those students who had more parental involvement were more successful in making the transition from high school to college. There was a greater likelihood of the student’s success in relationships where parents encouraged their children to make their own choices, and the student was allowed to actively participate in the college selection process. As a result, these students exhibited greater levels of independence and autonomy, and developed a level of confidence that enabled them to persist through the challenges they would experience and complete their education (Edelman, 2013).

While having an education is an important priority for many Black families, education may not be first in priority. For Black families that have non-American or international cultural roots, top priority might be the need to provide for the family (Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023). For

example, in some African cultures, it is a customary role for males in a family to sometimes leave and come to the United States, to work, and to then send money home to help sustain the family left behind. For male students who come to the US and decide to pursue an education, the pecuniary provider role still remains the top priority in these households. Deviating from this cultural norm can be seen as shameful and unacceptable for men (Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023; Onuma et al., 2022). However, in Black immigrant families with Caribbean roots, children are socialized at an early age to value education. It is not only valued for the potential financial gains but is considered a symbol of prestige and a noteworthy accomplishment for the whole family (Onuma et al., 2022). With the many different global representations of Black culture, Onuma et al., (2022) suggests that additional education research should include an intra-racial exploration of how cultural norms and expectations can influence Black student educational attainment.

Peer Relationships

By the time a student completes high school, he/she has already had a myriad of experiences that have influenced the development of his/her identity (McCabe, 2023). The college experience involves establishing new friendships or new peer connections. Research shows that having friends is important to student success, increases student persistence, and can make the journey more impactful. As students attempt to adjust to a new college/campus environment, the search for a peer community and a sense of belonging among other students becomes a priority. As is the case in the pre-college years of schooling, good friendships are an important commodity (Leath et al., 2022; McCabe, 2023; McDougal et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2022).

In Zirkel's (2004) study on the development of academic and achievement goals, the author focused on the ease and difficulties of developing social connections between White

students and students of color. This study was in relation to adolescent (non-college) students in newly integrated high schools. The study confirmed that at diverse but still predominantly White schools (at least 50% of both the students and staff are White), White students find it easier to connect socially than students of color in the same setting. Additionally, this study showed that having positive relationships with peers at school helped to relieve the anxiety for students of color regarding racism and racial stigmas that may exist. While Zirkel's (2004) findings were in relation to high school students of color, research on college-aged Black students and other students of color reflects a continuation of these social dynamics beyond high school and into the Black college student experience (Leath et al., 2022; McCabe, 2023).

Zirkel's (2004) findings on the importance of positive peer relationships support Tinto's (1999) expansion on his initial theories of academic and social integration. Tinto posited that having positive peer relationships is one element of the college experience that helps to forge the student's sense of belonging and increases the likelihood of students becoming more socially integrated into the institution. McCabe's (2023) study on the formulation and composition of friendships or peer relationships discussed the characteristics that fuel a desire to form a friendship. *Homophily*, meaning "social similarities in terms of race, gender, and academic orientation" (p.8), was highlighted as an important factor in shaping how undergraduate students form friendships. Stated simply, people are usually drawn to others who are most similar in characteristics. In a study by McDougal et al., (2018) on Black student success and engagement, 51% of the Black participants (21/41) shared that they felt comfortable only with Black peers. Whether at PWIs or community colleges, receiving social and emotional support from other Black peers is a way of coping with day-to-day challenges (i.e., racial microaggressions, isolation, anxiety) as a Black college student. Furthermore, the participants described a sense of

family and community in their relationships with Black peers that they felt was missing in their non-Black peer relationships. A lack of Black peer relationships or friendships can create feelings of disconnection, loneliness, and isolation. This lack can impede the development of a student's sense of belonging and increase the possibility of them dropping out (Bivens, 2016; McCabe, 2023; McDougal et al., 2018; Thelamour et al., 2019).

Faculty/Staff Relationships

As students leave high school and transition into college, they leave “old” relationships with the expectation of forming new ones. Attempting to bond or connect in a new environment can prove extremely challenging for many students. New students must connect not only with peers but also with the faculty and staff at the college or university they are attending. The student faculty/staff relationship includes both *formal* (inside the classroom or specific academic environment) and *informal* (outside of the classroom) encounters between the student and faculty/staff member at the institution. Connecting with the institution's faculty and staff is a form of critical social engagement and integration that influences student success (Beasley, 2021; Cody, 2017; Golden et al., 2017; MacNear & Hunter, 2023). Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) found that the faculty-to-student relationship strongly influenced the student's desire to persist in college. Additionally, recent scholarship has found that students who have strong relationships with faculty tend to be more academically engaged and have higher GPAs. Simply stated, the more time faculty spend connecting with students, the greater the likelihood of student persistence and achievement of educational pursuits (Beasley, 2021; Cody, 2017; Golden et al., 2017).

Exploration of the faculty/staff-to-student relationship reveals various layers for consideration beyond the pedagogy, curriculum or other academic factors. Racial and ethnic

differences represent one such layer (Cody, 2017). Johnson (2013) explained that relationships with faculty at PWIs are very important to Black student success. One of the challenges to establishing a relationship with faculty is that Black students can encounter racial stigma and stereotypes that become barriers to building relationships. While there have been various types of diversity or DEI (Diversity Equity and Inclusion) training for faculty and staff at their respective institutions, the effectiveness or impact of this type of training has been questioned (Connor, 2022; Griswold & Ariss, 2022). While White faculty and Black students can have a positive connection, the relationship can sometimes include cultural insensitivity or a lack of understanding about Black student experiences (Griffin, 2013). As a result, Black students are at times wary of White faculty, unless the faculty have been identified as being culturally sensitive (Cody, 2017; Griffin, 2013). When immersed in an inclusive environment where they feel culturally accepted, Black students are more likely to be confident and view themselves as capable of achieving success. Such interactions will create an environment where Black students feel safe and want to invest themselves academically (Sinanan, 2016; Zirkel, 2004).

The issue of racial and ethnic disparity is also present in institutional hiring practices, specifically at predominantly White schools. Since the birth of Affirmative Action (1961), colleges and universities have sought to increase the hiring of underrepresented faculty and staff. Over the years, the effectiveness of Affirmative Action has been both praised and targeted for significant scrutiny. There have been questions regarding the program's fairness to all ethnic and racial groups (American Federation of Teachers (AFT), 2010). In 2005 - 2006, approximately 5.4% of all tenure-eligible faculty were Black. According to AFT (2010), in 2007, the hiring of underrepresented faculty averaged 10.4 % on college campuses. However, 7.6 percent of those positions were either part-time or adjunct faculty, with low wages and inadequate benefits. As a

result, the attrition rates have been higher among underrepresented faculty members than among their White colleagues (AFT, 2010).

According to Baker and Robnett (2012) and Sinanan (2016), whether students have a good relationship with the faculty and staff at the institution greatly influences a student's decision to stay. As is sometimes characteristic of people adapting to a new environment, the tendency is to seek out others who bear the greatest resemblance to them, which can mean racial or ethnic similarities. The need for racially relatable campus support and a sense of safety and belonging can be met by relationships that Black students form with Black faculty (Connor, 2022; Griffin, 2013; MacNear & Hunter, 2023). Black students view Black faculty as role models and sometimes as extended family members. According to Golden et al., (2017), Black students attending HBCUs report that this sense of family and cultural connection is a significant factor influencing their decision to attend and stay those institutions. Additionally, it has been documented that Black students with increased access to Black faculty/staff in their college environment feel more supported and cared for, and become more excited about learning (Beasley, 2020; Golden et al., 2017; Sinanan, 2016).

In the absence of faculty/staff with similar racial and ethnic backgrounds, Black students, can experience barriers to connecting and feeling welcomed on predominantly White college campuses. Recent studies have called for more attention to the dynamics that help shape the faculty/staff and student relationship (Beasley, 2020). With a small number of Black students and Black faculty represented at PWIs, Black students at these institutions may find it difficult to culturally connect with non-Black faculty (Golden et al., 2017). A lack of Black faculty role models with whom these students can identify and build relationships can make the first-year

transition difficult for Black students, and therefore contribute to increased Black student attrition rates (Johnson, 2013).

According to Grier-Reed et al., (2008), whether at a HBCU or PWI, Black students felt their experience with Black faculty on campus was one of the main reasons why they stayed in school. Some Black students shared how they experienced great difficulty in their relationships with White faculty because White faculty could not identify with issues that Black students were facing. For some Black students, there was a concern that White faculty would be unfair in their evaluation of assignments and would have low expectations for Black students. Having a strong connection to the college faculty made these students feel more like they were a part of the college (Beasley, 2020; Cody, 2017; Golden et al., 2017; Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Johnson, 2013). In a 2014 study by Sandoval-Lucero et al., on the Black student perception of Black Faculty, one student shared, “the teachers are easily accessible and always willing to help” (p.528). Students also felt the Black faculty were motivating and saw Black faculty as role models or in some instances as family (Golden et al., 2017; Griffin, 2013; Sinanan, 2016).

Grier-Reed et al., (2008) discussed a program called the “African American Student Network” (AFAM), signifying African American and “A Family” (p. 476). This program was developed by two Black faculty at a PWI in response to Black student concerns about PWI on-campus life. AFAM provided Black students with a supportive environment at the institution. It was a group of Black students who met once a week, shared a meal, and had discussions regarding issues that African American students were experiencing on campus. One faculty member shared, “through listening to students’ experience, sharing our own, and focusing on the collective wisdom of the group, we generated new knowledge and ideas for coping with college life” (p.478). The group served as a safe space where students were encouraged to develop as

social, self-aware, culturally and academically-focused individuals. One student stated, “...Everybody spills their guts...and it was away from White people too so we could say whatever we wanted to say without fear of being stigmatized” (p. 480). Through programs like AFAM, Black students found support, an outlet, and a safe space where they could freely express themselves without threat of racial stigmas or stereotypes (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008; MacNear & Hunter, 2023; Sinanan, 2016).

Financial Support

As Black students make the decision to go to college, another factor for consideration is the ability to cover the high cost of college, which can be a major financial obligation. Every year, students spend thousands of dollars to attend the institution of their choice. For many students, paying for their college education is impossible without some form of financial assistance. A report published in 2006 showed that academically qualified high school graduates from low-income households were less likely (83%) to enroll at four-year institutions than students from high income households (92%). Additionally, students from families with household incomes ranging from \$30,000 to \$59,999 were more likely to enroll at public two-year institutions like community colleges (Kuh et al., 2006).

As the cost of a college education continues to increase, the burden of paying for school results in more students borrowing federal student loans. According to Baker et al., (2017) from 2013 to 2014, the total student loan debt was \$1 trillion. For minority students the type of institution selected is strongly influenced by family income or socioeconomic status. Like other minority student populations, Black students vary significantly from Whites in social class and economic status. In previous research, it has been found that low income and minority students are less likely to attend selective postsecondary institutions (Baker et al., 2017; Wood &

Harrison, 2014). For low-income minority students, the reduced cost of community college makes attending community college a more affordable alternative to attending a four-year college or university. Research shows that approximately two-thirds of community college students graduate with zero debt (Camardelle et al., 2022). Despite the opportunity to attend lower cost institutions, like community colleges, Black students are still more likely to borrow large amounts of student loans to cover their college costs than White students (Baker et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2017).

Terrell and Strayhorn (2010) found that while approximately 87% of students from high socioeconomic backgrounds enroll in some form of postsecondary schooling after high school, only 53% of students from low-income or minority backgrounds will do so. Research has found that African American students are less likely to have families with the financial means to support going to college. Students from low-income and minority families are more likely to stay in college if they are receiving a financial aid package that covers their school expenses (tuition and fees, room and board, books) (Kim et al., 2017; Wood & Harrison, 2014). Black students' success in higher education requires more than students having a strong level of academic ability. For many Black students, it also requires having access to financial assistance to help them pay for a college education. Without the financial means to pay for education, Black students will either have to pursue their education at a slower pace (part-time) or end up postponing or leaving school (Camardelle et al., 2022).

The challenges of embracing the significant responsibility of financing a college education, in addition to other financial obligations students may have, impacts whether Black students stay in college. A study by Huelsman (2015) found that at public four-year institutions, 81% of Black students, compared to 63% of White students, graduated with loan debt.

Furthermore, in 2016, 67% of Black community college students took out loans compared to 51% of White students, 36% of Hispanic students, and 30% of Asian students (Baker et al., 2017). This translates into an average Black student loan debt of \$22,303 – higher than other race or ethnic minority groups in higher education (Camardelle et al., 2022).

The high cost of college is a barrier for low income and racially and ethnically diverse students. It influences whether a student attends college and remains to complete their degree of study (Bivens, 2016). In recognizing the importance of financial support in increasing college access for Black students, institutions have relied heavily on various types of federally funded programs providing grants, loans, and scholarships. However, these program opportunities typically promise financial support (i.e. loans, grants, and scholarships) mainly to students who meet strict requirements, such as high grade point averages and test scores. Such opportunities are available mainly to those students with full-time status. Placing such a great emphasis on these criteria can exclude Black students from receiving larger allotments of financial aid for college and mainly leave significant loans as the only option (Baker et al., 2017; Bivens, 2016; McGill, 2015).

Although student loans can have both a positive and negative impact on the student experience, research shows that Black and Latino students were less likely to enroll in college if offered significant loans in their financial aid packages. Black and Latino students were less likely to enroll, enrolled in fewer credits, or attended lower-cost institutions like community colleges to prevent large accrual of debt (Baker et al., 2017). The stresses of having to repay borrowed money coupled with the likelihood of lower-salary jobs can be discouraging. Research shows that one in three Black community college students lives in poverty. In a 2016 National Postsecondary Aid study, the data showed that the median household income for Black

community college students was \$24,044 compared to \$39,385 for White families. With the low potential for earning higher rates of pay, accessibility to necessary funding sources is key to promoting college access for Black students. It is vital that policymakers and institutions expand their efforts to make sure that Black students are aware of available resources for financial and basic needs assistance (Camardelle et al., 2022).

Race/Campus Climate

The intersectionality of the U.S. societal racial climate and that of the college campus climate can influence the student experience. Colleges and universities throughout the country have experienced pressure to increase their racial and ethnic campus diversity, to help facilitate feelings of sense of belonging for students, faculty, and staff of color. Within the last decade, the overall racial climate in society has been marked by increased tensions and awareness resulting from various high-profile race-related events (i.e., the death of George Floyd and the emphasis on the Black Lives Matter Movement). Such events have jolted national and higher education leaders and have challenged the racial *status quo* of the college campus. With this increased racial unease in the U.S., higher education leaders must further examine how Black students are contextualizing the racial climate of the campus environment. (Beasley, 2020; Mwangi et al., 2018).

