

The Persistence of First-Generation African American Female Students at Private Hbcus

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the persistence or lack of persistence of first-generation, African American female students at an Historic Black College and University (HBCU). The study utilized Tinto's (1975) student integration model for persistence as the foundation for the research questions. Those questions were: 1) How does pre-entry attributes influence the persistence of first-generation African American female students? 2) How does academic integration influence the persistence of first-generation African American female students? And 3) How does social integration impact the success of first-generation African American female students? Thirteen first-generation African American female students aged 18 to 21 years old, who were juniors or seniors at an HBCU, shared their experiences. Nine themes emerged from this research: socioeconomic factors, support systems, academic preparedness, faculty and staff engagement, academic and financial support, and campus resources and support services. This study found that understanding and addressing the socio-cultural dynamics of these students can contribute to the development of targeted interventions and support mechanisms for this population. In addition, socioeconomic factors, such as income level, parental education, and financial resources, often provide distinct hurdles in terms of academic preparedness for college-level coursework. Active engagement by faculty and staff with these students improves their sense of belonging, promotes emotional wellbeing, and furthers academic success. Finally, academic and financial support can address the specific issues and barriers that these students commonly face.

Keywords: historically black colleges and universities, persistence, first-generation

INTRODUCTION

First-generation college students (FGCSs) disproportionately enroll in less-selective colleges than peers and persist to graduation at much lower rates (Startz, 2022). First-generation college students refer to individuals whose families do not have "a college-going tradition" (Dennon, 2022). Though the last national statistics for the number of FGCSs enrolled in colleges and universities were reported in 2016 by the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (NCES, 2018), Wichita State University (Ezarik, 2022) and UC-Santa Barbara (Startz, 2022)

counted 40% of undergraduates as FGCSs while Purdue reported 16.8% (Purdue, 2022). More women (60%) than men (52%) claim FGCSs status, 46% of all first-generation students are white and 18% of all first-generation students are black. (Center for First-Generation College Student Success, 2020 based on NCES 2016 data). This finding is perhaps because more White students attempt college than Black students.

Toutkoushian et al. (2021) found FGCSs were less likely to persist to graduation than students who were from families who had college experience. FGCSs were also more likely to drop out (33%) than non-FGCS peers (14%) within three years (EAB, 2019). The FGCS may struggle in college because of lack of prior knowledge of what college is about due to poor advising and guidance (Matthews et al., 2022), failure to understand college jargon needed to navigate academic life (Ardoin, 2018; Dennon, 2022), and financial struggles (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Compounding these factors is the intersectionality of FGCSs with race, gender, class, and culture (Gray et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021; Nguyen, T. & Nguyen, B., 2018; Shahid et al., 2018). Feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and being an imposter may emerge among FGCSs affecting college persistence and performance (Aspelmeier et al., 2012; Booker, 2016; Holden et al., 2021; Orbe, 2008).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY/RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study was to understand the persistence or lack of persistence of first-generation, African American female students at an Historical Black College and University. The study utilized the Tinto (1975) student integration model for persistence as the foundation for the research questions. (1) How does pre-entry attributes influence the persistence of first-generation African American female students? (2) How does academic integration influence the persistence of first-generation African American female students? (3) How does social integration impact the success of first-generation African American female students?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Higher education student persistence theories, models, and frameworks are critical for developing an understanding of what has enabled first-generation students to persist and succeed in their own college experience. From current research, no single conceptual framework fully captures first-generation college student persistence and the characteristics associated with their own student success. However, for this study, the Tinto (1975) student integration model for persistence was used. This theoretical framework had a specific focus on higher education student retention, a model that challenged popular theories early on about institutional fit and its relationship to retention and continues to be controversial (Andres & Carpenter, 1997; Nicoletti, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review defined the characteristics of first-generation college students and research on their retention and persistence. Next, it explored the intersectionality of FGCS with an emphasis on African American students and then on female African American students. Finally, the theoretical framework that was used as the foundation for this research and its application was presented.

Defining First-Generation College Students

Engle (2007) defined first-generation college students (FGCSs) as students whose parents had not attended college and/or had not earned a college degree. That has been the standard used until Whitley et al. (2018) and their national study of first-generation student programs in the United States uncovered more than six distinct meanings of first-generation used in the academy today. The multiplicity in FGCS definitions stems from the difficulty of defining what constitutes a parent and what educational experiences those parents have had. Some researchers, such as Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) and Choy (2002), categorized a student as an FGCS if neither parent earned a bachelor's degree. Toutkoushian et al. (2021) emphasized that parents play an important part in the college admissions process and must be identified, regardless of whether they are foster parents, adoptive parents, stepparents, biological parents, or even grandparents. While there is no universal agreement on the term "first-generation student" due to its varying definitions and purposes, failure to define FGCS can complicate future research, including the current investigation. Most significantly, a precise definition aids in the general comprehension of access for this student group (Toutkoushian et al., 2021). First-generation college students will be defined for the purpose of this study as students whose parents did not attend college and/or did not acquire a college degree (Engle, 2007).

Toutkoushian et al. (2021) researched whether the definition of first-generation college status played a significant role in the likelihood of a student attending college, applying eight types of measures to identify FGCSs, which varied by parental education level and the number of parents who met the educational criteria. There were also levels to define FGCS, such as one parent having a high school diploma, a parent beginning but not completing an associate degree, a parent who completed an associate degree, or both parents completing an associate degree or beginning but not completing a bachelor's degree. All data came from the 2002 Education Longitudinal Study, which had a sample size of 7,300 people. Toutkoushian et al. (2021) discovered that students with a parent with at least one degree were more likely to take the ACT/SAT, apply to, and attend college. They also discovered that parents with a bachelor's degree or higher had a greater influence on the decision of their child to attend a four-year institution.

Toutkoushian et al. (2021) presented findings from a long-term study that began in 2002 and looked at the relationship between first-generation student definitions and graduation rates at 2- to 4-year colleges. The authors discovered disparities in college completion rates at 2- and 4-year colleges based on the students' parental education level. The completion rate between students with two college-educated parents and students with no college-educated parents ranged from 34% to 42% at one four-year college. Students with a college-educated parent or parents and students with no parent having a degree ranged from 18% to 23%. (Toutkoushian et al., 2021). Having one or both parents with a college degree affects not only persistence but college readiness.

College readiness refers to the academic and practical knowledge required for success in higher education (Pitre, C.C. & Pitre, P, 2009). Many students enter college without the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in college-level work (Wachen et al., 2018). Furthermore, many of these students lack self-confidence and exposure to college campuses because of their parents' lower educational levels and the admissions requirements (low ACT/SAT). According to Markowitz (2017), while one-third (28%) of all ACT test takers meet the ACT College Readiness

Benchmarks across all subjects (reading, math, science, and English.), only 10% of first-generation ACT test takers do. Inadequate preparation plays a significant role in student educational journeys and earning a college degree (Cardoza, 2016).

When first-generation college students choose a college, financial considerations play a significant role. According to Kuh et al. (2007), first-generation students frequently choose their institution based on the type and amount of financial aid available, as well as their perception of academic work demands outside of the classroom. Tuition and college costs are of the utmost importance to first-generation college students (Kuh et. al, 2007). Many parents of first-generation students cannot afford college and if financial aid barriers exist, first-generation college students are less likely to attend, much less graduate within five years, if at all (Kuh et al., 2007).

First-generation students lack "insider knowledge" of the necessary skills, attitudes, and abilities for students to successfully choose a college, apply to one, search for and fill out financial aid forms, and then navigate the college environment (Horn & Nuez, 2000). This information gap is caused by the inability of each student to benefit from the insights and assistance of college-educated parents. Without this assistance, first-generation college students do not receive college tips, insights, advice, and information from their parents, which would be invaluable in their pursuit of academic success (Horn & Nuez, 2000).

College application and admission, as well as college experience, can be complex for first-generation college students. Complex issues include parental expectations of their students, student/parent perceptions of school affordability, and the purpose of college (Alvarez, 2016). Because of these complexities, enrollment, also known as the college-going process (CGP), is unique for this population. The college-going process (CGP) is defined as the process that a student and a parent go through when seeking to access and enroll in a higher education institution.

The CGP is a very different experience for first-generation college students than it is for those of the continuing generation whose parents have completed college (Alvarez, 2016). During the CGP, first-generation college students face challenges that their continuing-generation college peers do not. Because first-generation students receive little encouragement to attend college from their parents and/or guardians, they frequently apply to less selective higher education institutions due to a lack of insider knowledge of the college matriculation process (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996).

The CGP is heavily influenced by the family, including the attitudes of both students and their parents and can be a very emotional journey. Alvarez (2016) investigated the many complexities and nuances of first-generation college students and their families, as well as the requirements required to plan, navigate, and enter college. This familiarity, or lack thereof, with the higher education system influences how parents and families deal with emotions while preparing for college and can cause varying expectations about what going to college will involve (Alvarez, 2016).

First-generation students arrive at college with a distinct set of familiarities and a lower level of educational preparation than other students. According to the National Survey of Student

Engagement (NSSE), low-income, first-generation, and underprepared students have less exposure to high impact learning and teaching practices that have a significant impact on the success of college students (Swaner & Brownell, 2009; Kuh, 2008).

Barriers to Persistence for FGCSs

For first-generation college students, having a successful academic integration experience impacts their academic success. Academic transition and integration, student involvement, and consistent engagement impact first-generation student college success and, critically, their successful completion of a four-year college degree (Finley, 2012).

Academic Barriers

First-generation students are frequently academically underprepared for the college experience and, as a result, do not perform as well as their continuing generation peers throughout their college careers (Atherton, 2014). Elliott (2014) discovered that first-generation college student status was negatively related to college academic achievement and student grade point average in a study that included 2,358 students (first-generation and continuing generation) at 25 private institutions across 14 different states. Although both student groups showed an increase in GPA along with an increase in perceived self-efficacy, the increase was more substantial for first-generation college students. "First-generation college students who experienced comparable increases in their own academic self-efficacy perceptions throughout their studies during their first year still finished with lower-than-average final grades than their continuing generation peers," according to Elliott (2014). (p. 38). First-generation college students are frequently surprised by the academic demands and rigor of higher education. This finding reveals an apparent gap in first-generation college student understanding of the academic environments into which they are admitted as college students (Atherton, 2014).

One characteristic of first-generation college students' academic preparedness is that they are easily influenced by how well their expectations line up with their lived experiences while in college (Elliott, 2014). Because first-generation college students have less knowledge of the realities of college than their peers, they are more likely to be unprepared and dissatisfied with their college experience (Kuh et al., 2007). This disparity between expectations and reality leaves first-generation college students less prepared to overcome barriers as they arise, implying that this student population will find it more difficult to persist and succeed academically while in college (Kuh et al., 2007). Because of this misunderstanding, many first-generation college students misunderstand their role as students and fail to meet faculty expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

First-generation college students are impacted by the effects of class size throughout their college and university experiences (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). Beattie and Thiele (2016) study found that first-generation college students in larger classes were more negatively impacted than their continuing generation peers. Despite the negative impact of being in a larger classroom setting, this experience did not prevent first-generation college students from collaborating with their professors. Interestingly, despite the disadvantages of large class sizes, students were motivated to approach their professors to discuss their academic, career, and future goals (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). According to this study, despite the fact that first-

generation college students may struggle with the academic realities of college, they remain steadfast and committed to achieving their academic goals.

Ricks (2016), however, found, when compared to their continuing education peers, FGCSs had a limited understanding of the college-student role and the higher education environment. Furthermore, they reported lower levels of engagement with academic work and studying, as well as statistically lower grade point averages during their first year of study (Ricks, 2016).

Chen and Carroll (2005) investigated the course-taking experiences of first-generation college students with the goal of better understanding study habits, coursework success, and any differences in coursework between first-generation students and their peers. They found that first-generation college students were less likely than their peers to major in academic fields such as mathematics, science, humanities, and social science, and were more likely to have no major or major in a vocational/technical field (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

Chen and Carroll (2005) also found that first-generation students earned fewer academic credits, took fewer academic courses, and received less academic support than their peers. First-generation students did not perform as well academically as their continuing-generation peers, with lower first-year GPAs (2.5 vs. 2.8). First-generation students had an average overall GPA of 2.6, compared to their continuing-generation peers' average GPA of 2.9. This trend of lower GPAs for first-generation students continued throughout their academic enrollment (Chen & Carroll, 2005). First-generation students who earned more credits and higher grades were more likely to persist and earn a bachelor's degree (Chen & Carroll, 2005). These findings suggest that first-generation students face more obstacles in coursework and academic performance than their peers, putting them at a higher risk of dropping out before graduating (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

Finally, first-generation college students face barriers "when it comes to college or university access - a (barrier) that persists even after accounting for other factors such as educational expectations, academic preparation, and support from parents/schools in college planning and preparation" (Choy, 2001, p. 4). Furthermore, many of these barriers are the result of first-generation students' primary and secondary school experiences (Ricks, 2016). Despite their successful transition into college, this population faces unique challenges when compared to their continuing generation peers.

Institutional Cultural Barriers

In addition to academic barriers, first-generation college students face cultural barriers of the institution that impact their academic experience once they arrive on campus. While college administration, faculty, and staff may recognize that first-generation students are pursuing college degrees in greater numbers than in previous years, many of these stakeholders may be unaware of the complex challenges this population of students faces (Vaughan et al., 2014).

Collier and Morgan (2008) found that first-generation students' understanding of the hidden curriculum is a common barrier that this population faces. The hidden curriculum encompasses everything that is implicitly taught at higher education institutions that allows an individual to master the role of being a college student (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Many of these norms are unknown or unlearned by first-generation college students, and they may have an impact on

their success in college (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Because “they do not yet have a mental library of cultural knowledge associated with the hidden curriculum at their specific university,” not fully understanding the hidden curriculum can have an impact on the adjustment to college of this population (Gable, 2021).

Additional institutional barriers, such as the use of college-specific language, or jargon, contribute to an insider knowledge culture that affects students’ access and success (Ardoin, 2018). Jehangir (2010) identified the challenges that first-generation students face in terms of “classroom issues, relationships (or lack thereof) with professors, financial aid, and campus resources” (p. 3). However, these difficulties are caused not only by a lack of academic preparation, but also by simple life roles and the juggling of multiple identities (Jehangir, 2010).

First-generation college students are more likely to experience a type of intellectual poverty, which has been defined as a lack of access to college role models, a lack of understanding about important college processes, and a lack of access and engagement with the campus community and its activities (Saenz et al., 2007; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). First-generation students question whether they belonged on campus or if they were “uninvited guests here in college for a brief period of time before being discovered as imposters” (Jehangir, 2010, p. 3).

Rendón (1994) conducted a multi-institutional qualitative study that researched the degree to which college students were engaged and involved with their college community, and how these outside-of-classroom experiences impacted and influenced student classroom learning and personal academic goals within the college.

Rendón (1994) concluded that first-generation college students are certainly capable of becoming immersed and being prominent members of a campus community, but this is dependent upon faculty, staff, and administrators providing validation to students, particularly early on in their college experiences. Further, Rendón (1994) argued that not all first-generation college students will become involved with their learning and the campus in the same way, and that this engagement with learning varies from student to student.

In another study, Woosley (2003) explored first-generation students’ initial academic experiences at a mid-sized research institution. Further supporting the connection between social integration and academic success, Woosley (2003) found that positive student social adjustments and integration were positively linked to their own academic persistence and graduation, even when the research data accounted for pre-entry characteristics and student commitment to education.

Personal Barriers

First-generation college students, like academic and institutional cultural barriers, frequently face personal barriers that impact their college experience. Previous research indicated that, when compared to their continuing generation peers, first-generation students enter college with less academic preparation, are more likely to drop out, and are less likely to earn a four-year college degree (Vaughan et al., 2014). Others are more personal, such as having to work part-time or full-time to help pay for college. Pursuing a college degree can be an overwhelming, daunting, and isolating experience. Characteristics unique to first-generation students have an impact on their academic performance and ability to complete their studies (Kim et al., 2021).

Finally, non-academic responsibilities such as work, personal, and family commitments are common among first-generation students, limiting their ability to complete college successfully (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; Petty, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Given that this population reports working more hours than their continuing-generation peers, there is less time and motivation to engage and connect with peers, attend campus events, activities, or complete necessary academic work (Mitchell, 1997; Ricks, 2016).

Not Fitting in or Belonging

According to Rendón (1994), students require validation that they belong. Many first-generation college students feel isolated, alone, and as if they are having a different college experience than their peers (Hui, 2017). Many students who are the first in their families to attend college may feel isolated and unable to connect with and relate to their continuing generation peers (Hui, 2017). When first-generation college students return home for the first time after starting college, they frequently comment on how their college experiences have changed them, making them feel more distant from both their families and their hometown communities (Jehangir et al., 2015).

Many first-generation college students struggled to reconcile their parents'/family members' pride that their children were attending college with their new feelings of isolation and separation from their hometown communities (Jehangir et al., 2015). Participants in the study recognized that several of these feelings would persist and grow, potentially widening the gap between the student and the family as the college experience "pushed them upwards in terms of social mobility but also away from their families, reaffirming the conflict between the microsystems of college and the home environment" (Jehangir et al., 2015, p. 22). While many first-generation college students have their parents' and families' enthusiastic support, this support can also contribute to feelings of significant pressure (Hui, 2017). As first-generation college students, they frequently describe feeling like the "chosen ones" of their family despite a complex experience; they frequently felt that this experience was like the guilt a survivor feels (Piorkowski, 1983; Tate et al., 2010).