While there are many factors that play a role in a student's decision-making process, the racial composition of the prospective institutions is a critical deciding factor for Black students as they consider attending a college community (Benton, 2001; Baker & Robnett, 2012; Morales, 2021; Mwangi et al., 2018). Once a Black student enters an institution, the effort to remain one's "true self" can be overpowered by the desire or need for social connection and acceptance in a new environment. The urgency and challenges to "fit in" are a reality for Black college students

at PWIs (Beasley, 2021; Osbourne et al., 2020; Sinanan, 2016). In the literature reviewed concerning predominantly White campuses, racial and ethnic differences were at the forefront of the list of barriers to fitting in for Black collegians. Baker and Robnett (2012) found that at PWIs, Black students are less likely to feel connected to the campus. There is a tendency for Black students to feel invisible, and to experience discrimination from other non-Black students and staff members of the institution (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Johnson, 2020; Lee & Barnes, 2015; MacNear & Hunter, 2023; Sedlacek, 1999). Additionally, at PWIs, Black students report numerous instances of microaggressions on campus. Whether Black students perceive the campus racial climate as positive or negative influences his/her decision to continue at the institution. If the learning environment is deemed unsafe, Black students will disconnect or isolate and limit their overall engagement with the campus environment, sometimes resulting in departure from the institution (Bivens, 2016; Morales, 2021).

Black students, and other racially marginalized groups, can experience feelings including social isolation, loneliness, and anxiety when seeking to socially integrate into the PWI campus environment (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Lee & Barnes, 2015; Mwangi et al., 2018). These feelings arise in Black students due to what MacNear and Hunter (2023) call *public regard*, meaning "... an individuals' perception of how their racial group is viewed by society" (p.3). If the Black race is viewed positively, then there is likely to be greater self-esteem, sense of belonging, and potential for Black students to want to remain at the institution. In addition to the standard pressures of college life, the concept of public regard illuminates the importance of racial sense of belonging for Black students. (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Lee & Barnes, 2015; Museus et al., 2020; Tinto, 2017).

Whether a Black student has international roots or is U.S.-born, fitting into the dominant White culture requires a shift in lifestyle. Both Tinto's (1999) theory of social integration and Tierney (1999), posits that if students from different cultures are going to be academically successful, they must commit "cultural suicide" in order to properly "fit in" with the dominant culture on campus. This cultural suicide occurs when students of color "abandon their ethnic identities to succeed on predominantly White campuses". Echoing these thoughts, Beasley (2021) summarizes a similar premise that students of color, such as Black students, at PWIs are living a bicultural experience. This means that they are constantly having to shift back and forth between the dominant White and the less dominant Black cultures daily in order to "fit in". In an effort to avoid the potential side effects of racism or racial stigma, many Black students can become disconnected either fully or partially from their past lives. Black students who attempt to resist this assimilation may experience social isolation, anxiety, and frustrations, which can reduce one's vested interest in educational achievement at the institution. Furthermore, feeling disconnected also lowers the probability that Black students will seek essential help in navigating their education (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004; Lee & Barnes, 2015; Morales, 2021; Tierney, 1999; Tinto 2017).

In his article entitled, *Challenges African American Students Face at Predominantly White Institutions*, Benton (2001) examines arguments that suggest that "Black students are academically, culturally, and economically incompatible with the PWI model of education" (p.1). This ideology in conjunction with various stereotypes and micro-aggressions contributes to the negative image of Blacks. These factors also influence the development of Black students' racial and cultural identity. How Black students perceive or define themselves racially has implications for self-esteem, which can impact their academic performance (MacNear & Hunter,

2023). Some examples of stereotypes include: 1) Black people are usually on welfare, 2) Black students are not academically strong, 3) Black women are angry and loud, and 4) Black males are violent (Ritchey, 2015). These stereotypes can have an impact on the Black students' perception of self, identity development, and can greatly impact their ability to be successful in college (Beasley, 2021; MacNear & Hunter, 2023; Osbourne et al., 2020; Zirkel, 2004).

Despite the challenges facing Black students, these students have developed unique ways of coping as they navigated college. Black student strategies for coping and fitting into the campus environment can manifest in various ways. For some Black students, the journey includes searching for faculty and staff who are racially similar and could be advocates or mentors throughout their college experience. Although community colleges tend to be more racially diverse than PWIs, Black students still emphasize the need to see others Black persons on campus (Bivens, 2016; Golden et al., 2017; Griffin, 2013; Sinanan, 2016). This desire to see people who are Black and look like them is a part of what Beasley (2021) calls the search for *cultural congruity*. Seeing themselves racially reflected on campus fosters a welcoming feeling that increases sense of belonging for Black students (Morales, 2021; Osbourne et al., 2020). Whether through interactions with Black faculty, staff, or peers, being able to connect racially helps to fortify a Black student's sense of identity (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Osbourne et al., 2020; Thelamour et al., 2019). Relationships with others who bear similar racial resemblance can be perceived as safe and supportive spaces where there is a greater likelihood of being understood and accepted. This sense of belonging, in turn, helps to bolster a Black student's self-efficacy regarding degree attainment (Cody, 2017; Golden et al., 2017; Lee & Barnes, 2015; Thelamour et al., 2019; Tinto, 2017).

Student Support Services

In an article entitled, *Taking Retention Seriously: Rethinking the First Year of College*, Tinto (1999) explores some of the issues first year students experience in college. He states “that colleges and universities have done very little to change the overall character of the student experience” (p.5). Tinto explains that while student attributes are beyond the control of the institution, the institution can control the setting or learning environment the student will experience. For example, the learning environment includes the classrooms, laboratories, residence halls and other areas of the institutions where students spend time. Based on his research, Tinto (2017) suggests that there are four institutional conditions needed for student retention: advice, support, involvement, and learning. His theory focuses more on these conditions within the context of creating learning communities where students would share knowledge, share learning, which would cultivate a supportive community.

Baker and Robnett (2012), Eakins and Eakins (2017) and Wood and Harrison (2014) also stress the lack of student social integration into the college environment as one of the reasons why, specifically minority students, may choose to leave an institution. As stated by Museus et al., (2020) “...campus environments, programs, and practices that meaningfully engage and reflect racially minoritized students’ cultural backgrounds, communities, and identities are more likely to attract, engage and empower these students” (p.8). When Black students experience the difficulties of “fitting in” with the dominant culture, there is a tendency for these students to form “groups” or communities of peers that provide social and emotional support. These groups will often sit at the same table, attempt to align class schedules, and travel to events together as a way of connecting, coping, and supporting one another throughout the college journey (McCabe, 2023; Yan et al., 2022).

For Black students, becoming more connected to the college campus can be accomplished through various campus activities. While there is a myriad of general student support services that exist on college campuses, the gamut of campus support programs specifically geared to Black students is limited. Historically, Black student organizations (BSOs) were created to uplift, protect, and support the Black student community on college campuses (McDougal et al., 2018; Nagbe et al., 2020). The development of these types of student clubs and affinity organizations stems from Black students feeling excluded from the larger campus community. Racism, microaggressions, and the unresponsiveness to Black student needs feed these feelings of exclusion. Through these clubs and affinity organizations, Black students received the support, advocacy, mentorship, and guidance they needed to navigate the college experience (Benton, 2001; Nagbe et al., 2020; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Some of these Black student organizations include:

Black Fraternities and Sororities

Also known as Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs), these groups were started by early Black students attending Cornell University, Howard University, and Indiana University, among others. They evolved out of Black students wanting to create communities to support each other when they encountered racial prejudices. Through a brotherhood and sisterhood model, these fraternities and sororities represented opportunities for peer-to-peer relationships, bonding, and connection. These interactions helped to combat the feelings of anxiety and isolation, in particular at PWIs. (Nagbe et al., 2020).

Black Student Union

This group was originally created to challenge political and racial injustices across the U.S. Today, this group can be found on all types of college campuses throughout the country.

With a purpose that includes highlighting and celebrating Black culture and diversity, the Black Student Union has become a central hub of support for Black students in college (Nagbe et al., 2020).

Black Professional and Academic Organizations

Other Black student organizations found on college campuses tend to be professional and academic in nature. With established local and national chapters, these types of organizations included the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), the National Association of Black Journalists, and the Black Undergraduate Law Association. With a focus on disciplines with low Black student representation, these organizations partner with college and university services to provide financial, career, and networking resources specifically for Black students (Nagbe et al., 2020).

In addition, there are also multicultural student organizations along with culture-specific groups (e.g., Caribbean clubs) that are occasionally found on college campuses. Black students can also receive support on college campuses through programs that provide tutoring, mentoring, and one-to-one advising. Such programs will enable them to better navigate college life (Benton, 2001). An example of a support program is the Pre-Accelerated Curriculum in Engineering program (PACE). This program was designed to academically support Black students who were enrolled in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers. The purpose of this program was to enhance the student's academic preparedness for such careers. Through support services that included retention counselors, Black faculty mentors, and access to upperclassmen as peer mentors, students felt more confident about their ability to achieve academic success at the institution (Palmer et al., 2010). In Tinto's theory of college student departure (as cited in Palmer et al., 2010), he states, "... when students drop out of school, do not

do well academically, or are unsatisfied with school, it is because they are not successfully integrated into the academic and social college communities” (p.326). Through PACE, these students received both academic and social support that helped to fuel their desire for success. As a result of participation in the PACE program, the students were found to be more likely to persist and graduate from their institutions (Palmer et al., 2010).

The formulation of racially congruent cultural communities results in trusted spaces where Black students can express their authentic selves and share resources. These shared resources can help to meet similar basic needs, such as where or how to find local ethnic foods and places to get one’s hair done (Nagbe et al., 2020; Tinto, 2017). These Black cultural campus communities help to support Black student success, sense of belonging, and identity development, and are influential in Black student growth and development (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; McCabe, 2023; Ritchey, 2015).

Summary of the Framework

The six factors discussed in the literature do not represent an exhaustive list of all of the factors found to influence the Black college student’s experience. However, they do represent some of the more prevalent factors that have emerged in previous research. Studies in the literature explain the intersectionality of external personal factors (e.g., family and peer relationships) and institutional factors (e.g., financial support, student support services, campus climate, faculty relationship) for consideration. These studies also identify ways in which such factors influence Black students’ experiences and sense of belonging. Missing from the literature was a more in-depth exploration of how international culture and family norms influence Black students in their college journey. One particular gap revealed by this literature review and suggested for further exploration was the impact on Black students of having families living

abroad. The tendency for existing research to study Black students as an aggregate group rather than their disaggregated ethnicities, can overshadow the impact of cultural norms, traditions, or other key factors for consideration (Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023).

Chapter Three: Methodology

Throughout the history of higher education, most scholarship on student persistence, retention, and success has focused on students who have historically attended four-year institutions. Acknowledging the importance of academic factors, the present study is an exploration beyond student grades, SAT scores, and other academic grading metrics to better understand the Black student experience and highlight areas for institutional support and intervention. Additionally, research scholarship has evolved to incorporate undergraduate student experiences at other types of institutions, such as community colleges. Hence, this study was conducted to expand knowledge by exploring the influence of non-academic factors on the Black college student experience and sense of belonging (Bivens, 2016; Bueno et al., 2022; Tinto 1993, 2017; Wood & Harrison, 2014). Chapter Three is a detailed description of the research process used for Black college student recruitment, data collection, and analysis. It provides (1) an in-depth explanation of how the research in the present study was conducted, and (2) some of the necessary considerations for conducting research on the Black college student experience.

Qualitative Approach

The purpose of phenomenological research is to examine the lived experiences of people who have encountered the same phenomena. In the present study, utilizing a phenomenological approach provided greater insight into the lived experiences of Black students in higher education. This method of research helps to identify core similarities and differences as they pertain to a group phenomenon. This approach is conducive to a small sample size and can be used in conjunction with various data collection tools (Creswell, 2013). Through a collection of demographic questions and interview data, this study provides a narrative reflecting how ten Black students make sense of their college experience at four-year PWI and/or community

college. Through individual stories from Black students, a more in-depth examination of the Black college student experience is provided in relation to significant factors influencing their successful persistence toward graduation. The six non-academic factors explored in this study include: (1) Family support, (2) Peer relationships, (3) Faculty relationships, (4) Financial aid/support, (5) Race/campus climate, and (6) Student support programs/services (Baker & Robnett, 2012; Camardelle, 2022; Johnson, 2013; Ngabe et al., 2020; Sedlacek, 1999; Snijders et al., 2021; Wood & Harrison, 2014). Additionally, this research incorporated the student voice in efforts to better understand how Black students make sense of the college experience. Through rich, robust data, this method amplified the student voice and draws the reader into the lived experiences of the participants to give a realistic view of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Research Questions

The study research questions acknowledge the many dimensions of the Black college student experience, and the importance of the Black student voice in better understanding their experience. With emphasis on non-academic factors, these questions focus on how Black students make sense of their college experiences. The specific research questions include:

1. What are the non-academic factors that influence the Black college student experience?
2. How do Black college students make sense of the non-academic factors that shape their college experience?
3. How do Black college students describe the challenges and successes on their journey to college completion?

Recruitment

The research phase involving Black student interviewees was set to begin in February 2020. Emails were sent out to advertise the study. All data were set to be collected in a face-to-face interview format. However, in March 2020, as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, all study processes and protocols required revisions and re-approval from the IRB committees (See Appendix A). These revisions required that all face-to-face recruitment and research activities be shifted to a more appropriate virtual (internet-based) process. Once revisions were completed, the study commenced in February, 2021, and the final interview was completed in March 2022. Additionally, the researcher completed the Human Subject training for the protection of human subject participants (See Appendix B). Student consent was collected through (1) the recording of virtual, verbal Zoom Video Communications, Inc. interactions, and (2) an electronic Qualtrics confirmation question that participants answered at the beginning of the student survey, sent via email link (see Appendix C).

Students were recruited in various ways for participation in this study. The primary method of recruitment was email outreach through faculty and staff colleagues at four-year and community college institutions. With IRB approval, college instructors were also allowed to make verbal announcements during their online courses. The author of this study (hereafter, “the researcher”) drafted a generic email letter for prospective participants that was sent to all willing colleagues for distribution to eligible students (see Appendix D). Due to various pandemic challenges, recruitment became more targeted toward student clubs and organizations that would host online events for Black or multicultural students. The researcher attended various virtual campus events and was allowed to make announcements to attendees regarding study participation. Additionally, recognizing the potential for students to access local community

organizations outreach was also made through community contacts working specifically with people of color (including Black college students). With the ongoing challenges of COVID-19, a significant portion of the recruitment was done by word of mouth and referrals by students and colleagues.

To keep the identities of the prospective participants confidential (known only to the student and researcher), students were asked to contact the researcher directly via email. Once a student expressed an initial interest to participate in this study, the student was contacted by the researcher via email to schedule a prescreening Zoom or phone conversation. The purpose of this prescreening conversation was to confirm that the student met the study criteria. If the criteria match was confirmed, the student was assigned a pseudonym and a participant ID number and was sent an email with information on the next steps (see appendix E). Shortly after, the participant was sent an email with the link to the Qualtrics survey (see Appendix F). Multiple outreach attempts to participants were often required to complete the study. Complications associated with COVID-19 and other personal student dynamics at the time delayed the study progress. For one study participant, a period of five months passed between the initial Qualtrics survey and the completion of the Zoom interview. All other interviews were typically completed within two weeks of the Qualtrics survey completion.

Study Participants

The sample consisted of Black undergraduate college students who had attended a four-year predominantly White institution (PWI) and/or a community college. Twenty-five (25) prospective participants were recruited for pre-screening. However, fourteen (14) of these participants, due to various unforeseen circumstances, decided not to participate. Of the

remaining eleven (11) students who started the Qualtrics survey, one declined to continue and therefore was excluded from the study. No interview was conducted with this participant.

There was, therefore, a total of ten (10) Black students who completed the entire study. The total participant pool represents seven (70%) females and three (30%) male participants. Criteria for participation in this study included previous attendance at and completion of at least one semester at a PWI or community college. Participants must not have received either an associate degree or a bachelor's degree when they commence study participation. Additionally, at the time of the interview, each participant was enrolled in at least one college course. There was no specified number of completed credits from either the PWI or community college needed for participation in this study.

While all participants identified as Black students, they represented the following ethnicities: Black African American, Black Caribbean, or Black African descent. The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 40 years old. Six (60%) of the participants attended a four-year PWI and then transferred to a community college. In total, there were five different PWIs represented in the student experiences. Four of the PWIs are located on the East coast and one is located on the West coast. The remaining four (40%) of participants had only attended a U.S. community college, all of which are on the East coast.

Data Collection

Part I

This phase of the study consisted of a demographic survey that included questions about each participant's gender, age, ethnicity, family education, and general enrollment status at institutions they attended. The data collected from the survey gives a description of the student population represented in the study. Having demographic data also allows for comparisons

between findings (Creswell, 2013). The questions were emailed to the students in the form of a Qualtrics survey, which they completed individually (See Appendix G). The beginning of the survey included a consent form which each student completed electronically to confirm agreement to participate before they could proceed with taking the survey. Once the participant completed the survey, the consent form and survey results were logged in the Qualtrics survey system results. The individual surveys were reviewed by the researcher to confirm that the necessary consent and correct participant student ID number had been provided. Students' actual names and pseudonyms were tracked separately from all participant data collected.

Part II

Once the Qualtrics survey was completed by each participant, the second part of data collection was initiated. The researcher then sent each participant an email requesting the scheduling of a time for the one-on-one online Zoom interview (see Appendix H). Once a date and time for the interview was confirmed, each participant was sent a confirmation email containing a Zoom meeting invitation (with hypertext link) and instructions. The virtual Zoom "room" was set up so that participants could enter the room with their cameras off. The standard Zoom virtual interface lists the name of each participant on screen for all participants to see. For this study, and for the purposes of confidentiality during the Zoom recording, participants were asked to replace their actual names with their assigned pseudonyms and interview ID. At the start of each interview, all participants were asked to confirm their permission to record the interview, and all provided this confirmation. The interview questions requested qualitative open responses pertaining to the Black college student experience at the four-year PWI and/or two-year community college institutions that each student attended. Specifically, the interview included

questions concerning family support, peer and faculty relationships, financial aid/support, race/campus climate, and Black student support programs and services at these institutions.

Once the Zoom interview recording was initiated, the researcher once again explained the contents of the consent form and asked participants to verbally confirm agreement for Part II. During the interview, participants were only referred to by their pseudonyms. If the participant needed to briefly step away (e.g., for a bathroom break) or briefly chose to turn the camera on, the recording was paused and then resumed once the camera was turned off and the participant had resettled. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 30 – 40 minutes, with only one interview lasting 60 minutes. Each interview was recorded as a video file, but the only face that was visible in the recording was that of the researcher. Given the difficulty of simultaneously asking interview questions and taking notes, having interview recordings helped to facilitate a more accurate account of each participant's story. The participants' voices only, along with the face and voice of the researcher are included on each recording. For each interview the researcher's camera was left on so participants could see that the researcher was focused and attentive during the interviews.

All interview recordings were saved to the Zoom "cloud" (online data storage service) and then transferred to the researcher's personal electronic device. Saving each recording to the Zoom cloud allowed for automatic Zoom transcription of each recording. Each transcript was copied from Zoom and saved in a Microsoft Word document using the participant's pseudonym and ID number. To confirm the accuracy of the transcription process, all recordings were reviewed immediately (within 24 hours) and edited only according to words spoken by the researcher and study participants. All transcriptions were transferred to an external hard drive to be stored for five years per IRB expectations.

Data Analysis

Once all surveys and interviews were completed, the Qualtrics survey responses were compiled in a general report via the Qualtrics system. Through this report, the data could be reviewed in disaggregated format. All remaining participant demographic data are arranged in table format in Table 2, below.

Table 2

Core Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Attended 4 year	Attended 2 year
Margaret	F	40	Black/African American	N	Y
Susan	F	29	Black/Caribbean	Y	Y
Kara	F	21	Black/African American	N	Y
Debra	F	33	Black/Caribbean	Y	Y
Sheila	F	20	Black/African	Y	Y
Bradley	M	34	Black/African	N	Y
Tony	M	25	Black/African	N	Y
Christine	F	21	Black/Caribbean	Y	Y
Lily	F	28	Black/African American	Y	Y
Steven	M	40	Black/Caribbean	Y	Y

Note. This table represents core demographic participant data based on Qualtrics interview questions.

Analysis of the participant interviews was completed manually by the researcher. The process of coding the data consisted of both theming and subcoding in an effort to focus on the research themes that emerged from the data (Miles et al., 2014). Participants' interviews were coded according to survey sections, and then recoded and grouped using the subthemes of the six non-academic factors cited earlier in relation to the phenomenon being researched. Additionally, quotes from the interviews were used to help illustrate and support key themes and results from this study. Some of the collected survey data have also been included in the profiles of the participants in Chapter Four ("Findings").

The data were first organized into the six non-academic factors of each section of the survey (family, peers/friends, faculty, financial aid, race/campus climate, and support services/programs). All edited interview transcriptions were printed in hardcopy format, each section was assigned a color for highlighting purposes, and then each section was color-coded to emphasize the emerging themes.

Ethical Considerations

To maintain an ethical process in conducting this study on Black undergraduate students, the following steps were implemented. The study proposal was submitted to and approved by IRBs at both Lesley University (as the researcher's host academic institution) and at Community College X (as the primary recruiting institution; name withheld). Per university requirements, Human Subject Training was completed by the researcher. Due to the many unexpected setbacks associated with COVID-19, the Human Subjects training needed to be completed a second time, after the expiration of the first certificate. These certificates of training completion were submitted and are on record at both institutions. There was minimal risk to human subject participants.

As described earlier, each potential participant was contacted for a one-on-one pre-screening conversation with the researcher. This pre-screening was carried out to confirm the prospective participant's age and willingness to participate. Additionally, each student received the informed consent documentation in writing electronically and was required to provide consent in order to take the Qualtrics survey. All participants were over the age of 18 and therefore did not require parental consent to participate. An electronic copy of the Qualtrics consent has been saved for future records in the researcher's files. Recognizing that students could terminate participation at any time, the researcher asked the students at the beginning of the interview to reconfirm participation verbally; this verbal consent was recorded. As required by the IRB, all recorded materials will be kept for five years from the dates of the interviews, and then destroyed upon approval of the completed dissertation to preserve confidentiality.

Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, also occurring in the U.S. during this study was what has been termed a "racial pandemic". This racial pandemic included the highly-publicized deaths of several Black/African Americans at the hands of law enforcement officers. The researcher assumed that study participants would want to discuss this issue during the Zoom interviews. However, in an effort to remain impartial and not guide participant responses, it was decided that the researcher would only discuss this issue if it was raised by the participants. Out of the ten participants interviewed, only one student briefly mentioned these racial incidents. This student spoke about the impact of institutional response and services provided in response to these incidents. As a result, the racial pandemic is not specifically reflected in the findings of this study.

Limitations

One of the more obvious limitations of conducting this study was having to navigate the difficulties and uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the researcher, as well as for the participants, there was a constant need to revise intended next steps and deadlines. Interviews were often rescheduled because of illness, unexpected family issues, or other personal challenges. Recruitment of participants via email and other electronic means proved to be challenging. Utilizing electronic means required significant follow up with interested participants. Not all participants were quick to respond to emails, which would delay the completion of the survey and interview process. Initially, the consent form was sent to participants, asking them to print, sign and scan the signed form for emailing. This highlighted an assumption made by the researcher and revealed the unconsidered inequity, that all of the participants had access to printers or scanners and were digitally savvy. The reality of this inequity resulted in the need for all consent to be provided online (via Qualtrics) and verbally.

Utilizing the Zoom virtual meeting platform presented some challenges, as well. Through various Zoom training workshops and some trial and error, the researcher was able to learn the core skills needed to properly navigate the Zoom room during the interviews. At times, there was a need to stop the recording to walk a participant through technical challenges. Additionally, at times, the Zoom internet connection became unstable and persons in the interview were not able to be heard, which disrupted the recording and transcription. All recordings were reviewed in order to edit and ensure accuracy in the transcription. Although editing required extra time on the part of the researcher, utilizing the Zoom recordings and transcripts proved an effective and more affordable option during the pandemic.

As the interviews were conducted, the researcher assumed that all pertinent information would be captured on the recordings. However, this was not the case in all participant interviews. Some participants shared relevant experiences after the recording had ended. The natural human inclination to share and have dialogue was strong. Some respondents were particularly excited about the topic and the opportunity to share their stories and experiences. As a result, some interview data were captured manually by the researcher, and then noted in a section at the end of the transcript entitled, “*participant thoughts shared after recording ended*”.

Summary

The goal of Chapter Three was to explain the methodology used in executing this study on the Black undergraduate college student experience. This chapter highlights the step-by-step process used, and the details associated with engaging the study's participants. This chapter also acknowledges the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and explains methodological deviations from traditional research expectations and best practices. In Chapter Four, snapshots of the study participants are shared to provide a more in-depth look at the experiences of these Black college students. Student experiences are presented within the context of the six non-academic factors studied in relation to how each student viewed the college journey at the institution(s) which they attended.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter contains the results of the phenomenological study on the Black undergraduate college student experience at four-year PWIs and two-year or community colleges. The study was conducted to examine the following research questions: (1) What are some of the critical non-academic factors that influence the Black college student's experience? (2) How do Black college students make sense of the non-academic factors that shape their college experience? (3) How do Black college students describe the challenges and successes on their journey to college completion? Chapter Four is broken into two sections. The first section is comprised of "participant profiles" of the student participants as provided in an electronic Qualtrics survey and during the interviews. The second section contains excerpts/direct quotes from participants during one-on-one Zoom interviews conducted by the researcher.

Participant Profiles

This chapter begins with ten brief descriptions of each of the Black undergraduate student respondents interviewed for this study, or "participant profiles". Each participant profile provides a brief narrative and demographic information about one of the participants. These profiles provide a clearer picture of the diverse backgrounds represented within this cohort of Black undergraduate college students.

Margaret

Margaret was a 40-year-old female who identified as African American. She is a first-generation college student. She had never attended a four-year institution. She was married with a daughter and husband and lived in the local community. Margaret's husband was a college graduate. In 2003, Margaret was first enrolled in a community college but did not finish her education. For various personal reasons, not shared, she left the institution. Margaret worked for

a number of years as a sales manager until she was furloughed from her place of employment. After five months of having no new job opportunities, she decided to go back to school.

In 2020, she enrolled in college and chose to attend a different community college than her previous institution. She felt that 2020 was a better time for her to pursue her education. Her family was very supportive of her return to school and worked with her to make sure she had time to study and become fully immersed in the student experience. She received scholarships and other financial assistance that helped to cover the cost of college and make her education possible. At the time of the interview, Margaret was enrolled as a full-time student at a community college close to her home and had completed one semester of courses. She was very excited to be back in school and was confident that she would finish her degree.

Susan

Susan was a 29-year-old female who identified as being of Black Caribbean ethnicity. She first entered college in 2010 at a four-year PWI and pursued a degree in the health field. Susan was not a first-generation student. She had three members in her immediate family who had obtained either a bachelor's (mother and sister) or master's degree (father). At her previous four-year institution, Susan was enrolled full-time and had completed two semesters. Her experience at this institution was challenging because she had some difficulties with her roommate which she chose not to disclose. Through all of her roommate difficulties, Susan felt that she did not receive support from the staff at the institution. However, she mentioned that her interactions with faculty/professors were good. Susan also shared that she did not have any friends at the institutions. Furthermore, she was stressed and concerned with the then recent news of her mother's cancer diagnosis. Feeling unsupported and alone, Susan decided to leave the four-year institution.

Susan took some time off to support her mother. She returned in 2017 and enrolled at her first community college. She shared that her two reasons for attending a community college were (1) the reduced financial burden and (2) the proximity of the institution to her home. After taking a few courses at this institution, Susan transferred to a second community college because the first community college did not offer the major she wanted to pursue. She also shared that the urban location of the school made her feel more comfortable given the greater likelihood of her seeing other Black people. Seeing more people who looked like her made her feel like she belonged at the institution. At the time of the interview, she had completed three semesters at this institution and had five courses remaining to complete her degree.

Kara

Kara was a 21-year-old female who identified as being of Black/African American ethnicity. Her family's educational background included three immediate family members who had obtained either an associates (mother and sister) or bachelor's degree (brother). She had not attended a four-year institution. Kara first attended a local community college in 2019 and was enrolled as a part-time student. She shared that one of the main reasons she chose community college was that it would reduce the financial burden, and her family was in favor of this lower-cost option. At the time of the interview, Kara had completed four semesters at this institution.

Kara had initially planned to follow the expected post-high school pathway of attending a four-year institution, like many of her friends. She felt discouraged and embarrassed that she was not, in actuality, following her friends in this way. Kara shared that she was impressed with how she was treated by the staff at the community college. In particular, her experience with the financial aid office staff made her feel supported. She described how the office staff simplified what she had assumed would be a difficult application process. Additionally, Kara was drawn to

this institution because of its racial campus climate and diversity. She was planning on completing her associate degree and then transferring to a four-year institution to obtain a bachelor's degree.

Debra

Debra was a 33-year-old female who identified as being of Black Caribbean ethnicity. She was not a first-generation college student. She had two immediate family members, both with bachelor's degrees (mother and sister). In 2006, she was enrolled in college full-time and had completed one semester at a four-year PWI. For Debra, having the financial resources for college was not a concern as her mother was an employee of the institution and Debra attended tuition-free. A year later, in 2007, Debra left the institution. She shared two reasons for why she left. First, she felt alone and out of place because she had no friends at the institution. Second, Debra described her interactions with faculty at the institutions as being of poor quality and frustrating. She described feeling invisible, as she was oftentimes the only Black student in the classroom and felt like she was passed over when attempting to participate in class.

Upon leaving, she enrolled at a local community college where some of her friends were attending, and she continued to pursue her degree. She was an honors student, and a member of the school's Phi Theta Kappa honor society. Overall, she felt that the community college was more diverse and welcoming, and that symbolic representations of many different cultures were on display there. Her family was very supportive of her decision to attend community college, although this decision meant having to pay tuition. As a mother of three children, Debra found it difficult as a student to be intensely engaged in student activities. The timing of the events oftentimes conflicted with the needs of her family (i.e., picking up her children from their own schools). At the time of the interview, she had just completed an associate degree and was in the

process of starting another associate degree. Her interview, although initiated before she completed her first degree, was delayed for personal reasons.

Sheila

Sheila was a 20-year-old female who identified as being of Black African ethnicity. She attended both a four-year institution and a community college. She was a first-generation student who first attended college in 2020, starting at a four-year PWI. While at this institution, she was enrolled full-time and completed two semesters of coursework. Sheila shared that while she was attending this institution, she did not feel connected to the faculty and staff. Specifically, she felt that oftentimes she was being ignored when she would try to express personal challenges or concerns. Additionally, Sheila was finding it difficult to pay the very high tuition costs despite receiving some financial aid. As a result of her lack of connection to faculty and staff and the financial burden of tuition, she decided to leave this institution.