This struggle and stress for first-generation college students to fit in to their college experience may eventually lead to a decrease in engagement with their own college community and experience (Hui, 2017). According to Pike and Kuh (2005), one of the major differences between first-generation college students and their peers is that first-generation college students are less engaged and integrated within the diverse college experiences that are available to them.

Furthermore, first-generation college students were not only less engaged; their lack of engagement translated into a negative perception of college when compared to their peers (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Studies abroad, community engagement, clubs, and student activities on campus have been shown to increase the likelihood that students will be successful and graduate, as these activities foster an additional connection to peers and the institution (Hui, 2017). If first-generation college students do not participate in these engagement opportunities, they will have fewer opportunities to fit in and will have a negative impact on their college success.

Research from the last several decades confirms that the more college students connect with friends and participate in activities outside of the academic setting, the more likely they are to stay in college (Spady, 1970). Students become more socially integrated into higher education as they connect with others and form meaningful relationships on campus (Spady, 1970).

Student-motivated relationships can help students interact with faculty and peers, as well as participate in extracurricular activities, reaffirming the importance of the college experience (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1994). Continuing generation students not only report a greater sense of connectedness, but also a greater sense of belonging, implying that they are more socially adjusted to the college experience (Hertel, 1992). College students must connect with and find who they perceive to be “their people” or “their community,” specifically genuine connections with peers, faculty, and staff (Irlbeck et al., 2014).

Winograd and Rust (2014) found that first-year students, particularly first-generation college students, are less likely to reach out for help or reciprocate offers of assistance if they do not feel connected to the institution. According to the findings of this study, when students felt more connected and that their institution cared about them, the stigma that they felt when seeking help was reduced (Winograd & Rust, 2014).

There is a large body of research on college students’ sense of belonging (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nunn, 2021; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Strayhorn, 2019). A sense of belonging refers to how much a college student feels connected to a group, accepted by their peers, and a vital part of the campus community (Kitchen et al., 2020). Maslow (1954) proposed that belonging was a basic human need. Researchers discovered common traits associated with a sense of belonging in college students: 1) the transition to college (Johnson et al., 2007), 2) campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), 3) first-year student experiences (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), and 4) college persistence (Cole et al, 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). As previously stated, the Tinto (1975, 1994) student integration model frames much of the research on college student persistence.

Nunn (2021) recently published a study on college belonging and first-generation college students. “Belonging is positive; it provides a sense of security, which engenders emotional well-being” (Nunn, 2021, p. 2). Distinguishing that prior research has conceptualized a sense of belonging, Nunn (2021) stated that it is critical to give weight to student voices and “allow students themselves to define what belonging means to them, and to describe their personal experiences in college” (p. 2). Participants described belonging as “feeling accepted and valued within the larger community...it brings a kind of confidence, the liberty to let down their guard, to not feel self-conscious or worried about being judged...feeling comfortable and at home” (Nunn, 2021, p. 2).

Cole et al. (2020) examined both the sense of belonging and mattering on college campuses for historically underrepresented and first-generation college students, and the impact of institutional programs of support upon their academic success. Cole et al. (2020) suggested that although a sense of belonging provides an understanding of college student environmental perceptions, involvement, and relationships, a sense of belonging fails to consider the concepts of personal recognition and attention, specifically during the first year of college. Mattering

accounts for these additional concerns and specifically emphasize how college students perceive that they matter to an individual, group, or community (Schieferecke & Card, 2013).

Schlossberg (1989) created a concept of marginality and significance for students in higher education. Within his framework, he proposed that all college students feel marginalized at some point during their transition to college (Cole et al., 2020). According to Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), “mattering is a motive: the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, and are concerned about our fate” (p. 165). Schlossberg (2020) sought to apply his construct to college students from a variety of backgrounds, but little research had been done prior to the Cole et al. (2020) study that focused specifically on students of color, low-income, and first-generation college students and their experiences of marginality and mattering in college.

Schlossberg (2020) attempted to apply his construct to college students from various backgrounds, but little research had been done prior to the Cole et al. (2020) study that focused specifically on students of color, low-income, and first-generation college students and their experiences of marginality and mattering in college.

First-Generation Intersectional Identities

Students of color, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, enter college with inadequate academic preparation and scholarly planning (Cole et al., 2020). Many public and private high schools do not emphasize the importance of postsecondary planning, nor do they employ strategies to increase parental involvement (Gamez-Vargas & Oliva, 2013). This lack of preparation for the college experience affects FGCSs more than other students who have parents or siblings who could offer them guidance on navigating the social and institutional aspects of college. For FGSOCs, not having insider knowledge of how college works and what to expect being a student of color on campus puts these students at a disadvantage, often impacting their persistence (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Schuyler et al., 2021).

First-generation college students of color have not been fully researched in the literature, although a few studies have been significant. Nguyen, T.-H. and Nguyen, B. M. D. (2018) found that the term FGCS was problematic and obscured the intersectionality of students as the term had been operationalized in research. Schuyler et al. (2021) found that a third of all college students are first-generation students of color (FGSOC), having the intersectionality of being both a racial minority and a first-generation college student. These students face more difficulties in the college setting than their peers who are not of color or first-generation (Banks and Dohy 2019; Schuyler et al., 2021).

Schuyler et al. (2021) found that FGSOCs faced marginalization, racial discrimination, stigma about socioeconomic status, lack of academic preparation, and distinct cultural differences from their non-FGSOC college peers. Though FGCSs in general face high levels of classism on college campuses, FGSOCs face more because of assumptions made about their socioeconomic status tied to their racial identity (Havlik et al., 2020; Allan et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2017; Schuyler et al., 2021). In truth, many FGSOCs rely heavily on financial aid and work full-time while at school (Pratt et al., 2019; Schuyler et al., 2021).

FGSOCs as well as other students of color face microaggressions and sometimes racial discrimination (Chakraverty, 2020; Ellis et al., 2019; Schuyler, 2021). This combined with classism and lack of funds contribute to a lack of desire to join campus activities, study groups, interact with faculty, or even seek out or use campus support services (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This can lead to isolation, feelings of not belonging, and mental health difficulties (Schuyler et al., 2021). Chakraverty (2020), though dealing with Black doctoral and postdoctoral students, found that race singled out students, often making them feel as if they were the only persons of color in a large lecture hall or they were diversity enhancers at events. Stukes' (2021) study of Black FGCSs, however, found that these students in particular had experienced covert racism and other negative experiences based on stereotypes. Both positive and negative experiences of these students had a profound impact not only on their college success but also on their professional work and personal lives (Stukes, 2021).

Though some research has been conducted about FGSOCs, few studies have been done about female FGCSs. Kim et al. (2021) recently researched female FGCSs and found that most of the FGCS literature lumped all students together, not recognizing the intersectionality of many of those first-generation students. Kim et al. (2021) sought to examine gender as a factor within FGCSs since there was a need to better understand this particular population and a gap existed. Their research found three important factors that contributed to persistence: socioeconomic background, support systems, and role expectations. The last factor is unique to FGCS research but could be an important factor in studies about female FGSOCs. Because there is little research on female FGCSs (Engle et al., 2006; Ishitani, 2006; Kim et al., 2021; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), female FGSOCs, and persistence of female FGSOCs, there is a gap in the literature.

First-Generation Program Experiences at Private Institutions

Though Startz (2022) indicated that FGCSs are more likely to attend public institutions because of less-selective admission requirements, lower tuition, and more financial aid readily available, some FGCSs do attend private institutions and persist to graduation. Saenz et al. (2007) indicated that this difference in FGCS admissions has narrowed since 1971. According to the most recent data, 76% of first-generation college students enrolled in public institutions, 9% in private institutions, and 16% in for-profit institutions (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). This data, however, was not broken down by race to indicate the percentage of FGSOCs were in those statistics.

Furthermore, when compared to their first-generation peers at public higher education institutions, first-generation college students at private institutions were more likely to come from families with an annual income of more than \$40,000, have attended a private (either religious or non-denominational) high school, and had earned an "A" or better in high school (Saenz et al., 2007). First-generation college students frequently choose private colleges and universities due to the size of the institution as well as the financial assistance provided to the individual (Saenz et al., 2007). Finally, first-generation college students at private colleges are more likely than their peers at public universities to live on campus, which Saenz et al. (2007) believed had an impact on first-generation student engagement and retention at private institutions. Startz (2022), however, stated that it was the highly selective criteria of private colleges and universities that admitted higher motivated students.

Havlik et al. (2020) researched first-generation students who attended a mid-sized, private, religiously affiliated institution and found two major themes. First, students reported frequent feelings of “otherness” in the university setting, owing primarily to their own first-generation status as well as other intersecting identities (Havlik et al., 2020). Furthermore, participants reported feelings of not belonging, of being an outsider, of being perceived as different or less than, of being misunderstood, excluded, invalidated, or disadvantaged in comparison to the majority of the student body and that their continuing-generation peers, faculty, and staff promoted those feelings (Havlik et. al, 2020). Some participants believed that their need for additional resources contributed to their feelings of otherness and alienation. First-generation students experienced a sense of otherness at private schools, reporting feeling misunderstood, alienated, and excluded because of their first-generation status (Havlik et. al, 2020).

The second theme that emerged from study participants was one of motivation and strengths (Havlik et al., 2020). When asked what contributed to their perseverance in the face of obstacles, participants provided a diverse range of responses. Internal contributors, such as a commitment to “The Greater Good and perceived strengths of Character, Identity, and Relational skills,” were the most common (Havlik et al., 2020, pp. 129-130). Some felt they were, “changing generational patterns within families or entire communities by obtaining a college degree” and that this contributed to their wanting to persist (Havlik et al., 2020, p. 130). Character strength, or an internal drive to succeed, emerged as an important factor in persistence, with participants using “resilient,” “persistent,” “a fighter,” “passionate,” and “determined” to describe themselves (Havlik et al., 2020, p. 131). Finally, relationships were identified as a key factor influencing persistence by both participants and researchers. Participants spoke of seeking out and forming supportive relationships, which the researchers viewed as a survival tool. One study participant, for example, stated, “You have to actively seek it [peer support] ... I needed to be extroverted in order to meet and network with the right people and not be afraid to go out there” (Havlik et al., 2020, p. 132). Despite feelings of alienation, first-generation students were motivated to succeed by personal character, identity, meaningful relationships, and changing generational patterns in families and even communities for the better.

The Havlik et al. (2020) findings appeared to be similar to previous first-generation participant research at public institutions. This study, on the other hand, concentrated on the experiences of participants at a single private institution. While these findings of FGCSs at private and public institutions appear to be similar, no research has been found that has studied FGCSs and their perceptions at multiple private institutions in the United States of varying sizes and geographical locations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a result of stagnant completion rates and low persistence percentages, a diverse pool of educational analysts and researchers has developed theoretical constructs to study the process of college persistence and degree fulfillment. There are several theories about college students and the challenges they face when they arrive on their respective college campuses. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Strayhorn (2012) stressed that there was a link between college persistence and student connection with the institution. This is often called institutional fit and is consistent with Tinto (1975) and his student integration model for persistence, which defines persistence as the degree to which a student feels academically and socially connected to and

committed to an institution. The student's likelihood of remaining at and graduating from a university, therefore, is determined by his or her level of connectedness.

Previous research on fit was heavily focused on traditional students and their academic and social integration into higher education, as well as how both students and universities were compatible with one another (Andres & Carpenter, 1997). Tinto (1975) focused on two specific areas of integration: academic or intellectual and social. This meant that for a student to persist to graduation, that student needed to be accepted and be a part of each of these groups. Social integration involved belonging and acceptance found in interactions with others and developing ties or affiliations with them (Lee & Choi, 2011; Tinto, 1975). Intellectual integration involved finding common ground with others regarding ideas, values, and beliefs within a community (Lee & Choi, 2011; Tinto, 1975). In other words, those students who succeeded in college did so because of their connections to the academic and social life on campus.

When this does not occur, the student experiences incongruence with the institution and academic life and they can feel isolated from students (Lee & Choi, 2011). Both can prevent persistence. Since belonging and issues of isolation continue to be stressed as having a negative impact on continuing to graduation (Dennon, 2022; Engle, 2007; Ma & Shea, 2019; Nunn, 2021), the Tinto (1975) model provides a solid theoretical framework for this study.

Tinto (1975) posited that students needed to be integrated into the academic and social aspects of college life in order to persist to graduation. Student perspectives and commitment to higher education also changed as they interacted with academic and social components of the institution. The greater student commitment and connection to the institution were, the more likely the student would persist to graduation. This model challenged popular theories about institutional fit and its relationship to retention (Andres & Carpenter, 1997).

Tinto (1975) acknowledged that this was the first conception of this framework, adding that additional adjustments would be required in the future as the scope, landscape, and demographics of students changed across colleges and universities in the United States (Guiffrida, 2006; Longwell-Grice, R. & Longwell-Grice, H., 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Torres, 2006). Almost two decades later, Tinto (1994) linked departure decisions to student characteristics, collegiate goals, and institutional factors. Student characteristics are pre-entry attributes that include family background, student academic history, and individual skills and abilities. Family background includes socioeconomics of the family, the social dynamics of the family (two parent, single parent, raised by grandparent/other relative), the educational levels of parents and siblings, race/ethnicity, and cultural traditions. Student academic history involves GPA, high school achievements, advanced placement classes, and college entrance exam scores. Individual skills and abilities include special talents or interests such as clubs in high school or the community, sports, art/music ability, and volunteering or work experiences. Also, special interests in specific course work such as biology and a love of animals or mathematics and building things could indicate a potential career interest. All of these pre-entry attributes can influence how well a student does in college.

Collegiate goals refer to the intention of the student to stay and finish college, specific educational goals, and commitments to the institution and to other people. Intentions often reflected whether the student was self-motivated to attend college and persist to graduation or

was doing so to please a parent, relative, or mentor. Intention could be weaker if trying to please someone else or it could be stronger depending on the strength of the commitment. Specific educational goals usually refer to a chosen career path: to become a doctor or a teacher or just to be a college graduate. Commitment to the institution may involve the prestige of the university or college or a loyalty to a friend, mentor, or teacher who attended the school. Commitment can be linked with a student's intention if the student is only going to college to please someone else. Commitment to others may include not wanting to disappoint family or their community.

Institutional factors include the climate or culture of the institution, the interactions with faculty and peers, extracurricular activities, and peer group interactions. The climate or culture of the institution is not only a source of socialization but a factor in persistence. The norms presented in the culture of the school through peer norms and institutional norms and throughout communal events and routine practices either offer students a sense of being accepted and belonging on a college campus or they alienate them (Colby et al., 2003). Interactions with faculty can be positive and negative and have an influence on persistence. Extracurricular activities, interactions with peer groups and peers in class can also affect student sense of belonging and can be positive or negative.

These factors influence integration that further influence student goals and commitment, and ultimately lead to persistence and graduation or a decision to drop out (Museus et al, 2017; Nun, 2021; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Stebleton et al., 2014). Negative and positive experiences influence student desire to stay in college as they interact academically and socially within the college setting. Students who do not interact or integrate well do not form a connection or commitment to the institution, which often leads to their withdrawal from college (Tinto, 1994). Figure 1 provides a visual of the interconnectedness of pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, and institutional experiences.

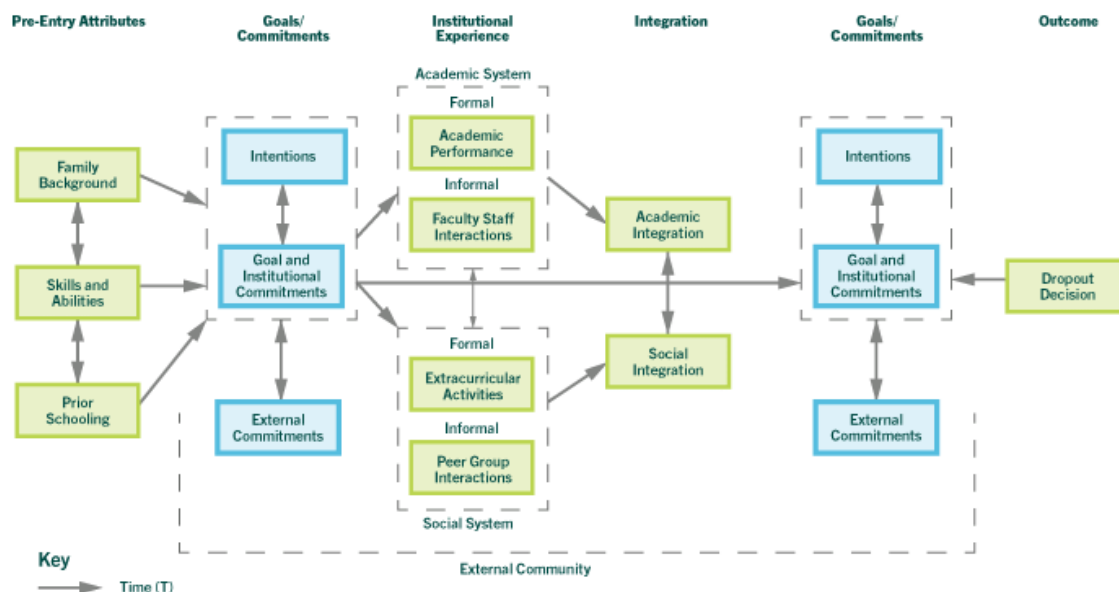


Figure 1: Interconnectedness of pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, and institutional experiences

Tinto's Student Integration Model 1975

Originally, Tinto (1997) put the onus on the student to integrate into the existing culture and conform to institutional norms. Rendón et al. (2000) and Hurtado (1997) claimed that the Tinto (1975) student integration model for persistence was Eurocentric, failed to recognize cultural characteristics, and would be difficult to apply to students of different ethnic or racial backgrounds, especially those with intersectional identities. Rendón et al. (2000) further argued that concept of integration (Tinto, 1975) resembled assimilation that required a person to separate from a personal culture and acquire the values, customs, traditions, and language of another group to become an accepted member of society. Rendón et al. (2000) insisted that Tinto (1975) did not address institutional culture or the role of the university in establishing a representative and welcoming campus climate and that student social integration should be shared with the institution. The ability to adjust to the social and academic environment of the campus is not solely a failure on the part of the student.