When Sheila left the four-year institution in 2021, she took some time off from academics to work. In 2022, she transferred to a local community college. Attending this community college made sense from Sheila's perspective, as it was located close to home and she had friends attending this institution. For Sheila, having friends at the institution made her feel more comfortable, connected, and that she belonged. At the time of the interview, she was enrolled as a full-time student at this community college and had completed one semester of coursework. Her intention was to complete an associate degree and transfer to a four-year institution to obtain a bachelor's degree.

Bradley

Bradley was a 34-year-old male student, who identified as being of Black/African ethnicity. He was a first-generation student who came to U.S. from Africa. He came to the U.S.

intending to work and make money with which he could help support his family back home, as was culturally expected of African men. Bradley's family was overseas in his home country of Nigeria. After some months of being in the U.S., Bradley decided to enroll in college to get a degree. At the time of the interview, he had not previously attended a four-year institution.

Bradley first enrolled in 2020 at a local community college. This decision to start college was not well received by his family, who expected him to follow their cultural traditions. He shared that, as a result of spending time in the U.S., his perspective on the importance of education had changed. A fellow Nigerian friend in the U.S., who had attended the same community college, explained to him the long-term benefits of having additional education. This same friend helped Bradley to navigate the college system and get acclimated to life in the U.S. Additionally, Bradley shared that some of his interactions with faculty and staff at the college were positive and reinforced his desire to attend. At the time of the interview, he was enrolled part-time at this community college and had completed seven semesters of coursework toward a degree. He was undecided as to whether he would pursue additional schooling after completing his associate degree.

Tony

Tony was a 25-year-old male who identified as being of Black/African ethnicity. He was not a first-generation college student. He shared in his interview that his father had obtained a master's degree. Tony came to Massachusetts from Africa, and he had not previously attended a four-year institution. Tony first enrolled at a community college to pursue a degree in 2015. In choosing to come to the U.S., Tony and his family agreed that his main aspiration was to attend college, like his father, and obtain a good job. For Tony, the language barrier was one of the more challenging barriers to adjusting to the U.S. educational system. However, the help and

support of the faculty and staff at his college made it easier for him to navigate the school and services that he needed.

Tony shared how his father was instrumental in his college pursuits. Since the community college tuition was much lower than that of a four-year institution, his father was able to help him to pay tuition for each semester. Overall, Tony described his community college experience as positive, and he was willing to recommend the institution to other Black students. At the time of the interview, he was enrolled part-time and had completed four semesters of coursework. Tony was hoping to one day achieve a master's degree and follow in his father's footsteps.

Christine

Christine was a 21-year-old female who identified as being of Black/Caribbean ethnicity. She also identified as a first-generation student. Christine's parents did not go to college, and she was the first one of her siblings to start the college process. However, she and all of her siblings were in college at the time of the interview. Christine was the furthest along in her degree pursuits. In 2019, she enrolled as a full-time student at a four-year PWI and completed five semesters of coursework. She shared that she chose to attend the four-year institution because this path was emphasized in conversations with her friends and high school counselors. Although Christine had attended a predominantly White high school, she admits that she did miss and desire interactions with other Black peers. Such interactions did not occur often at the PWI.

Her attendance at the four-year school became challenging as the cost of tuition increased. She did not want to leave the institution but eventually decided she needed to transfer. Initially, she was reluctant to leave as she knew her family would have preferred that she stay within the four-year system. However, given the high cost of tuition and her desire for more same-race interactions, Christine decided to leave and enroll in community college. At her new

institution, she expressed an appreciation for the increased racial diversity, especially in regard to faculty, and the reduced tuition. In 2022, At the time of the interview, she was enrolled full-time, and was in the process of completing her first semester of coursework at this institution.

Lily

Lily was a 28-year-old female who identified as being of Black/African American ethnicity. She was not a first-generation college student. Both her mother and sister had obtained bachelor's degrees and her father had obtained a doctoral degree. She first attended college in 2014 at a four-year PWI on the U.S. West Coast. For Lily, being at an institution with a lack of racial diversity was challenging. Additionally, she felt family pressure to attend and stay at this institution. Her family's perception was that four-year-school attendance was more likely to result in a better job after graduation. However, in 2015, after discussion with her family and weighing factors such as the lack of racial diversity and the high cost of tuition, Lily left the institution. During her time at this institution, she was enrolled part-time and completed four semesters of coursework.

Lily worked full-time for a short period in the state where she attended the PWI. Then, in 2019, she moved to Massachusetts and enrolled at a local community college. Although Lily's family members were concerned about her leaving the four-year institution, they were supportive of her attending a community college. She shared how there were members of her family who had attended and graduated from community colleges before transferring to obtain their bachelor's degrees. For Lily, the community college option eased the financial burden and brought her back home and closer to her family and friends, where she felt more comfortable. At the time of her interview, Lily had just graduated from community college with her associate

degree. Her interview, although initiated before she completed her last semester, was delayed due to illness and other personal challenges.

Steven

Steven was a 40-year-old male who identified as being of Black/Caribbean ethnicity. He was not a first-generation student. His mother had completed a master's degree. He first attended college in 1999 at a four-year PWI. Enrolled as a full-time student, he completed two semesters of coursework at this institution. He shared how his journey through college did not include his family, as they were living in another country at the time. Steven had to figure out how to navigate the college process on his own and with the help of his girlfriend. In addition, to help pay for college, he had to devote some of his schoolwork time to work and pay for college.

Feeling as though he could not manage the various challenges of work and school, in 2000, he decided to significantly decrease his coursework at the four-year institution. During the 2000 – 2022 period, Steven officially transferred to a community college but also continued to take classes intermittently at the four-year institution. Additionally, he had to work part-time to pay for school and meet other basic needs (i.e., food, rent). Steven shared how he struggled academically at times. He felt that he did not have enough time to fully devote himself to his schoolwork, amid all he needed to do day-to-day. He shared his longing for family connection and support throughout his educational journey. At the time of the interview, in 2022, Steven was finishing up his final semester at community college, with plans to then fully return to finish his bachelor's degree at his previous four-year institution.

Findings

The remainder of Chapter Four reflects the voices of the study participants. This deepens our understanding of their lived experiences as Black undergraduate college students at PWIs and/or community colleges. The findings are organized by the six non-academic factors that are the focus of this study, which are (1) family support, (2) peer relationships, (e) financial support, (4) faculty relationships, (5) race/campus climate, and (6) student support programs/services. As reflected below, this study highlights the similarities and differences between Black student experiences at two types of institutions. The presentation of the study's findings, themes, and subthemes, helps us to better understand how these Black students perceived their experiences throughout their college journey. Findings are presented and supported by interview excerpts and student quotations extracted from the one-on-one Zoom interviews and organized based on themes and subthemes that emerged.

The Influence of Family on the Black Student Experience

In the interviews, students shared specific examples of whether and how their families played a role in their experience. For some students, families were very supportive in helping them to navigate the process. Such support included giving advice during challenging times, which helped to guide the students' decision-making throughout the college journey. In addition, the encouraging words of various family members helped to motivate these students to succeed.

Sheila felt that her family's support was important. When asked about her family's role, she stated:

My family played a really large important role. They were honestly, like the deciding factor in choosing whether I was going to keep attending or when I chose to leave [the

four-year PWI]. They were really like my greatest supporters in the sense of they supported me leaving because they knew I was not happy.

Margaret also emphasized the importance and her appreciation of familial support. She felt that her family's support all throughout her college journey contributed to her being academically successful. She shared the enthusiasm they expressed when she told them she had applied to college:

I ended up calling them afterwards saying "hey - guess what I think I am going to do?" And told them that I had enrolled and would be speaking to an advisor. ... they were thrilled! They were both so excited. My husband is a college graduate, so he was just like - "Is there anything that you need?" ...And my daughter being a teenager was just thrilled that I was taking the time to get my education... it has been nothing but support. ...So - You know my family's support has helped me to be so successful so far and I am extremely grateful for that.

Although families were supportive of decisions made by the students, at times there was reluctance regarding the type of institution that the students would attend. Lily, who started her college journey at a West Coast four-year PWI, talked about her family's reservations about her leaving the four-year school. They initially felt that staying at the four-year institutions would be more beneficial for her professionally. She shared some of her family's thoughts and preferences regarding attending a four-year institution:

I would say they [family] wanted me to stay [at the four-year institution]. ...they felt like it [four-year school] had the best opportunities.... They felt like the job prospects would be much better, you know getting good internships, the name looking good on the resume, things like that.

Ironically, although her family had a preference for the four-year institution, they also saw community college as a good place to start her education. Lily's mother and both siblings had attended community colleges before continuing on to obtain their bachelor's and master's degrees. Lily highlighted her family's specific thoughts on attending community college and it being a good place to start:

They were just happy that I've gone back to school...My mom went to community college - she got her first degree, her associates from a community college, so they do value community college. My older sister also got her first science diploma from community college so, they were like go for it - it's a cheaper option, and it's a steppingstone.

For some of the respondents, their journey through college did not include support from family for various reasons. In some cases, the student's immediate family was located in another country. For Steven, not having the help and support of close family made it difficult for him to endure the rigors of his college experience at various times. He shared how it felt not having his immediate family in close proximity, and the tendency to feel alone:

You know I just didn't have that support group that I needed to get me through at the time, and so I just felt, I felt a little bit alone in the whole process. ...at the time, my mom had moved to another country, and she was starting her own family with my stepdad. Yeah, I was just kind of alone in the whole process, and I was having some financial hardship and I didn't want to burden her with you know with it all...

Family and Cultural Influences

While all the participants were Black students, there were diverse cultures represented in this cohort. Many different cultural norms and expectations were reflected in the students'

stories. For Bradley, an international student, even though education was important to his family, it became secondary to the need to work and provide for the family. He shared an account of a conversation with his family in Nigeria, regarding his decision to go to school in the U.S.:

First of all, I don't have family here. But when I decided to go to the community college and I talked to them, I told them that... I'm not going to work like before. I was working like full-time, but I will start work as part-time and go to school, because I need to continue my education, and they [family] was a little bit okay, but a little bit, not too happy. African, when we work, we used to send more money [send money home to help the family]. Now we're gonna divide that- they're not going to get that kind of money, because I would save that for my school fees... that was their hesitation - Happy but not too happy for that.

Tony, another international student, explained how his mother and father shared different opinions about him attending college in the U.S. He shared his mother's reservations about him immediately attending school centered on whether he was prepared for the U.S. academic system:

My dad you know paid my tuitions and he helped me sign up for financial aid... My mom wasn't in support of it [going straight to college], she said, I should repeat the last class [year] of high school [at a U.S. high school], so that I can be use to the United States before going to college, but I refused, so I just head to college. ...eventually my mom was happy with it and my family was fine with it.

Christine spoke candidly about some of the Caribbean cultural norms, and expectations surrounding attending college. When she did decide to leave the four-year institutions to attend a community college, she did not feel that her family would agree with her decision. She talked

about the stress of feeling like she was not meeting expectations. This stress was a significant factor in deciding whether she would tell her family. Christine alluded to the notions of shame and embarrassment in choosing to attend community college:

I'm like first generation college student. So my parents didn't go to school, but I am the youngest of my siblings, and my siblings did go to school. ... when it came to my decision to leave the four-year school, it was just a decision I made myself... I come from a strong Caribbean background, so I felt like I was letting my family and my parents down, and just felt like they wouldn't understand where I was coming from, or why I made the decision to go down to community school [college]. ...I know explaining it to them on the spot would not work out. And I wanted to make the decision and give myself some time - to reflect on how I will probably deliver to them, so they can understand where I'm coming from.

Although these students made the final decision to attend their chosen institutions on their own, the family's input and perspectives were considered in the decision-making process. Whether encouraging words or concerns were shared, the family feedback seemed to be valued by the participants and useful for discerning what was best regarding the institution they would attend.

The Influence of Peer Relationships on the Black Student Experience

The study participants described the role of peers/friends from two different perspectives. Some students spoke about peers in relation to friends with whom they already had a relationship. For others, the peer factor was explored from the perspective of wanting to connect, meet, and have new interactions with people who looked like them.

Peers as Existing Friends

Current friends were people from whom these students typically sought advice. These friends were described as being supportive when it came to helping the students make various decisions. Margaret described her inquiry of a friend, who worked at a college, regarding finding the right school to fit her needs:

I have one friend in particular and I call her - and she is my best friend. I did reach out to her at the start of school and just was asking her a few questions, because at the time she, herself, was working at a college. So I would ask her just a few questions.

Christine, like Margaret, also sought the advice of friends. She described a strong sense of support and understanding, and shared how she relied on them to help vet and guide her decision making:

When it came to my decision to leave the four-year school, it was just a decision I made myself, of course, after getting advice from mentors and friends...they're [her friends] the ones that I was getting advice from, and I ran the decisions through them to make sure that I was not making a bad decision, or a decision that I would regret. All of them fully supported my decision because they've been with me through the whole college journey, so they know all the ups and downs I had at the school - so they're very supportive. They helped me decide between the community college I go to now....

Similarly, Bradley turned to a friend who was an alumnus of the community college he wanted to attend. His friend encouraged him and reassured him of the support he would receive when attending this institution. This made Bradley feel confident in his decision to choose his community college:

My friends they played a very great role because of they encourage me. One of my friends who has already attended the community college, and he always told me, that you know you get support there, and they will coach you with anything you need, or you will find someone there to help you. ... I will be always a friend to you.

On the other hand, the advice from friends was not always as supportive as might be expected. Lily spoke about the challenges of peer pressure in making her decision to leave the four-year PWI to attend a community college. She emphasized the tendency for others to see community college as “second rate” because of the negative stigma in comparison to four-year institutions. Lily described her reluctance to tell her friends she would be attending a community college:

Actually I didn't tell them [friends] - I didn't want to tell them - I felt, I don't know, I felt weird telling them that I was going to [community college name]. To me, because I left the university, and I felt like they [friends] might look down on me, so I didn't tell them. ...just because in general, you know, they would always talk about oh - that's just a community college. When I was with them at the university ... I don't want to say they thought they were better, but they did feel like the university was better than going to community college.

For Steven, his peer support came from his girlfriend at the time. He shared, “the girl I was dating at the time she played a big role. And she was you know, one of my biggest cheerleaders. She helped me a lot.” He highlighted her constant support and encouragement, which he believes helped him to make it through all the challenges that he was experiencing.

Desiring Peer and Social Connection

For other respondents who transferred between the institutions, the peer factor was talked about in relation to wanting to socially connect with people, specifically people who looked like them. Debra shared that not having friends at her four-year institution was one of the reasons that she wanted to leave:

None of my friends or associates were at the school that I was attending so, that was important to me. I was kind of like the new kid on the block all over again. So that had somewhat of an effect in my decision to want to leave the school. ...most of my friends were at [community college name].

Having just come to the U.S. from Africa, Tony did not have any friends in the U.S. The challenges of having to navigate a new educational system were compounded by the desire to make new friends and connect with peers with whom he would attend school. Tony describes his experience in trying to make friends in the U.S. as follows:

I had most of my friends back home in Nigeria... the African Culture club [at the community college] is like a social club to me, because I didn't have friends. When I started college... I just came straight from Africa. I didn't know how to interact with these people, so it was like a social club, little social club for me.