In truth, Tinto (1994) did address the responsibility of the institution in helping students persist when he wrote if institutions wish to make substantial progress in educating and retaining more, especially those who have been under-represented in the higher educational system, their communities must involve all students. They must actively engage students in the life of the classroom and allow them to gain a valued voice in the educative process. (p. 210-211).

Tinto (1994) added that “to be fully effective, college communities, academic and social, must be inclusive of all students who enter” (p.187). Further, Tinto (1994) recognized that students were feeling alienated from learning because they did not feel a part of academic life. He stated if we wish to have our students become actively involved in their own learning, we must first be involved in their learning as well as in our own. And we must provide them with meaningful ways of becoming involved in learning, both inside and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1994, p. 210).

Underrepresented students may not identify with the institutional culture, and the college or university should share responsibility for assisting them in making the necessary adjustments. Strayhorn (2012) argued that how campuses are perceived in terms of climate influences student satisfaction with college.

Some researchers, however, have applied the Tinto (1975) model to the study of persistence in FGCSs. R. Longwell-Grice and H. Longwell-Grice (2007) studied White, male, working-class FGCSs and focused on the student-faculty relationship factor in the Tinto's theory, finding that these FGCSs were reluctant to seek help from faculty because they felt intimidated (Longwell-Grice, R. & Longwell-Grice, H., 2007). Akpo (2021) studied first-generation Latinx students at a community college using the Tinto (1975) theory of persistence. Findings showed that these students persisted if financial, socioeconomic, and support systems were conducive to learning (Akpo, 2021). In addition, Karp et al. (2010) study of Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander FGCSs at two community colleges, using the Tinto theory of integration, found that students persisted because of the relationships they established socially and academically. These three examples show that research using the Tinto (1975) model as a framework for research has been used to study FGCSs, but even this research is not specific to female, African American FGCSs at an HBCU.

METHODOLOGY

It is important to understand the college experiences of African American, female, first-generation college students and how they perceive their experiences (Pascarella, 2004). The responses of the participants (a) described first-generation college student experiences at a private historically Black college, (b) described the ways in which the institution supports or hinders persistence, and (c) highlighted areas in which the institution can improve programs that provide resources for first-generation students. Participants were female African Americans who agreed to share experiences as first-generation college students. In this chapter, the methods, research design, research questions, procedures, ethical considerations, analysis, and limitations are described.

RATIONALE FOR METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research involves direct individual participation with the goal of gaining a thorough understanding of externally observable behavior and internal states in context (Patton, 2014). Researchers observe and engage participants in natural settings so that they can speak about their experiences in that setting (Mills, 2019). Qualitative research uses an inductive methodology for sorting and organizing information and identifying patterns or themes among categories (Marshall et al., 2022).

To examine first-generation, African American, female student experiences and perceptions, a qualitative methodology was appropriate because it allowed participants to describe lived experiences in depth (Creswell, 2007). The dynamics of undergraduate student experiences are frequently complex and individual (Crozier et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2006; Wong & Chiu, 2021). Additional dynamics and complexities may color the first-generation college student unique college-going experiences (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; Carpenter & Pena, 2017; Davis, 2010; Hands, 2020; Jehangir et al., 2015; Whitley et al., 2018).

A qualitative approach is best suited for research on African American first-generation female students attending a private Historically Black College or University (HBCU) because it allows for a thorough exploration of their experiences and perspectives. Qualitative research provides a contextual understanding of the social, cultural, and institutional factors that influence their lives. It captures the subjective aspects of their experiences, including personal stories and emotions. The flexibility of qualitative research allows for adaptive data collection and analysis, accommodating the diverse backgrounds and unique challenges of this population. Additionally, it helps contextualize institutional practices and resources within the specific private HBCU setting, contributing to a comprehensive understanding and potential interventions for improving educational experiences and outcomes.

SITE SELECTION

This study explored experiences of female African American, first-generation college students within a specific campus context. The site selected for this study was a women-centered historically Black college in the south. It was chosen because it was an HBCU, had an African American female student population, and was convenient to the interviewer. The selected institution had a student body of over 2,100 individuals from 43 states and 10 countries with female African American students from diverse cultures.

SAMPLE SELECTION

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to identify and select study participants. To be included in the study, participants had to identify as first-generation, African American, and female who attended the selected institution as a junior or senior. Using a sampling frame of 25 juniors and seniors ensured that the participants had enough experience to identify factors that may or may not have played a role in persistence to graduation and be able to share specific examples of how they were able to integrate into the collegiate atmosphere over an extended period.

A representative from the Office of the Registrar served as the study gatekeeper. The office was contacted to provide a list of first-generation students of junior and senior classification with contact information. A letter was emailed to the students describing the goals of the study, potential risks, and requesting participation. Students who agreed to participate were emailed consent forms that were signed electronically and returned to the researcher. This process resulted in the identification of 25 students resulting in 13 participants enrolled in the study.

Several factors can affect sample size and therefore saturation. Saturation from a small sample of in-depth interviews can be achieved from the strength of the interview process, the intensity of gentle probing, and the willingness of the participants to answer the interview questions (Guest et al. (2006). The participant was not intensely interrogated but were pushed enough through the skills of the interviewer, the nature of the probing questions, and how comfortable the participant was with the process (Creswell, 2012). For this particular study, a smaller sample of twelve achieved saturation because of the depth of the information that the participants provided because of their experience.

Purposeful sampling was used in this research. It is “based upon the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). The broad population already provided a base for purposeful sampling since it contained three factors necessary to this study: being female, African American, and enrolled in an HBCU. Additional factors provided definition of the sample. Thirteen students, who were of junior and senior classification, were selected to be interviewed for this study. Each participant met the specified criteria for inclusion in the study: 1) be at least 18 years of age, (2) self-identify as African American or Black, (3) be a first-generation college student (defined as neither parent had earned a bachelor’s degree), and (4) be a junior or senior at the site institution. The rationale for these criteria is described below.

- **Criterion 1: African American or Black and female.** African American, female students were of interest to this research and made up the majority of the student population at the site institution. This population served as the population pool for further factors in purposeful sampling for this research (College Trust, 2022; Merriam, 2009).
- **Criterion 2: First-Generation College Student.** At the site institution, about 16% of the student body was composed of first-generation students (Stirgus, 2018). First-generation students were identified by information submitted on their enrollment application.
- **Criterion 3: Junior or Senior.** This study focused on the experiences of upperclassmen or college students beginning their third or fourth year. In contrast to the vast majority

of writing on African American or first-generation college students, which focuses on the experiences of first- and second-year students, these students provided a useful insight on what it takes to continue within the selective campus environment (Charles et al., 2009; Padilla et al., 1997).

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data were collected in 60–90-minute in-depth interviews. Students agreeing to participate in the study were contacted by email and electronic consent forms were provided, detailing the purpose of the study, risks and benefits, and compensation. The consent form was completed and returned to the researcher. Once received, each student was contacted to schedule an in-person interview. Participants were interviewed until saturation was reached. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. Demographic questions were asked at the beginning of the interview. After that was completed, the interview continued with in-depth questions. All interviews were transcribed for analysis.

The demographic questions collected general information regarding students' race/ethnicity, parents' highest levels of education, family economic status, high school and college academic achievements, and personal skills and abilities. These questions applied to research question 1 and helped establish rapport with participants because they are easy questions to answer. This information was also utilized to determine the socioeconomic position of students based on a) their eligibility for financial aid, b) their parents' educational level, c) their parents' occupational status, and d) their self-reported class standing.

In-depth 60–90-minute personal interviews were conducted for this qualitative study. Questions were open-ended and structured but provided some flexibility for the interviewer to ask related questions in order to probe deeper into responses of participants. This allowed the interviewer to pay close attention to the lived experiences of participants while addressing the theoretically driven factors in the study (Galletta, 2013). The interviewer took notes, observed the students as they answered questions. Zoom interviews were conducted in the privacy of a space identified by the participant where there were not any disturbances. Participant gave permission to record interviews. Using an interview guide, the interviewer reviewed the consent form, discussed confidentiality, and reminded participants of the voluntary nature of the study. Data was secured on an encrypted password-protected hard drive and kept in a secure location at the institution.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Recorded interviews were transcribed using Amberscript transcription software. Transcripts were checked for accuracy before analysis by comparing the transcription with the recording and editing them for accuracy. Next, a copy of the edited transcription of the participant interviews was sent to that person to check further for accuracy. This is a process called member checking (Marshall et al., 2022).

The transcriptions were read and reread by the interviewer to become familiar with the contents. After which the interviewer coded the transcripts by using Atlas.ti and by hand, looking for emerging themes. Coding involved searching the transcripts for recurring phrases and additional ways to say the same thing. At first, codes were applied to the responses to specific questions the interviewer asked. Sections were highlighted and given a code label.

Initial codes dealt with specific attributes the interviewer was searching for, such as belonging or commitment. Code labels were compared through all of the transcripts. The next layer of coding dug deeper into the responses, noting recurring ideas and responses that became emerging themes. Coding continued as many times as necessary to unearth themes. The next step involved looking for specific words or phrases related to the research questions.

This was a labor-intensive procedure that required multiple readings of the data and analysis in various ways by going back and forth in the data. This process provided a greater depth of analysis by providing connections between the data, the research questions, and the literature (Marshall et al., 2022). Notes taken during the interviews were also consulted as the analysis continued to look for details that applied to the analysis. Once all the pertinent themes were identified, a written report of the findings was made. Throughout this process, the identity of each participant was protected. Before analysis, each transcription was given a number or a pseudonym. This also allowed for easier reporting of selections of responses in the written report.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Description of Participants

The study focused on African American first-generation female students. Thirteen study participants were aged 18 to 21 years old with an average age being 20. Study participants were classified as junior or senior undergraduate students enrolled in diverse academic majors. Participants were given pseudonyms to comply with IRB requirements of confidentiality. Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics of the 13 participants. Participants identified as female and were first-generation students. Six were juniors and seven were seniors. Participants majored in diverse fields. Four were political science majors, three were psychology majors, two were comparative women studies majors and one participant each majoring in philosophy, biochemistry, international studies, and art. All participants identified as African American/Black. However, one further identified as Cape Verdean descent, one identified as Jamaican descent, and one identified as Guyanese/Caribbean. Three participants resided in single-mother households, one participant was from a single-father household, two participants resided in single-mother households with father incarcerated, five participants were from households with married parents, one participant was from a single/widowed mother household, and one participant described her household as having a mother and a stepfather. Parents' education attainment was mixed. Seven mothers completed high school, three mothers held a GED, and three mothers dropped out of high school. For fathers of the participants, 10 had completed high school, two dropped out of high school, and one was unknown. Four mothers of participants had some college, and two fathers had some college. The household income for participants ranged from less than \$20,000 – to approximately \$50,000. Two participants reported less than \$20,000, three participants reported an income between \$20,000 - \$30,000, four participants reported between \$30,000 - \$49,000, and four participants were not sure of their parents' income.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Data

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Classification	Major	Institution	Income
Tessa	18 or older	Female	African American	Junior	Psychology	Dupont College	Less than \$20K
Katy	18 or older	Female	African American	Junior	Comparative Women's Studies	Dupont College	\$29K-\$30K
Teresa	18 or older	Female	African American/Jamaican	Junior	Philosophy	Dupont College	Less than \$20K
Lucy	18 or older	Female	African American	Senior	Psychology	Dupont College	\$22K
Nancy	18 or older	Female	African American	Senior	Biochemistry	Dupont College	Not Sure
Olivia	18 or older	Female	African American/Cape Verdean	Senior	Political Science	Dupont College	About \$40K
Monica	18 or older	Female	African American	Junior	Comparative Women's Studies	Dupont College	Not Sure
Alisha	18 or older	Female	African American	Senior	Political Science	Dupont College	\$30K-\$40K
Mary	18 or older	Female	African American	Junior	Art	Dupont College	Not Sure
Brandi	18 or older	Female	African American	Senior	International Studies	Dupont College	Not Sure
Tiffany	18 or older	Female	African American	Senior	Psychology	Dupont College	\$30K
Isabel	18 or older	Female	African American/Guyanese Caribbean	Junior	Political Science	Dupont College	\$39K-\$49K
Tammy	18 or older	Female	African American	Senior	Political Science	Dupont College	\$20K-\$39K

Findings

The study explored the experiences of African American first-generation female students who are enrolled in a private historically Black college. The 13 students interviewed offered information for carefully analyzing and identifying developing themes. The study was guided by the Tinto Student Integration Model (1975). Study research questions were:

1. How does pre-entry attributes influence the persistence of first-generation African American female students?
2. How does academic integration influence the persistence of first-generation African American female students?
3. How does social integration impact the success of first-generation African American female students?

Study findings are presented with emerging themes derived from each question. Research question 1 themes were socioeconomic factors, support systems, and academic preparedness.

RQ1: How does pre-entry attributes influence the persistence of first-generation African American female students?

Pre-entry characteristics appeared to have considerable impact on the persistence in higher education of first-generation African American female students. Academic readiness, financial considerations, social and cultural influences, access to support systems, self-efficacy, and institutional atmosphere were factors gleaned from participants narratives. Participants with good academic skills and access to financial help and scholarships performed better academically.

Theme 1: Socioeconomic Factors

Pre-college experiences described by participants described by the participants included socioeconomic factors, support systems, and educational background and preparedness. Eight participants resided in single-parent homes and five participants resided in two-parent households. Household income was at least \$20,000 but not more than \$40,000, which qualified participants for financial assistance at the institution. Participants encountered difficulty preparing for college because their parents were unable to assist with the college application and enrollment processes. Parents were unable to provide needed resources. One participant, whose father was in and out of prison, did not have the support of her mother to attend college because her mother thought it would be an additional burden on the family. The cost of tuition was prohibitive, and her family would be unable to provide assistance.

Theme 2: Support Systems

Another emerging theme was the importance of support systems. Participants described the challenges faced navigating college selection and application processes without the guidance of parents or family members. Most participants entered college during the COVID-19 pandemic and relied heavily on virtual communication for the first and second years of college. Without adequate support these students often faced challenges during their college journey. These challenges included completing the college application process, applying for financial aid and scholarships, and leveled understanding of the academic planning and course selection process.

As first-generation students, some participants struggled to navigate the academic environment given the lack of guidance in accessing resources. Nine participants felt unsupported in making important decisions while navigating the complexities of college life. A participant recalled not having the support she needed at home or from the institution. She described problems associated with being unable to timely pay tuition. Financial barriers led to late registration, classes often being purged, and inability to enroll in needed classes that were closed.

The research showed that the students with access to information and resources encountered fewer difficulties navigating the matriculation process. The participants found the registration process to be challenging. She sought assistance from friends and a former teacher. She did not have anyone from her family and had limited resources from friends to provide support. The participant felt that COVID had denied her the opportunity to enter college traditionally and the lack of support further complicated her process.

Theme 3: Academic Preparedness

Two participants found support from community service organizations and mentoring groups that were instrumental in helping them access college. Mary described an organization in her community that was instrumental in preparing her for the college application and registration processes. One participant received assistance through her involvement with Top Teams at Compton. Through connections in her grandmother's church, she connected with someone who helped young men and women in the community. The program provided support in community engagement and college preparation, including recommendations and guidance on the application process. This assistance was particularly valuable to the participant and her family, as they had no prior knowledge of the college process. It helped them navigate the unfamiliar territory of college applications as a first-generation student.

Most participants felt they had adequate resources during high school (9 out of 13). However, two participants did not feel their high schools provided education on African American history and the schools needed to start organizations to support students who were Black and of color. One participant believed her high school was in a low poverty area and lacked resources needed for students to be successful.

RQ2: How does institutional experiences influence the persistence of first-generation African American female students?

Participants reported differing perceptions about the institution even though they all identified as first-generation and shared similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Three themes emerged from their responses: faculty and staff engagement, academic and financial support, and campus resources and support services.

Theme 4: Faculty and Staff Engagement

Students held varying perceptions of the institution. Some participants believed they received needed support from faculty and staff while other participants felt faculty and staff were not helpful. One participant described that her experiences as an art major have been positive overall. She specifically mentioned Professor X at Dupont College as a great professor who pushed and motivated her. While it could be challenging at times, The participant recognized that Professor X's approach aimed at helping students succeed and become stronger artists. She appreciated the professors at Dupont College who pushed students, even if it meant a heavy workload, as it ultimately contributed to personal growth and improvement in their chosen pursuits.