Challenges to Peer Relationships: COVID-19

At the time of the interviews, socially connecting or integrating for these students was significantly challenged because of the risks of contracting the COVID-19 virus. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an extensive period of isolation for all persons. This social isolation, resulting from social distance mandates, became a major barrier to connecting with anyone (i.e. family, peers, faculty, staff). Sheila expressed her frustration with trying to connect with others during COVID:

I felt that the COVID -19 pandemic made it very hard for me to make friends, and I felt very alone. ...the overall environment of the school wasn't what I thought it would be.

Um I think the pandemic played a huge role in that sense ...I found myself just very alone in that aspect. It was just very hard trying to make friends in that environment where you have to social distance, and you have to keep apart.

Overall students seemed to value friendships, whether existing or new. They saw their peers as advisors who could assist them in making good decisions. Whether attending four-year or community college institutions, participants spoke about the importance and their desire for peers who were of the same race (Black). Having same race peers helped to make these students feel comfortable and safe and contributed to the participants' sense of belonging at each institution. This was especially important for those participants who attended a four-year PWI, as these institutions tend to have an overall small number of Black students. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic compounded the challenges of socially integrating for these students. Not having close peer connections during COVID-19 contributed to students disconnecting and feelings of isolation from peers, although institutions were still virtually in session.

The Influence of Faculty Relationships on the Black Student Experience

The next section of the survey focused on faculty-to-student relationships. It is important to note that in higher education, there is a distinction between the terms "faculty" (professors) and "staff" (administrative persons). The intended meaning of the term "faculty" in this study was a professor or instructor at the institution. However, participant responses regarding faculty relationships revealed a nuanced student perception of the term "faculty". All but one participant (i.e., nine out of ten or 90%), equated the terms "faculty" and "staff" in their responses. That is, respondents were sometimes referring to staff when they were asked about faculty interactions.

Recognizing the synonymous use of the term by study participants, a follow-up question was asked to emphasize “faculty” as persons teaching in the classroom. The participant examples below represent student experiences with both faculty and staff at their respective institutions.

Faculty and Staff Support

For these Black students, the influence of having encouraging and supportive faculty/staff underscores the importance of faculty-/staff-to student relationships at an institution. In her response below, Margaret was referring to the Admissions staff when she reflected on her experience with faculty and the support she received at the community college she attended:

Faculty was actually the reason why I choose my school... and what I liked about it after I completed the application, they had the virtual Admissions sessions that were set up, and I was able to log in and I could actually speak to somebody, get my questions answered. They would send me links so that I knew where to go, where to find information and they would find out where I was in the process. I mean they made it so simple. You know I started this process about 2 - 3 weeks prior to the start of the fall semester of last year (2020). And I kept saying am I going to be able to go?... And they said don't worry - yes you will be able to attend. We will make sure of that as long as you follow ABC, then you will be good... So that is the reason why I chose my school.

Debra was also appreciative of all the support and assistance she received at the community college from both faculty and staff. She described the environment as a community and shared an interaction with one of her professors at the community college she was attending:

It's been an overwhelming source of community in the college experience as far as helping me navigate, keeping on track, staying focused. The faculty [and staff] all from

start to finish, have been supportive and helpful in any and every way so that the faculty have been a major part of me wanting to stay in a community college...

[Faculty/professor interaction] ...I had missed orientation for the beginning of the courses for the program that I was starting. The professor had reached out to me, hey you missed this you know, this is what I need from you. ...they [the professor] let me know how I needed to get it [missed assignments]...the teachers made sure I knew what I was doing... ...there's always someone to assist you, to look up something for you, give you information...they made sure that I applied [Admission staff] when I needed to apply I knew the deadlines... the college always tried their best to offer some sort of help...so the college was more than forthcoming with any information....

In addition to providing students with the necessary information, the faculty/staff were highlighted for their words of encouragement towards students. Steven shared how a math professor's words helped to motivate him to pursue engineering as his major:

I had a math Professor tell me - you really have a mind for mathematics, and you should get interested in engineering ...I've always had this insecurity about you know my math skills... her saying that to me really made me pursue that even further... They've [faculty/professors] been very instrumental in getting me to where I'm at right now ...sometimes you just need someone to see you and believe in you, and that can like really make a big difference and so that math professor I'll never forget her and I appreciate her.

Not all of the students had complimentary things to say about interactions with faculty/professors. Lily found it challenging to connect with her professors in her experience at

the four-year school. Throughout her time at the institution, and while dealing with personal challenges, she described feeling frustrated and disconnected from faculty:

I never felt a connection with any of my professors, maybe one... I didn't feel like close to them at all, and I didn't feel like they really cared if I came or went... there was one time, where I went through like some difficulties, I was missing classes and I felt like they didn't even like notice that I wasn't in classes... even when I was there, you know I didn't feel like they, ever remembered my name.

Susan spoke about poor staff interactions at the four-year institution she attended. She focused on the staff at the institution and her efforts to receive support during a challenging time:

Most of my interactions with the faculty were just so poor [she was actually talking about staff]. And I felt like very misunderstood. I felt little support from them. So that was definitely a main reason why I was ready to leave.

Ethnically Relatable Faculty/Professors

A lack of relatable faculty was one area that exposed some of the more specific challenges for Black students at the four-year PWIs. Throughout this section of the student interviews, there was a constant echo of the phrase “*who look like me*”. For these students, seeing faculty and staff at the institutions who looked like them was important. Participants expressed a longing for persons who they felt would be more racially and ethnically relatable and would likely have had similar experiences as a Black person or Black college student.

Christine shared feelings of relief, because she was taking a course taught by a Black professor at the community college:

I felt more welcome. For example, I had my first Black - my second like Black teacher my whole life. I had my first Black teacher, when I was in high school. And at the community college is when I experienced that again, so I felt relieved.

Sheila also emphasized the importance of having Black professors and stressed how this experience influenced her recommendation of the institution.

My biggest regret was not starting with the community college. And I would just recommend the school because not only do they have faculty members that looks just like you... and it's not like an alienating experience, you're not the only kid there- Black kid...

Susan felt that her college experience was enhanced by interacting with Black professors. She shared her excitement about having diverse representation among the professors at the community college. Her enthusiasm was expressed as such:

It's very diverse, because the school [community college] is in the city, so everyone looks like me. So that's already bringing my level of comfort to 100% - you know my professors look like me - they understand the Black experience - I've had Black female professors for literature and Black studies. That was a great experience - just because growing up, I can count on my hands how many Black teachers or Black professors I've encountered. And I do feel like it definitely makes a difference in my learning experience - to see someone who looks like me, speaks like me.

In his comment below, Steven talks about how the guidance and mentorship of a Black professor was encouraging in his journey.

And there were a couple of faculty who looked like, you know me, people of color - that encouraged me. Actually, one of one of my engineering professors was a Black male.

After taking this class and doing so well, I asked him if he would mentor me and he said yes.

From a different perspective, Steven candidly spoke about the potential for inequities when racial or ethnic similarities do not exist in the faculty-to-student interaction. In his example, he refers to an experience with a White professor at a community college:

[Steven talking with a White professor]... can you explain this homework question for me, because, I really don't understand.

[White professor] Well, I don't have time to explain, because this is the end of the semester. I don't have time to explain the problem to you, if you don't understand it by now.

[Steven later that day], another Black student like me went to the professor, with the same question. She said the same thing.

[Steven on the same day] And then I see another student... White person and she [the professor] sat with that [White] student for a good like half hour during that same time period...these [White] professors I think they see themselves in these [White] students - but when it comes to Black students, they don't see themselves in us. And so, they are less prone to like want to help. Not all [White] professors. ...it's not a level playing field like you know I mean, like we [Black students] we're coming in at a disadvantage.

As a comparison, Steven described his experience with a Black professor at the same community college. He felt the Black professor was more considerate of him as a student. Steven felt that the racial and ethnic similarities between them made this instructor more relatable and empathetic to what he was experiencing as a Black student:

I remember there was a Black Professor. I was taking Calculus 2 [summer course] at the time and I had done really poorly on the first exam... He walked up to me and asked what's going on? The fact that he went out of his way just to ask me what was going on - I appreciate it. ... I said, "I'm working like 60 hours. Plus, even though it's just one course that I was taking, because I was working so much, I didn't really have the time to like really delve into the material and understand what I was taught.

As has been found in previous research, the faculty-to-student relationship is an important factor in student success. The words of encouragement and support given by faculty and staff at an institution can be a great motivator for Black students they encounter. In addition, having same race interactions with Black faculty and staff was important to Black students connecting and feeling like they belonged at the institution. Students gravitated toward Black professionals on campus as mentors and saw them as role models who could help guide them through the journey.

The Influence of Financial Aid on the Black Student Experience

For the participants, financial aid was a factor that influenced their decision making in various ways. Students shared concerns regarding affordability, debt accumulation, and discerning the overall return on investment at the various types of institutions represented. One of the more prevalent subthemes was the high cost of education at the four-year institutions.

The High Cost of Education

In weighing the cost of a four-year institution relative to that of a community college, financial aid can be a deciding factor in which institution a student decides to attend. Whether paid for by members of the student's family or as an out-of-pocket expense for the student,

college was seen as an expensive endeavor, typically requiring some form of financial assistance to make college economically feasible.

Susan shared about having to take out loans in order to pay for her education at the four-year school, although her mother had been saving for college since she was young:

My mom had been saving since I was a kid... We [she & mom] only took out a small loan - for about 20 grand... It was 43 grand for the year. So - that's a lot of money when you think about it (Laugh).

Sheila echoed the same sentiment regarding the expense of her education at the four-year school, even with financial aid:

That school was very pricey! And I felt like even in terms of financial aid, I got some grants and some aid, but even still with all that - it was still costly. ... financial aid, played a big role in me choosing to leave. I worked briefly there, but even though with the work study experience I saw like okay, this is not much.

Obtaining the funds to pay for school was a part of the student challenge. The other critical piece of the affordability issue was being able to annually retain the aid or funding that was awarded. Christine shared about having to navigate some of the challenges of keeping the financial aid, in the midst of the increasing tuition costs at her four-year institution:

I was losing a lot of my scholarships. I kept having to rely on financial aid and loans and there's one point during the pandemic semester, my financial aid was on pending, like I was close to losing it and the school offered that you could appeal it. One that I did appeal got approved, so I was able to hold on to it. I think, just the cost of the school kept increasing and more loans, so it was more of an issue for me.

Affordability of Institution

Affordability helped to make community college an attractive option for many of the students in the study. For some of the students, the potential for accumulating student loan debt was an important factor in them deciding to leave their four-year institutions in favor of a community college.

Sheila was adamant about not having student loan debt. She considered the post-college financial burden more manageable as a student who attends community college because of the lower cost to attend:

So I'm going from a school that was like 30 grand [\$30,000] a semester to a school that's like 6 grand (\$6,000) in total [a year]. Financial aid was really supportive and helpful.

Yeah, I would say honestly my biggest regret was not starting with a community college...I don't know what I was thinking my senior year [of high school], but financial aid has really helped in [community college name].

Also noting the importance of the low cost of community college, Christine touched upon the decreased worry and stress of financing her college education. She stated, "the stress of finance and affording education was like lifted off my shoulder because it's definitely a more affordable route. ...I do not regret making the decision to attend [community college name] because I'm technically attending for free."

When asked if she would be attending school if she did not receive financial aid assistance, Kara shared the following regarding not wanting student debt:

I say no... My situation is that I either would go to school or work a job. So, I would say no, because I'm very adamant on not having any debt, especially because I am a student, so I don't have an income right now....

Although community college was low cost, Steven decided to pay for his education out-of-pocket. He explained the challenges of having to work to pay for school without financial aid, and the potential to delay the degree completion progress.

I paid out-of-pocket my whole time at the community college because I was going part-time. And I was taking one class here one semester, two class here... I was working full-time, and so I paid out of pocket my whole time I was there and no financial aid at [community college]. Yeah it's just the fact that I was able to afford, you know, one or two classes, without breaking the bank that helped a lot. I probably would have finished it more sooner if I had gone there full-time. But because at the time I was working full-time, it wasn't feasible for me to go there full-time... and I was getting quality education too so that you know [community college name] is one of the top community colleges in the greater Boston area.

For students like Bradley, international students who were trying to work while attending school, financial aid was important as they worked to quickly acclimate to the new system. Bradley stated, "... it will be very hard for me to be pay all the school fees, even if you are working, but when the financial aid come, it will help you to pay almost 70%...

Concerns About Return on Investment

There were two students who specifically discussed how they determine whether community college curriculum was as rigorous as a four-year institution. Margaret explains her process for determining the strength of community college course work.

... it was interesting that I found that the general education courses that are taught at a four- year institution would be equivalent to the two years that I would have at community college... it was like a third of the cost... I thought that was absolutely

perfect...you don't want to have a lower quality, and it didn't appear that this school had a lower quality for its cost. ...knowing that these would be the same classes that I would be taking at a four-year institution just kind of sealed the deal a little bit more for me.

Additionally, Steven expanded on Margaret's sentiment regarding the quality of a community college education. He discussed the experiences of other students by sharing how "Many students of color have gone to [community college name] and gone off to become doctors, lawyers, engineers so just knowing that makes it easier... you know if I go there, I can be successful."

The greater potential for student loan debt and post college financial burden was an important factor for consideration for Black students. Findings in this section highlight some of the participants' concerns regarding the rising cost of education and college affordability. With the cost of education at four-year institutions being significantly higher, these students saw community colleges as a more affordable and feasible option to pursue. As students continue to graduate with greater levels of student loan debt, continuous exploration of the long-term effects of student debt for Black students is necessary.

The Influence of Race/Campus Climate on the Black Student Experience

For the participants, the race and campus climate factor centered on the look and feel of the institution. Themes centered on the overall racial diversity of the campus including that of the faculty, staff, and peers. Students highlighted the need to see physical symbols that represented racial acceptance and inclusion of all cultures or ethnicities. These symbols would indicate whether the institution was a safe space and they belonged or whether they felt alienated and wanted to leave.

Campus Look and Feel

Regarding four-year PWIs, common themes that the respondents shared related to the very small number of Black students at their respective institutions. Several respondents highlighted their experiences of being the only Black student in class at PWIs. They expressed the importance of seeing signs of an inclusive culture, feeling a sense of community, and seeing people who look like them.

Debra candidly shared her thoughts about the lack of student racial diversity on campus at her four-year PWI, and provided a specific example of what she thought an inclusive campus should look like:

I didn't see a lot of African American students. I didn't see a lot of even just culture. Because it's not only Black and White it's Black, White, yellow, light, dark it's all... I wanted to be somewhere where students, faculty, my peers and others looked like me, thought like me, could even understand me, so I knew that wasn't the right campus for me. ...I remember walking into their [PWI] library, and I remember seeing the American flag...there's more than just the American flag of course yeah, we're in the United States of America... you have students from abroad... And I was just wondering where are the other flags. I don't see my flag from my culture, my heritage, I don't see any other flags it's just this one flag.