Theme 5: Academic and Financial Support

Both academic and financial support contributed to the persistence and success of study participants. Academic support through advising, mentoring, and academic services helped build confidence, develop effective study habits, and maximize their learning potential by enhancing their overall institutional experience. Financial support, participants felt, ensured that they were able to meet basic needs, acquire textbooks and other needed materials, and participate in extracurricular activities. It reduced financial stress and allowed them to fully immerse themselves in their education. The participant described the importance of academic support and seeking academic advisement as the support she needed to boost her confidence to succeed.

In addition to faculty and staff engagement, it was important that students found a connection to the institution through academic and financial support. Financial support was important to first-generation participants who faced financial barriers to accessing higher education. At the beginning of the second semester of her sophomore year, the participant described having difficulties paying tuition. Professors were helpful by allowing her to remain in class to stay on top of work while she identified financial resources.

Twelve participants shared positive experiences with faculty and financial support. Without academic and financial support, participants felt unable to develop confidence to maximize learning potential. With academic and financial support, participants believed they were able to immerse themselves fully in the educational experience. One participant shared a different experience. She felt she received inadequate support from faculty and financial aid personnel. She believed students from more affluent backgrounds or who were college legacy students received different treatment than first-generation students. The participant felt discrimination by not being a legacy student or coming from a more affluent background. However, she felt support from some professors who understood her situation as a first-generation student because they had backgrounds similar to hers. The participant also related an experience about how one legacy student was permitted to pass a course without attending classes.

Theme 6: Campus Resources and Support Services

Most participants reported having access to campus resources or support services. Access to counseling services, student success centers, campus safety, student affairs, and other support services provided guidance and assistance and a safe space for first-generation students. Participants shared experiences with support services. Isabel utilized several services at Dupont College. She described helpful services provided by campus health services, campus security, and financial aid. However, Isabel described challenging experiences with the health service center and financial aid. She spoke about perceived inadequate services provided by a White doctor to a woman of color. Isabel also felt the services provided by financial aid were inadequate and did not address the needs of the financially insecure student.

Most participants did not have personal interactions with campus security other than entering and exiting campus. However, Tammy had two encounters with campus safety. These experiences did not meet her expectations since campus security encouraged students to report suspicious behavior. When she and her friends did so, Tammy felt that she was being dismissed and that her concerns were not validated. She shared that the experiences caused her to lose faith in campus safety.

RQ3: How does academic and social interactions impact the success of first-generation American students?

Participants felt academic and social interactions impacted their success because these interactions provided a support system, enhanced academic performance, promoted personal growth, and cultivated a sense of belonging. Three themes emerged from the experiences of participants: a sense of belonging, teacher-student interactions, and co-curricular engagement and leadership opportunities.

Theme 7: Sense of Belonging

Eleven participants felt a sense of belonging on campus through clubs and organizations. Two participants felt the college was divided into the “have and have nots.” Teresa shared her feelings of inadequacy and limited ability to interact with classmates and peers. She felt other students made comments in class that made her feel unwelcome and less than enough to attend Dupont College. These feelings left Teresa wanting to transfer so she would not have to deal with some of the students she encountered.

One participant spoke about transferring to Dupont College in her sophomore year. As a transfer student, she felt like an outsider, as if she did not belong. The participants saw cultural differences in dress and other behaviors. In her classes, she said other students talked about experiences of Black women, and it was never finger pointing, but no one ever said, “You are different because you had a rich upbringing.” The participant also felt that some of her feelings of being an outcast were of her own thinking.

Theme 8: Teacher-Student Interaction

Participants felt that positive relationships with teachers who provided support, guidance, and encouragement had a profound impact on student academic experiences and outcomes. One participant shared with excitement that she has the “plug” with her teachers. She was comfortable with speaking to them during and after class hours. She knew that building relationships was important because these relationships she shared with her professor’s offered opportunities for them to help her.

One participant described her teacher-student interactions as unique, acknowledging that teachers are human and have good and bad days. She expressed that most of her teachers had positive interactions with her but noted that some teachers made her feel dumb or answered questions in a demeaning way. On the other hand, she appreciated teachers who were supportive, available to help, and willing to go the extra mile. The participant emphasized the importance of navigating these interactions by communicating with teachers and staying engaged in order to succeed.

Theme 9: Co-Curricular Engagement and Leadership Opportunities

Participants reported involvement in student organizations, community service, internships, and research experiences enhanced a sense of belonging, skill development, and networking opportunities. Most participants were involved in clubs or organizations on campus. Two participants spoke about how chartered organizations related to their interests. One participant felt her involvement in organizations provided leadership opportunities that she could use after graduation. She was a member of the NAACP in high school and has been able to remain a part of that organization that means a lot to her, as well as developing a new skill as the finance chair which she felt would open a new opportunity in the workforce. The participant also talked about how being a mentor in an organization gave her a sense of belonging and contribution. That organization also helped her financially so she could devote more time to her studies and her academic performance improved.

Table 2: Identifying Themes

Research Questions	Themes	Theoretical Framework Construct
RQ1. How does pre-entry attributes influence the persistence of first-generation African American students?	(1) Socioeconomic Factor (2) Support Systems (3) Academic Preparedness	Tinto, 1975 Pre-entry Attributes
RQ2. How does academic integration influence the persistence of first-generation African American female students?	(4) Faculty & Staff Engagement (5) Academic & Financial Support (6) Campus Resources and Support Services	Tinto, 1975 Institutional Experiences
RQ3. How does social integration impact the success of first-generation African American female students?	(7) Sense of Belonging & Community (8) Teacher-Student Interaction (9) Co-Curricular Engagement & Leadership Opportunities	Tinto, 1975 Academic & Social Integration

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The study revealed the profound influence of socio-cultural factors on the persistence of African American first-generation female students. Factors such as familial expectations, cultural norms, and community support systems played pivotal roles in shaping their experiences.

There were nine emerging themes yielded from the research questions.

The themes were socioeconomic factors, support systems, academic preparedness, faculty and staff engagement, academic and financial support, and campus resources and support services. Understanding and addressing these socio-cultural dynamics can contribute to the development of targeted interventions and support mechanisms that align with the cultural backgrounds and values of African American first-generation female students.

Socioeconomic factors have a significant impact on the persistence of African American first-generation female students. Participants discussed how not having the financial means to attend college added extra burdens to their family. Participants explained it was difficult to cover the cost of tuition and have money for day-to-day living expenses. Participants emphasized the importance of socioeconomic factors and how the lack of their parents understanding, or support of college and their financial resources made it difficult to prepare for college.

The second important theme was academic preparedness, participants found support from community service organizations and mentoring groups were instrumental in helping them access college. Participants explained attending high school in low-income areas did not prepare them for college. Nine of the thirteen participants felt they had adequate resources during high school that prepared them for the college going process.

Faculty and staff engagement was the third theme, participants had varying perspectives of the institution and the support they received. Some participants felt faculty and staff were not

helpful, while most described positive experiences. Participants discussed how faculty and staff supported and motivated them to do better. While some participants felt some faculty were challenging, they emphasized this ultimately contributed to their personal growth and improvements in their chosen pursuits. One participant discussed smaller class sizes and being able to have one-on-one interactions with her professor as influential to her persistence.

The fourth theme, academic and financial support contributed to the persistence and success of African American first-generation female students. Participants explained academic support through advising, mentoring, and academic services helped build their confidence and maximized their learning potential by enhancing their overall institutional experience. All participants expressed financial support was needed not only for tuition but to acquire basic needs, purchase textbooks, and participate in extracurricular activities. Participants stated having financial support reduced stress and allowed them to fully immerse themselves in their education.

Theme five, sense of belonging, emerged throughout the study. Most of the participants felt a sense of belonging on campus through involvement in clubs and organizations. Some of the participants explained feelings of inadequacy and unwelcomeness. Participants felt their first-generation status made them feel like outsiders and outcasts. One participant emphasized she had been at the top of her high school class, and it was difficult for her to be in classrooms with students who were also the top of their class, the participant said she felt everything was a competition where she was no longer good enough to be at the institution. All participants explained imposter syndrome and the effects they dealt with however they were all determined to complete college.

The last theme was co-curricular engagement and leadership opportunities, participants reported being involved in student organizations, community service, internships, and research experiences that enhanced their sense of belonging, skill development, and networking opportunities. Some participants discussed how their involvement in clubs and organizations not only helped them with being involved on campus but provided them with the opportunity to grow as leaders and build their confidence. Participants explained how being a part of some organizations provided scholarships to help cover the cost of tuition and other expenses.