Debra, in comparing her experience at the community college to the PWI elaborates on how a similar gesture made by the community college helped to make her feel connected as someone of a different race:

The school is so diverse and one thing that I noticed is right off the bat...I remember seeing all the flags...I knew I was coming into a college that would shine a light on who I

was, who my peers were, and who all of the other students I would come into contact with. They allowed me to understand myself racially and other students racially and that played a big role in me wanting to stay there.

The Only Black Student in Class

As is characteristic of PWIs, there is low Black student representation at these institutions. Sheila talked about her experience at the four-year PWI she attended, and shared feelings of loneliness because of the small number of Black students:

In a classroom of thirty students, I felt alone when I would notice I was often the only Black student. It was uncomfortable trying to relate to my peers and professors when there was nothing to relate to. As the semester progressed, I found myself trying to comfort myself by saying that this was normal, and every student must be feeling the same. Nobody likes being an outcast. But by the end of the semester... I chose to leave and pursue my degree elsewhere.

Debra, who also attended a four-year PWI shared her concerns regarding her classroom interactions with faculty at the four-year institution. She echoed the challenge of oftentimes being the only Black student in her classes and how she perceived the overall experience at the institution:

I felt so out of sorts in my classrooms, and I felt like my professors - they weren't calling on me, they weren't - I would say interested in what I had to bring to the table. So, I didn't feel like I was being heard or seen in my classroom settings. And I didn't like it and that wasn't the way I wanted to learn... I was different I was the only African American female - African American student period in that classroom. In the majority of my

classrooms, so I knew I stuck out... But when I knew the answers I knew the answers, and I wanted to get my shot at trying...

Community College Signifies Diversity

Six of the ten student participants interviewed had both types of college campus experiences (four-year PWI and community college). All six of those students felt the community colleges they attended were more diverse and had more Black students, Black faculty, and Black staff. Kara's excitement about the diverse community college environment is expressed in her statement below:

I personally have friends there [community college name]. I feel like there is a community of people of color. I feel like there's so many different people of color at the [community college name] ...just knowing that people come from different backgrounds and it's not just so like homogenous...but I do feel very comfortable there seeing similar faces... But I feel like specifically at [community college name] there may be more instances or occurrences of you seeing people-of-color events or Black events. That's nice to see, that's nice to be around if I want to participate.

Steven spoke regarding the ease of finding diverse groups of people to connect with at the community college in comparison to the four-year PWI:

There's a good amount of professors who are minorities, you know Black, Latino. They reflect you know the communities that they were serving, not to say there's not a lot of White students at [community college name] - there is. It is just like a good majority of the student population there are immigrants. Like Black folks it was a good mixture... it's easier to find the group you can you know click with and gravitate towards, better than when you were at a you know [predominantly White institution name]

These Black students felt that racial diversity existed to a greater extent at community colleges than at PWIs. The importance of racial diversity in her attempt to find diversity on campus, Christine used other methods to confirm the numbers:

I like being in diverse places, ...but before I did select that community college, I did look at their student [race] data and one of the reasons I picked it was the diversity, it was way more diverse than the other option that I had.

Supportive Campus Environment

With the heightened racial tensions and incidents such as the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020, institutions across the country searched for ways to send supportive messaging to their Black students. Debra describes an event that took place at the community college that she attended:

In our communities whereas there was a lot of police brutality with young African American men ...I remember when George Floyd's death was really prominent in the news, and you know everyone was just going through a tough time dealing with that, especially African Americans, the school took a stand. I remember going to a rally at the school and everybody taking a moment of silence and kneeling down for the nine minutes...the school has always made me feel like I personally as an African American, and then being a young woman, included, appreciated, acknowledged, and wanting to help me succeed, no matter what was going on outside of my studies.

Findings in this section emphasized race/campus climate as an important factor in participants' choosing an institution to attend. As Black students, the racial composition of the campus was connected to how safe participants felt at the institution. The lower number of Black persons at PWIs challenged the students' ability to feel a sense of connection and belonging at

the institution. Interactions with other people or symbols of diversity were welcomed by the participants in this study and signified racially-welcoming institutions.

The Influence of Black Student Support Programs on the Black Student Experience

Students wanted to experience same-race interactions in campus support programs, as well. Affinity spaces that focused on services specifically for Black students helped to convey safety, family, and connection for the participants. The emerging subthemes are the following.

Affinity Groups vs. Generic Support Program Services

In order to better support Black students, some college campuses have developed affinity support groups and events to help Black students better connect to their peers and the campus environment. Lily described some of the Black student clubs on her campus:

And then I think it's like NABA where it's like the association NABA the accountant, the National Association for [Black] Accountants. The African club... NABA but I think I attended a couple meetings.... And then NSBE [National Society of Black Engineers] I never attended [never attended because she was not an engineering major].

Sheila was an active participant in Black student groups on campus. She stated, "I was a member of every club that was known to support Black students, whether it was the BSU [Black Student Union] or an African dance club, I was a member...But those two clubs weren't enough..."

Some of the Black student organizations were more academically focused while other groups were more for social purposes. Steven shared regarding his connection to two student groups at his four-year PWI:

The Black Student Union at that school was very outspoken at the time. I don't remember all the issues... I was one of the members of [Haitian club name]. This is called a Haitian association of students...for mostly like, Latino and Haitian American...

Connecting in Larger Groups

When asked about the importance of club participation relative to her decision to stay at the institution she was attending, Margaret shared the following:

It is important for students to be able to find where they can relate, where they can fit in. You have to have something like this ... I think representation is important. ... being a part of, belonging to a group of other people that you can identify with...

Sheila also shared her feelings on institutions having Black student clubs and events on campus. She highlighted the importance of same race interactions by stating, "...any school honestly whether it's a four year or two years school should have some sort of program for the Black kids there to mingle and get to know each other...that I think is very crucial for any institution."

Knowledge of Existing Black Student Groups

Other than the typical Black Student Union campus clubs and organizations, these students listed others groups they encountered on their respective campuses. Some of the other types of support groups and club activities that were specifically for Black students included those shared by Susan and Bradley:

There was a domestic violence group for Black women...in my mind that was important- taxes [tax preparation services/classes offered to Black students] and domestic violence.

...Also, we have the Brotherhood is also club [support group for Black men only], 80% of the club members is Black students... there are support coaches...there are so many resources there... We have a meeting every week of the semester...

Lily and Christine also mentioned other services that they found helpful, but which served the broader population of underrepresented students (i.e., other races and ethnicities).

The Success Program but again that's also for other people - that's broad... not just people of color. [Lily]

... Afro Latino groups, they have different like clubs and groups based on like ethnic backgrounds, I believe, like they have a Caribbean club. [Christine]

Challenges to Social Integration

For some students, simply knowing about the existence of services/clubs is not enough to ensure participation. There are various external responsibilities that can inhibit a person's ability to participate. Debra expressed her challenges to consistently participate in the campus groups.

My kids were younger, so it was more so making sure that they were always okay. A lot of the sessions were at a certain time where it's like okay now it's time to pick up the kids and I'm rushing to get home. ... had to make sure that I was available for my family and for my studies.

In trying to socially integrate through clubs, Steven talks about his attempts to participate in cross cultural activities, specifically White fraternity parties and not feeling welcomed.

The other groups they had some White fraternities over at [four-year PWI] and when I would go to the parties, I didn't feel welcome. It didn't feel like a welcoming place for people that look like me. I just gravitated towards parties that were you know, being held by people that look more like you know like me Black, or of color.”

In all, study participants valued opportunities to participate in social gatherings and connect with other students. Specifically, events where these students were able to interact with other Black students were very important to them feeling a sense of belonging at the institution. Whether the group was academic or strictly social, being able to engage regularly with other Black students provided a path to connecting, relating, and being accepted on one's campus. While multiple kinds of groups for social interaction were described, some participants felt that there was a need for additional groups that focused specifically on the needs of Black students.

Summary

The findings presented in this chapter reflect the intersectionality of the six factors studied in relation to sense of belonging. Factors such as peers, faculty/staff, and on-campus student support services were connected by the race/campus climate factor. For the students interviewed, the importance of opportunities for same-race interactions was a consistent and paramount theme throughout. Such opportunities made these Black students feel like they belonged at the institution. While some of these factors are applicable to students of other races and ethnic backgrounds, they all clearly reflect some key areas of emphasis for supporting Black students in college and creating a sense of belonging.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings of this phenomenological study. The study focused on factors influencing the Black college student experience at four-year PWIs and two-year/community colleges. This study focused on six non-academic factors which have been found to influence the college student experience for all students and explored them within the context of the lived experiences of Black college students. Factors explored in this study include: (1) family support, (2) peer relationships, (3) faculty relationships, (4) financial support, (5) race/campus climate, and (6) student support programs/services (Baker & Robnett, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Sedlacek 1999).

The findings of this study support existing research and highlight other areas for future research on the Black college student experience in relation to the six non-academic factors studied. While these factors are applicable to other student populations, previous research has emphasized the fact that all students will experience the college journey differently (Tinto 2017; Wood & Harris, 2013; Xu & Webber, 2018). Utilizing the stories of the participants interviewed, the present study examined how these non-academic factors can either support or challenge the progress and success of Black college students toward degree attainment. To better understand how Black college students make sense of their college experience, having a deeper understanding of how these students navigate the non-academic factors is key. This deeper understanding will provide more comprehensive insights regarding the Black student experience.

The Influence of Family Support on the Black Student Experience

With the many decisions to be made as a part of post-high school planning, the college process can be an exciting time, but also an overwhelming time (Brooks, 2015). Once students transition to college, there is sometimes a question as to whether family support and involvement

are as important to the student as they were in the pre-college years. While various points of the student's college experience can be independently navigated by the student, there are portions that require or would benefit from the involvement of the family. Research shows that supportive family relationships are an important factor in the academic success of ethnic minority students (Brooks, 2015; McCulloh, 2022; Wiggins et al., 2023; Workman, 2015)

The family relationship was considered an integral component of the Black student experience by the study participants. Student responses suggest that family support was just as critical during the college years as during the student's former years of education. Findings from Brooks (2015) and McCulloh (2022) reflect a similar sentiment that Black family members are instrumental in the academic success of Black college students. Interview data from the participants reflected varying levels and types of family support and involvement influencing the students' experiences. For example, family support included giving advice or informational support or counsel during decision making. Additionally, families also provided financial support, and emotional support such as "cheerleading" or encouraging students through the process (McCulloh, 2022; Wiggins et al., 2023). The findings revealed that families were supportive whether students were attending a four-year PWI or community college. Students used words such as "thrilled", "excited", and "greatest supporters" to describe family enthusiasm at various points throughout their experience (McCulloh, 2022).

For students with international roots, whose families were living in another country, the absence of family involvement made the college journey challenging. These participants felt that not having proximity to family support during difficult situations resulted in them losing focus, struggling academically, and eventually leaving the institution. Respondents described college life in the absence of family as "lonely" and felt that they lacked an important support group to

help them navigate the challenges of life. In situations where students did not have family in close proximity, these students relied on close existing friendships to help them navigate the decisions and challenges of their experiences (Brooks, 2015; Bueno et al., 2022). Students felt that having familial encouragement through the good and especially in the more challenging times was key to their academic success thus far in the college journey (Brooks, 2015; Bueno et al., 2022).

Family Support and Cultural Norms

Four (40%) of the participants emphasized the influence of their international and foreign cultural backgrounds on their student experience. The study participants introduced aspects of cultural expectation or norms and shared the impact on their college experience. This finding supports previous research by Khosa-Nkatini et al., (2023) and Eakins and Eakins (2017) that emphasize the importance of cultural beliefs and norms in Black households. Collectively, these students ethnically represented African and Caribbean cultures. For male students from African cultures, their initial intent in coming to the U.S. was to find a good paying job to help provide for family members still residing abroad. Education, though a priority in their home countries, was secondary at times to the need to help financially support the family. Navigating the competing demands of personal choice and familial expectations for these students manifested in unsettling feelings. These feelings resulted from the students' choice to break cultural norms by pursuing an education. While there is existing research on education and gender roles within traditional African and Caribbean cultures, more research on these combined themes is warranted within the higher education context (Khosa-Nkatini et al., 2023; Leath et al., 2015; Onuma et al., 2022;).

Within the Caribbean culture, as well, family opinions were a part of the students' decision-making. Although there was family support for either type of institution, there was a family reluctance to support the choice to attend community college. Families from island cultures sometimes prioritized the four-year institution as a better choice with greater long term professional benefits. This tendency to characterize an education at a four-year college or university as having greater value than the community college is a part of a long-standing societal view of these types of institutions (Camardelle et al., 2022). Choosing to leave a four-year institution to attend a community college was perceived as shameful and somewhat of an embarrassment to the student and the family. The negative stigma attached to community college has plagued these institutions for decades. Students and their families have characterized these institutions as being below the caliber of four-year college and universities. Research shows that such a characterization reflects a perceived lack of the value of the associate degree that community college students obtain. (Bivens, 2016; Camardelle et al., 2022).

The Influence of Peers/Friends on the Black Student Experience

According to Yan et al. (2022), it is important that every person connect with at least one other person as a friend, romantic interest, or other form of relationships to develop social networks. These social networks become sources of support and strength throughout the day-to-day navigation of life. Decades of research have acknowledged the importance of having friendships in college and shows a positive correlation to academic performance and student success. A review of literature reflects both the strengths and criticisms of college friendships (Leath et al., 2022; McCabe, 2023). When asked about the influence of peer/friend relationships on their experiences, participants answered this question from one of two perspectives. First was the appreciation of existing peer/friend or romantic relationships. Like the descriptions of family,

friends were described as sources of social and emotional support and hailed as encouraging and supportive by the participants. As explained in McCabe (2023), friends help to make “...difficult things in our life feel easier ...” (p.12). Seen as trusted advisors during decision making, friends were considered a safeguard to help prevent bad decisions from occurring. Whether an inquiry for basic college information or deeper personal guidance, existing friendships were valued and important.

As is also evidenced in existing research, friendships contribute to a student’s identity development, which come with questions of acceptance and challenges (Leath et al., 2022). For participants of the present study who left the four-year PWI, there were feelings of shame in deciding to attend community college. For Christine, the perception that friends valued an education at the four-year institutions more highly than that of a community college caused awkwardness and embarrassment. While these friendships were important to creating a sense of belonging, the peer pressure felt by students can also be an indirect barrier to their success (Yan et al., 2022).

The second perspective for students in discussing peer/friend relationships was within the context of efforts to make friends. Coupled with the nervousness of attending college, not having friends at the institution a student chooses to attend can result in a student feeling unsettled about the transition. For those students who attended four-year PWIs, not having existing friendships at their institutions influenced their decision to leave their institutions. The choice of community college was more attractive because there was typically an existing network of friends as well as an existing community of Black students attending the community colleges they chose. As a Black student at a PWI, Debra expressed feeling uncomfortable with being “...the new kid on the block...” and “the only Black kid” in many of her classes. In these experiences, Debra’s

sense of belonging was challenged by her limited connection to which decrease her desire to social integration into the college campus community (McCabe, 2023, McNear & Hunter, 2023; Tinto, 1993, 2017).

For international students, who did not have family in the U.S., the feelings of isolation and lack of connection were compounded by the fear of the unknown. Having to navigate a new system of education, coupled with trying to make new friends, required learning U.S. cultural norms. All the community colleges represented were located in the inner city. Given that inner cities typically have more diverse populations of citizens, the students expected to see this diversity mirrored on campus (Bivens, 2016; Camardelle et al., 2022). For these international students, this greater cultural diversity at the institutions they chose was important. At community colleges, these participants felt more like they belonged, because the campuses reflected greater diversity than the PWIs (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Love, 2009; Xu & Webber, 2018). All the Black students in the study stressed the need to find people who looked like them. This strong desire for similar racial connection made attending a community college the logical choice.

Challenge to Social Integration – COVID-19

For college students, the impact of COVID-19 compounded the existing obstacles to socially integrating and connecting in-person on a college campus (De Bruyn & Van Eekert, 2023; Hartzell et al., 2021). Campuses responded with a quick shift to fully remote classes and services in higher education. As such, the students' need for in-person social connection was superseded by the health and wellness needs of the country achieved via "social distancing". Immersed in isolation, as everyone followed the social distancing mandates and remained at home with little to no social or physical contact, many students struggled with being denied the

social interactions they would typically have on campus (i.e., orientation events, roommates, classes, clubs, sports, social celebrations). Lily described her feelings of loneliness and frustration at not being able to interact face-to-face because of the social distance mandates. As a first-year student, being able to only interact with others virtually induced other stressors that made it difficult to make friends and remain at the institution (Landertinger et al., 2021).

Although research on the impact of COVID-19 is in the early stages, recent research reflects an increased number of people suffering from mental health issues in society. Responses to COVID-19 by college and university officials have resulted in increased demand for mental health services to support students (Hartzell et al., 2021; Landertinger et al., 2021). Recent scholarship shows that Black students and their families were disproportionately more likely to have been severely impacted by COVID-19, in terms of physical, mental, emotional, and financial health (Bisconer & McGill, 2023; Hartzell et al., 2021). As noted by recent writings on the topic, colleges and universities will have to stay attuned to the realities of overall Black student health. This will be critical as institutions continue to assess the impact of COVID-19 in order to provide the support that these students may need (Bisconer & McGill, 2023; De Bruyn & Van Eekert, 2023; Landertinger et al., 2021).

The Influence of Faculty/Staff Relationships on the Black Student Experience

This section focuses on the influence of the student-to-faculty relationship on the Black college student experience. Interview conversations with students regarding faculty relationships illuminated a key point. Notably, all the respondents, when asked about “faculty” experiences, exhibited some confusion regarding higher education terminology and required a follow up question for clarification. Based on the frequency of this occurrence, it became apparent that the terms “faculty” and “staff” were assumed to be synonymous by the participants. However, in

higher education, these two terms are not used synonymously. When used in academia, the term “faculty” refers to professors/teachers, while “staff” tends to refer to administrators or other non-teaching persons responsible for operations at the institution. Additionally, when referenced in scholarly academic writing, the terms are typically detached from one another and used independently (Griswold & Ariss, 2022).

These observations call into question whether the issue of misinterpreting academic jargon has affected previous research related to faculty relationships. This unexpected occurrence, though it may seem minor, could skew data, as study participants’ answers were sometimes different when the question was reframed to specify faculty in the classroom. As a result, this study will sometimes reflect student interactions with faculty and staff, to accurately represent student perspectives. These study findings also underscore the importance of relationships students can build with other staff at an institution, that can influence their sense of belonging (Snijder et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings of the present study reflect that students felt the interactions with faculty and staff were important throughout their college experience. Students recounted experiences where faculty and staff were supportive, were helpful in providing information, and gave encouraging words that bolstered the students’ self-confidence and made them want to succeed. Of the 60% of the participants who attended both a PWI and then transferred to a community college, half of them shared experiences of poor faculty interactions. These experiences led to feelings of disconnection which culminated in students leaving the four-year institution (Bivens, 2016; Burke, 2019; Tinto, 2017).

Additionally, in discussing the influence of faculty and staff, the themes of college personnel and race were coupled together. Seeing and interacting with Black faculty and staff,

in particular at the community colleges, was often appreciated and described with great enthusiasm. A phrase that was frequently used when referencing Black professionals on campus was “people who look like me”. Seeing other persons who were Black represented an increased potential for relatability, sparked the students’ excitement, increased their level of confidence, and made them feel more welcomed at the institution (Beasley, 2021; Cody, 2017). Black professionals were seen as mentors and encouragers, and students felt they were more empathetic and considerate than the White professors. There was a general perception that Black faculty and staff would better understand the experiences of Black students than would White faculty and staff professionals (Cody, 2017; Griffin, 2013).

At PWIs, the opportunities to connect with Black professionals were limited, as these institutions tend to have not only a small number of Black students but also a paucity of Black faculty and staff (Beasley, 2021; Bivens, 2016; Connor, 2022). One suggestion that participants shared was for institutions to hire more Black faculty and staff. It has been articulated that while institutions emphasize the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in higher education, they fail to allocate the necessary resources and time to accomplish the associated DEI tasks. It is evident that the race and ethnicity of the faculty and staff do matter in creating a sense of belonging for Black students. That said, the targeted hiring of faculty and staff of color requires the urgent attention of higher education administrators (Connor, 2022; Griswold & Ariss, 2022).

The Influence of Financial Aid on the Black Student Experience

As students, parents, and families consider the pursuit of a degree or other academic credentials, an important consideration is the cost of the education. The ability to meet college costs, for many families, can be the deciding factor regarding whether the student chooses a

four-year school or community college (Camardelle et al., 2022; McCulloh, 2020; Wood & Harrison, 2014). As demonstrated in the findings, one of the main considerations for the Black students interviewed was decreasing the potential for student loan debt. All the students wanted to guarantee that their post-degree debt would be as low as possible or nonexistent, which made community college an appealing choice. In weighing the significant financial commitment of attending a four-year institution, irrespective of whether financial aid or scholarships were awarded, students felt that the cost of the institution was still too high. The 60% of participants who attended a four-year institution cited an average annual cost of approximately \$35,000 - \$65,000 in tuition, room and board, and other core college expenses, as full-time students. In these instances, with high-cost institutions, having to figure out how to pay for college was described as a burdensome and stressful process for the students and their families (Camardelle et al., 2022; Wood & Harrison, 2014).

In comparison, the low cost of community college was an attractive feature for all of the students, and for 40% of them was a deciding factor in choosing which type of institution to attend. The potential for large amounts of debt was drastically decreased by attending a community college (Wood & Harrison, 2014). The average annual cost of the community colleges represented was approximately \$5,000 - \$8,000 for full-time students. However, although the cost of community college education is significantly lower than that of a four-year college education, some of the students that attended community college were still in need of financial aid. Some students chose to work to help pay for college and avoid accruing large amounts of education loan debt. However, exercising this option delayed progress toward degree completion. As a result, this option required decreasing enrollment status to less than full-time and required a longer time to complete a degree (Sullivan et al., 2023). According to

Camardelle et al. (2022). Black students experience financial hardship at a higher rate than their peers in other racial groups. Recent data reflect that 70% of Black students experienced food and housing insecurities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This highlights the importance of financial aid/support in assisting Black college students toward degree attainment (Camardelle et al., 2022; De Bruyn et al., 2023). However, more data specifically related to the impact of financial aid and institutional affordability on Black student success are necessary to determine specific implications for Black students.

Return on Investment

Under the theme of financial aid support, study participants discussed the low cost of community college in conjunction with their thoughts on the academic rigor and quality of a community college education. Students weighed the courses taught at the community college to see if they were academically comparable to those taught at four-year institutions. Of the students interviewed, 50% of them conducted comparisons of the academic coursework at both institutions. All those students felt that the academic rigor of community college courses was equivalent to that of four-year institutions. With confirmation of the quality of the community college education, the students were comfortable with taking full advantage of the affordability that this option presented (Camardelle et al., 2022; Freeman et al., 2020).

The Influence of Race/Campus Climate on the Black Student Experience

In 2020, during this research study, the U.S. was at the height of very racially challenging times. The deaths of Black persons, including Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, at the hands of law enforcement officers rocked the country and movements such as *Black Lives Matter* came to the forefront. While society grappled with the repercussions of these and other racially charged incidents, the Black population began to wonder about its safety in America. These same

concerns about society were reflected on college campuses throughout the country. Institutions searched frantically for better ways to make Black students feel safe and that they belonged. Addressing the need to create an environment that felt and looked safe to Black students became a high priority (Meikle, 2022; Tichavakunda, 2023).

Signs of a Racially Welcoming Campus

In this study, the racial campus climate was found to have a significant influence on the Black college student experience. Participants described the importance of the *look and feel* of the campus environment as Black students in search of connection. Participants consistently mentioned the importance of racial diversity and the racial composition of the campus as factors helping them to feel welcomed and feel a sense of belonging at the institution. Students typically expressed sentiments of feeling safer, more connected, and wanting to stay if the campus environment was perceived as welcoming and representative of diverse racial and ethnic cultures (Johnson, 2022; Love, 2009; Thelamour et al., 2019).

As a way of confirming that the campus climate was racially welcoming, students described searching for signs that were representative of existing racial diversity and Black student life on the campus. Beyond the initial glance to determine the number of other Black students present, students looked for symbols such as flags from other countries, institutional statistics, the existence of Black social/affinity groups, and the faces of Black faculty and staff at each institution. This intense search for racially diverse symbolism was an attempt to establish a sense of comfort and a greater feeling of welcomeness, which according to Beasley (2021), Griffin (2013) and Johnson (2022) is a typical response for underrepresented populations like Black college students.

Connecting Racially

This quest to feel welcome was of great concern for the six students who attended four-year PWIs, as these institutions are defined and known to have a significantly smaller number of Black students, faculty, and staff. Experiences such as oftentimes being the only Black student in the classroom and feeling lonely are common occurrences for Black students at PWIs. According to Lee and Barnes (2015), Black students who attend PWIs tend to report more experiences of hostile environments, feeling unwelcomed, and feeling unsupported. These experiences can all culminate in a decreased sense of belonging and eventually departure from these institutions. (Tichavakunda, 2023; Wood & Harrison, 2014;). Findings from the present study confirm these observations and aspects of previous research regarding participants who attended PWIs.

Additionally, these students felt uncomfortable when attempting to connect with White peers, faculty, and staff, whom they felt could not ethnically relate to Black experiences. The paucity of Black faculty and staff was an area of challenge, regarding relatability, and became a barrier to these Black student's wanting to connect with non-Black faculty and staff at the institutions (Johnson, 2022; Leath et al., 2022; Lee & Barnes, 2015). That is, these feelings of racial disconnect inhibited the students' ability to feel comfortable sharing or asking for help with academic or personal issues they were experiencing. This became a stressor for students attending PWIs. Although most of these students were able to academically succeed at the PWIs, the decreased sense of belonging led to them eventually transferring to community colleges (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Johnson, 2022).

Finding Diversity

In addition to all being Black, 100% of the participants were community college attendees during the time of their interviews. Similar to the PWI experience, these students

desired a campus environment that felt safe and welcoming as Black persons. Overall, these students described the community college campus environment as much more racially diverse than PWIs. There was consensus that the word *community* in community college was a guarantee that the institution would be diverse. The reason for this was that all of the community colleges represented were located within cities, with racially and ethnically diverse populations representing various cultures. Since these institutions are typically a stronger representation of their surrounding communities, students considered it a guarantee that they would see a greater number of other Black students, faculty, and staff – *people who look like them* – if they choose to attend a community college (Beasley, 2021; Bivens, 2016; Camardelle, 2022). One institution carried the designation of PBI (Predominantly Black Institution), which made Susan feel “100% comfortable” and welcomed. Having greater diversity increased the likelihood of many other Black students or persons of color represented in the classrooms and other areas of the college. Greater diversity also fortified student connectedness, self-efficacy, and feelings of belonging to the institution (Beasley, 2021; Tinto, 2017).

The Influence of Support Program and Services on the Black Student Experience

This section explored existing and the creation of new campus support programs for Black students on their respective campuses. In reflecting on the importance of support programs, the study participants strongly emphasized the need for Black affinity social programs. Affinity organizations and services mentioned included the Black Student Union, African Culture club, and African dance club. One institution established a club called “The Brotherhood” for Black men. There was also a mention of emotional support groups like the domestic violence club, and academic clubs like NSBE (National Society of Black Engineers) and NABA (National Association of Black Accountants). These clubs provided academic and

social opportunities for connecting. More broadly, these types of groups provided a space that would reflect what Beasley (2021) calls *cultural congruity*. Here, Black students could find a cultural match at the institution that was representative of their own cultural values and lived experiences. For all of the students, whether U.S.-born or international, the general consensus was that these programs gave them an opportunity to be social with people who looked like them and made them feel like they belonged. These types of programs also allowed them to further embrace and learn about their own culture, as well as those of others. They were considered “safe” and affirming spaces for Black students to connect with persons who would be more relatable (Beasley, 2021; Leath et al., 2022).

Safe Spaces

For most institutions, the tendency is to develop programs that are centered around a more multicultural perspective (i.e., a “Multicultural Student Affairs” group). Approaching student support services from a broader multicultural standpoint has been put under the umbrella of *inclusion*. Although these types of programs are also important to the Black student experience, their existence does not negate the need for or benefits of culturally-specific programs and their potential to be safe spaces for Black students. When attempting cross-cultural integration at PWI social events, students shared they did not feel welcomed because there were typically few to no other Black attendees. Overall, participants gravitated toward affinity spaces with other Black students and Black professionals, where there was a sense of family and community that embraced them as individuals and made them feel like they belonged (Johnson, 2022; Leath et al., 2022).

Implications for Practice

While prior research has focused on whether these factors influence the student experience, this study highlights the essentialness of these six non-academic factors in relation to sense of belonging for Black students at the institutions that they attend. Building upon the existing body of research, the findings of this study have specific implications for institutions of higher education regarding Black college students. Three factors in the study, peer relationships, faculty relationships, and race/campus climate, emerged as being particularly critical. That is, they reflected the intersectionality and importance of Black students having opportunities for a campus community where they can see, connect with, and interact with others who look like them (Leath et al., 2022; Museus et al., 2020; Yan et al., 2022). Based on these findings, efforts to improve Black college students' experiences should emphasize the following.

Hiring Black Faculty and Staff

Across the U.S., the concept of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) has emerged as one of the core factors to consider in trying to foster a healthy sense of belonging for students. For a Black student, one of the first steps in establishing a sense of belonging is looking at the racial composition of the campus in an effort find people who look like them. In this regard, efforts to increase the sense of belonging for Black students must involve the deliberate effort to hire Black faculty and staff. This will help to maintain a balanced Black professional-to-Black student ratio. As found in the literature, advising and mentorship of Black students by Black faculty and staff is a vital part of Black student success at an institution (Wood & Harrison, 2014). Having professionals who are racially and ethnically similar to the students that they guide, support, and encourage through their journey, bolsters trust and relatability. This helps

foster Black student connections, belonging, and student success (Cody, 2017; Connor, 2022; Griffin, 2013; Wood & Harrison, 2014).

Creating Affinity Spaces

The findings of this study illuminated the importance of Black students having safe spaces that would allow them to share openly and authentically with other Black students, faculty, and staff (Thelamour et al., 2019). Whether at a PWI or community college, an institution's effort to create a safe space and welcoming environment is an important part of establishing a sense of belonging for Black students (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Osbourne et al., 2021). At many institutions, there is a tendency for events to be multicultural, where the benefit is for everyone. However, there is a caution for institutions not to "lump" groups together in a way that stifles each group's individual culture or personality (Leath et al., 2022). While Black students typically appreciate and participate in multicultural types of events, there is still a strong desire for more opportunities to specifically connect socially and emotionally with other Black students on campus. This emphasizes the fact that race does matter. Regarding Black student self-efficacy, connecting with other Black students socially and emotionally would help to motivate Black students toward academic success (Lee & Barnes, 2015; Tinto, 2017). Findings from this research reflect a greater likelihood of students finding affinity spaces at the community colleges than PWIs. These groups become safe space for students, faculty and staff to connect and reflect an institutions commitment to creating a welcoming campus that supports Black student sense of belonging.

Typically, one of the more prominent groups found on campuses was the Black Student Union. Participants were asking for an increase in spaces and events that specifically represented Black culture. For example, on community college campuses, fraternity and sororities tend to be

nonexistent and therefore not an option for Black student participation (Wood & Harrison, 2014). However, the increased campus diversity at the community colleges was more conducive to creating these types of space. The student participants shared many examples of groups, clubs, and services for Black students already in place at the community colleges. If PWI's seek to increase Black student retention, strong consideration must be given to intentionally creating and maintaining affinity spaces to support Black students (Nagbe et al., 2020; Palmer et al., 2010; Stewart, 2014). Having affinity programs, specifically for Black students, reflects recognition of the differences between and needs of the various racial and ethnic student populations. Such programs further reflect the call for solutions beyond the traditional one-size-fits-all model of retaining students (Xu & Webber, 2018).

While these types of spaces do exist at PWIs, the participants felt that there were very few of them on their campuses. Although the community colleges represented had greater levels of racial diversity, these students still sought regular same race interactions. As found in previous research, Black community college students, who tend to have decreased on-campus experience, participation in these affinity groups can be more challenging (Bivens, 2016). Consideration should be given to creating affinity activities that include virtual or weekend events. Events scheduled at such times would accommodate other student needs, including non-school work schedules and other family obligations. Furthermore, these spaces should include the participation of Black faculty and staff at the institution, who can become points of contact and possibly mentors should Black students need a resource. Affinity programs designed in this way would reflect an institution's intentional efforts to accommodate and support Black students as they continue the college journey (Connor, 2022; Golden et al., 2017).

Using Consistent Terminology

Another finding from this study was the importance of using consistent higher education terminology. In day-to-day interactions with students an assumption is that students understand the terms used to describe and explain the various roles and processes in higher education. However, the present study revealed that this is not always the case. The synonymous use of terms like “faculty” and “staff” represents an inconsistency that can create confusion. How terms are used and interpreted matters in understanding questions asked on student surveys, evaluations, or other modes of gathering student data or information. It is therefore important that intentional efforts are made to utilize language (non-jargon) when interacting with students, to help ensure clarity (Griswold & Ariss, 2022).

Recommendations for Future Research

Follow Up Research

The findings of this study suggest that Black students experience challenges at both community colleges and PWIs. In the future, conducting a study that performs follow-up research with these same participants at the end of their college journey would give a more comprehensive view of their experience. Specifically, such a study would provide a better understanding of the significance of each of the factors at various points along the student’s academic journey. Considering the potential for life changes and challenges in college, understanding how participants utilize the knowledge they gleaned from past college experiences, to persist and achieve a degree would provide higher education professionals with insights on how to more effectively support Black students.

Deeper Data Disaggregation

There is a need for more research on how non-African-American cultural norms can influence the Black student experience. This study presented a varied representation of Black racial and ethnic participants including Black African Americans, people of Caribbean descent, and Africans. Oftentimes, research in the U.S. on Black students tends to focus on the Black/African American ethnicity or maintain an aggregate view of data collected (NCES, 2012, 2015, 2020, 2023; Thelamour et al., 2019). Institutions must be intentional about disaggregating data to spotlight the other cultural, ethnic, and racial identities that are represented in the data. This would allow for greater balance in recruitment efforts and data collection in future studies. This would also allow for a more detailed exploration of the impact of ethnic backgrounds, cultural norms, and traditions in relation to Black students and creating a sense of belonging on campus.

Cultivating Non-Black Faculty-to-Student Relationships

Future research should also include studies on ways in which non-Black college faculty and staff have been successful at relating to Black students. The findings of the current study have confirmed the importance of same race interactions for Black students. However, the reality of the dilemma is that more than financial resources are required to increase the hiring of faculty and staff of color (i.e., finding qualified candidates). In the meantime, institutions are left with the task of having to properly equip their White faculty and staff to connect with and find ways to relate to Black students across racial differences. Although not an insurmountable task, such equipping requires significant intentionality on the part of the institution (Cody, 2017; Griswold & Ariss, 2022).

Importance of Staff Relationships

Finally, future research should include studies on the influence of Black student-to-staff relationships on sense of belonging. As described earlier, this research identified a difference in student responses regarding the simultaneous use of the terms “faculty” and “staff”, and the study participants were inclined to treat these terms as synonyms. There is a need for studies that specifically examine how and what types of institutional staff interactions help facilitate positive student interactions, that lead to an increased sense of belonging and student success (Griswold & Ariss, 2022).

Conclusion

As one of the underrepresented groups in higher education, there is a great concern that Black student retention and persistence rates will continue to decline (De Bruyn & Van Eekert, 2023). For Black students, having a college education is vital to overcoming barriers to success, such as stereotypes and poverty (Bivens, 2016; Camardelle et al., 2022). As Black students continue to enroll at various institutions, the quality of their college experience influences their motivation to persist in their educational journey. Factors such as race/campus climate, family support, financial support, peer and faculty relationships, and Black student support services all have the potential to positively or negatively impact a Black student’s sense of belonging, which influences the student’s persistence and success (Bivens, 2016; Chambers & Sharpe, 2011; Tinto, 2017; Wood & Harrison 2014).

Although all of these non-academic factors are important, there is no single solution that will increase Black student persistence and graduation rates in higher education. Creating a college environment that can effectively serve the Black student population will require thoughtful planning on the part of college administrators. Such planning must continue as higher

education moves forward in its quest to better support Black students and provide opportunities for them to achieve a better life.

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[african-american-college-students.pdf?sfvrsn=4](https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/preparing-and-supporting-african-american-college-students.pdf?sfvrsn=4)

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Appendix A
IRB Approval Letter

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Tel 617 349 8234
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irb@lesley.edu



Institutional Review Board

DATE: March 12, 2019

To: Alison Handy

From: Robyn Cruz and Ulas Kaplan, Co-Chairs, Lesley IRB

RE: **IRB Number: 18/19-035**

The application for the research project, “Low Black Student Retention: The Journey to the Good Life” provides a detailed description of the recruitment of participants, the method of the proposed research, the protection of participants' identities and the confidentiality of the data collected. The consent form is sufficient to ensure voluntary participation in the study and contains the appropriate contact information for the researcher and the IRB.

This application is approved for one calendar year from the date of approval.

You may conduct this project.

Date of approval of application: 3/12/19

Investigators shall immediately suspend an inquiry if they observe an adverse change in the health or behavior of a subject that may be attributable to the research. They shall promptly report the circumstances to the IRB. They shall not resume the use of human subjects without the approval of the IRB.

Appendix B
Human Subject Certificate



CERTIFICATE

OF COMPLETION

PHRP Online Training, Inc. certifies that

Alison Handy

has successfully completed the web-based course "Protecting Human Research Participants Online Training SBER."

Date Completed: **2021-09-10**

Certification Number: **2870629**



Appendix C

Consent Form

Introduction - My name is Alison Handy, and I am a doctoral student at Lesley University. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I am conducting a research study on the *Black Student Experience* in college. This form details the purpose of this study, a description of your involvement, and your rights as a participant. I am specifically focusing on Black students who have attended a four-year, predominantly White institutions (PWIs), and a 2 year or community colleges. Please feel free to ask questions should you need clarification regarding any sections of this form, or need further explanation about the study.

Purpose of the Study - The purpose of this study is to gain insight regarding: 1) The Black student experience at four-year, predominantly White institutions (PWIs) of higher education and a two-year or community colleges. 2) Non-academic factors that can influence a Black student's decision to attend a four - year PWI, two-year or community college. 3) Strategies college administrators and higher education partners can implement, to better support Black college student persistence, retention, and success in college.

The Process and Your Participation - Your participation in this study consists of two parts. Part one will consist of demographic questions about you, to be completed on your own. These questions will be emailed to you in the form of a Qualtrics survey. Once you have completed and returned the first part of the interview you will be contacted to schedule an interview for the second part. The second part will be a one-on-one virtual Zoom interview that will last a total of approximately one hour. You will be given the option to either keep your camera on or off before the recording starts. Your interview will be recorded as audio only on my personal device and not the Zoom cloud, to preserve confidentiality. This section of questions will focus on your experience at both your four-year and two-year or community college institutions you attended. Recorded interviews will then be transcribed and transferred to an external hard drive to be stored for five years.

Benefits and Risks - Your participation in this study will assist us in understanding how to better support Black students in their journey through college. There are no risks associated with participating in this study.

Confidentiality - All of your identifying information and interview responses will be kept confidential. While the interview will be recorded, your real name will not be included in the recording. You will be assigned a pseudonym/fake name and id number, in order to properly protect your identity. Your individual responses will not be shared with anyone. Should you desire to discontinue as a participant in this study, you may choose to stop at any time. There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. You can contact the Committee Chairperson at irb@lesley.edu. If you have questions, please contact me. See below for contact information for the senior advisor and researcher for this study.

Alison Handy (Researcher)
ahandy3@lesley.edu

William L. Dandridge, Ed.D. (Senior Advisor) Educational Studies Division (Lesley University)
wdandridge@lesley.edu

By signing below I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information and I am at least 18 years old. I am aware that I can discontinue participation in this study at any time. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

- I consent, begin the study
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

Note: As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants were unable to physical sign a consent form. Student consent was collected via the Qualtrics survey system in the form of a required question, which students confirmed agreement to participate.

Appendix D
Recruitment Letter

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Alison Handy, and I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at Lesley University. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about the Black student experience in college/higher education. The title of my research is The Black Undergraduate College Student Experience at Four-year Predominantly White Institutions (PWI), and Community Colleges. You are eligible for this study if you are an undergraduate Black college student who has either previously attended or is attending a four-year PWI, and/or two-year or community college, without completing an associate or bachelor's degree.

Should you decide to participate in this study, additional information will be provided regarding the next steps. Part I of this study - participants will be asked to complete an online Qualtrics survey that will be sent via email. Part II - of this study participants are asked to participate in a one-on-one Zoom interview with myself. You will be asked questions about your experience at the institutions you are attending or have attended. Your sharing will inform and help guide college administrators, faculty, and staff as they seek to provide the necessary support to Black college students.

Your identity will be kept confidential, and your real name will not be used in any sharing of information. You will be assigned a fake name, at your consent to participate. During the Zoom interview you will be renamed, and your camera will remain off the entire time. Although the interview will be recorded, your real name and information will not be made known to anyone but myself, and I will be the only person with access to the interview. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can stop at any time. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email me at ahandy3@lesley.edu. Thank you for your consideration to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Alison Handy

Ph.D. Candidate (Lesley University) ahandy3@lesley.edu

Appendix E
Participant Email

Date: (sent to student)

Dear: (Participant Name),

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study on the Black undergraduate student experience in college. Your interview ID # is (xxx). Please enter this number on your survey when prompted. Your interview name will be (assigned pseudonym). You will receive a link very soon where you can access Part I, which is a Qualtrics survey. Once you submit the completed survey, you will be contacted to schedule a Zoom interview. Please answer all questions. I especially ask that you provide detailed answers to those questions that require an explanation, to help me gain a better sense of your college experience. Should you have questions please let me know.

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix F
Survey Link Email

Dear ,

You are receiving this survey because you have agreed to participate in the Black College Student Experience study. This study focuses on the experience of Black undergraduate college students who have attended a four-year predominantly White institution (PWI) and a two-year or community college. This study is by invitation only, and this link should not be shared with anyone. As a reminder, please use the **assigned ID number** you were given, **as your Interview ID number** for question one. Once you have completed and submitted the survey, you will be contacted to schedule a Zoom interview. Your survey responses will be kept confidential. I thank you in advance for your participation!

Regards,

Alison Handy, Doctoral Candidate

Lesley University

email@lesley.edu

Follow this link to the Survey:

[Take the Survey](#)

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

https://lesley.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/preview/SV_bxqWDQHOTRfAcB0?Q_CHL=preview

Appendix G**Part I: Qualtrics Survey Questions**

1. What is your Interview ID #?
2. What is your Gender?
3. How old are you?
4. How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
5. Are you a first generation college student (meaning the first one in your immediate family to go to college)?
6. List the members of your immediate family and their highest level of education. Please identify the person's relationship to you (i.e. mother -bachelor's degree)
7. What year did you first attend college?
8. Have you attended a four- year Predominantly White Institution (PWI)?
9. What is the name of the four-year college or university you previously attended?
10. How many semesters did you complete at your previous institution?
11. What was your enrollment status at this institution?
12. Why did you choose to attend this school?
13. What year did you leave the four-year institution?
14. Please explain your reasons for leaving the four-year institution.
15. Based on your experience as a Black College student, would you recommend your previous institution to other Black students?
16. Have you attended a two-year or community college?
17. What is the name of the two-year or community college you attend/attended?
18. What year did you enroll at this institution?

19. What is your current enrollment status?

20. How many semesters did/have you completed at this two-year or community college institution?

21. Tell me the story of why you chose this two-year or community college institution.

22. Based on your experience as a Black college student at your two-year institution or community college, would you recommend this institution to other Black students?

Appendix H

Part II: Zoom Interview Questions

Black Student Experience at Four-Year PWI

- 1) What role did your family play in your decision to leave your previous institution?
- 2) What role did your friends/peers play in your decision to leave your previous institution?
- 3) What role did your relationships with faculty play in your decision to leave your previous institution?
- 4) What role did financial aid play in your decision to leave your previous institution?
- 5) What role did race/campus climate play in your decision to leave your previous institution?
- 6) Please list and explain the existing support programs specifically for Black students at your previous institution?
- 7) While you were enrolled how often did you participate in any of the above-mentioned programs? Please explain your answer.
- 9) How important were these programs in your decision to leave your previous institution? Please explain your answer.

Black Student Experience at Two-year or Community College

- 1) What role did your family play in your decision to attend community college?
- 2) What role did your friends/peers play in your decision to attend community college?
- 3) What role did your relationships with faculty play in your decision to attend community college?
- 4) What role did financial aid play in your decision to attend community college?
- 5) What role did race/campus climate play in your decision to attend community college?
- 6) Please list and explain the existing support programs specifically for Black students at the community college.

7) While enrolled how often do/did you participate in any of the above-mentioned programs? Please explain your answer.

8) How important are these programs in your decision to stay at the community college? Please explain your answer.

9) Approximately how often do/did you attend each of the programs you listed?

10) Do you intend on staying to complete an associate degree? Please explain your answer.

11) Based on your experience as a Black college student at the community college would you recommend this institution to other Black students? Please explain your answer.

12) Is there anything additional that you would like to share about your experience as a Black college student?