Discussions of Findings

The findings of this study are consistent with Tinto's Student Integration Model mentioned in the literature review. Some findings, however, contradict previous studies on first-generation college students. There were some surprising findings that went against expectations, as well as providing new insights. The findings are discussed further below.

Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975) is a widely recognized theoretical framework that explores the factors influencing student persistence and success in higher education. According to Tinto, integration refers to the degree to which students become involved and engaged in the academic and social aspects of their institution. One important aspect of Tinto's model is the consideration of socioeconomic factors, which can significantly impact student integration and ultimately influence persistence outcomes (Tinto, 1975). This study aimed to identify factors that influence persistence of African American first-generation female students.

This study found that socioeconomic factors, such as income level, parental education, and financial resources, play a crucial role in shaping students' experiences and opportunities within the higher education system. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face additional challenges that can hinder their integration and persistence (Kim et al., 2021). In contrast to previous research, first-generation college students at private institutions were more likely to come from families with an annual income of more than \$40,000, attended a private high school (Saenz et al., 2007). All participants in this study had family annual incomes of less than \$40,000 and attended low ranked high schools.

Academic preparedness is an important component in the success and persistence of African American first-generation female college students. According to this study, first-generation students frequently encounter distinct hurdles in terms of academic preparedness for college-level coursework (Kuh et al., 2007).

Furthermore, previous studies indicate that first-generation student lack "insider knowledge" of the necessary skills, attitudes, and abilities for students to successfully choose a college, apply to one, search for and fill out financial aid forms, and then navigate the college environment (Horn & Nuez, 2000). African American first-generation female students may encounter difficulties with time management, study strategies, and adapting to the academic demands of college. Collier and Morgan (2008) found that first-generation students' understanding of the hidden curriculum is a common barrier that this population faces. The hidden curriculum encompasses everything that is implicitly taught at higher education institutions that allows an individual to master the role of being a college student (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

The transition from high school to college can be particularly challenging without the necessary academic foundations. Many of these students may not have had access to educational resources or support systems that adequately prepared them for the rigors of higher education. Participants in this study discussed having a lack of knowledge of how to apply to college and not understanding the enrollment process. This sentiment is consistent with previous research that has highlighted academic preparedness for first-generation students.

Faculty and staff involvement is critical to the academic success and perseverance of African American first-generation female students. Active engagement by faculty and staff with these students improves their sense of belonging, promotes academic integration, and provides crucial support throughout their college journey.

Participants in this study explained benefitting from faculty members who actively seek opportunities to connect with them, offer guidance, and provide academic support. These interactions contribute to a sense of validation and support, which can positively impact their academic performance and persistence.

Moreover, faculty and staff who are culturally competent and responsive to the unique experiences and needs of African American first-generation female students can have a profound impact on their success. According to Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1997), a culturally competent faculty and staff understand and respect the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of their students, creating a welcoming and inclusive environment. These research findings align with previous literature.

Academic and financial support are critical components in supporting African American first-generation female students' academic achievement and persistence. These types of assistance address the specific issues and barriers that these students commonly face in their pursuit of higher education.

In addition, Black FGCSs lack resources and support that are necessary to succeed in college (Buie, 2022; Kelly et al., 2019, Parks-Yancy, 2012). Financial constraints, for example, can limit access to academic resources, textbooks, technology, and even basic needs like housing and food. These challenges can create stress and distraction, making it more difficult for students to fully engage in their studies and connect with the campus community. Though financial concerns matter for all students, FGCSs are 16% less likely to achieve their degree than their non-FGCS peers who come from the same financial circumstances (Startz, 2022). The finding from this study was consistent with (Startz, 2022).

The research findings from this study align with Nunn (2021). Nunn (2021) recently published a study on college belonging and first-generation college students. "Belonging is positive; it provides a sense of security, which engenders emotional well-being" (Nunn, 2021, p. 2). Distinguishing that prior research has conceptualized a sense of belonging, Nunn (2021) stated that it is critical to give weight to student voices and "allow students themselves to define what belonging means to them, and to describe their personal experiences in college" (p. 2).

Havlik et al. (2020) discovered two key themes among first-generation students who attended a mid-sized, private, religiously affiliated university. First, students expressed regular sentiments of "otherness" at university, owing to their own first-generation status as well as other intersecting identities (Havlik et al., 2020).

Furthermore, participants reported feelings of not belonging, of being an outsider, of being perceived as different or less than the majority of the student body, of being misunderstood, excluded, invalidated, or disadvantaged in comparison to the majority of the student body, and that their continuing-generation peers, faculty, and staff exacerbated those feelings (Havlik et al, 2020). Some participants stated that their need for additional resources led to their emotions of alienation and otherness.

This study aligns with previous research studies that highlight co-curricular engagement and leadership opportunities. Co-curricular activities, programs and learning experiences complement what students are learning in for-credit courses, providing the opportunity for students to engage with the institution and meaningfully connect with others in the community. Astin (1984), defines involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience."

Museus et al. (2011) conducted a study specifically focusing on African American students at HBCUs; however, the study found that participation in leadership activities at HBCUs positively influenced students' sense of belonging and overall campus engagement.

African American first-generation students were given a platform to advocate for themselves and their peers, make significant connections with faculty and staff, and contribute to the institution's community through leadership opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

For African American first-generation female students, financial constraints are frequently severe. Private HBCUs should implement financial aid efforts that explicitly address the needs of these students. Scholarships, grants, and emergency funds can all be established to reduce financial pressures and ensure access to educational resources. Furthermore, financial literacy classes can help students make informed financial decisions and successfully manage their resources.

It is critical to foster an inclusive campus climate in order to promote the success of African American first-generation female students. Policies, practices, and initiatives that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion should be developed by private HBCUs. This can be accomplished by implementing diversity training programs, developing inclusive curriculum, and establishing safe spaces and cultural centers on campus. Institutions may establish an environment in which African American first-generation female students feel supported and empowered by fostering a sense of belonging and embracing varied perspectives.

To ensure the academic achievement of African American first-generation female students, private HBCUs should improve their academic support programs. This involves increasing tutoring services, giving extra teaching, and providing targeted academic guidance. Institutions can promote academic preparedness and retention by personalizing support services to the specific issues these students encounter, such as time management, study skills, and test preparation.

Lastly, private Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) should prioritize continual monitoring and assessment of their support programs and efforts for African American first-generation female students. Regular data collection, analysis, and student feedback can aid in identifying areas for development and ensuring that treatments are effective and sensitive to their needs. This technique can help to guide institutional decision-making while also allowing for the constant enhancement and refining of support services.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several aspects of this study that will be valuable for future research to expand our understanding. There is a need to investigate the experiences of African American, first-generation female college students at all levels of education. There were students who wanted to take part in my study but did not meet the criteria of being of junior or senior classification. This suggests that there is a larger population of African American, first-generation female, college students who require a platform to express their stories. Students just entering may have experiences worth exploring. It is also critical to understand their motivation for persistence and academic achievement.

Extensive research on mentorship connections and support networks for African American first-generation female students at private HBCUs can shed light on the function of these ties in encouraging persistence. Investigating the features, effectiveness, and long-term effects of mentoring programs and peer support networks can help to shape mentorship models that effectively support these students.

The voices and perspectives of African American, first-generation, female college students were shared in this study, which contributed to the research. They were given a safe space to express their stories and discuss their experiences in general. This study presented a unique addition in terms of the factors that contributed to the preparedness, tenacity, and success of this demographic. Although there has been past research on student retention and persistence, there has been little research on the persistence of African American first-generation female students. While persistence has been studied in other ways, such as its relationship to academic accomplishment and African American students, this study focused on a demographic that has received little attention in terms of persistence and retention. As a result, future research should focus on African American first-generation female student persistence.

CONCLUSION

Specifically, this study explored first-generation female students socioeconomic backgrounds and the impact on their social and academic integration. As shared previously, the pathway to higher education is not the same for all students. There is a growing number of first-generation college students (FGCSs) in higher education with multiple identities. While there have been studies conducted about the experiences of female FGCSs, few have focused on female African American FGCSs and how the intersectionality of race and gender impacts their lives and their college experience. Each part of that identity may influence persistence and college achievement. When FGCSs enter college, they experience many different challenges and barriers that impact their overall college transition. Some of those roadblocks include lack of academic preparedness, financial barriers, family support, and lack of access to social capital. These challenges and barriers are even more troubling for African American first-generation female students in higher education.

The participants reported facing marginalization, racial discrimination, stigma about socioeconomic status, lack of academic preparation, and distinct cultural differences from their non-FGCS college peers. These experiences have made it more difficult for African American female first-generation students to navigate college. When marrying FGCSs with African American females in higher education, it is evident to see the uphill battles they are faced with while in college. The adversities that African American first-generation female students are faced with have negatively impacted their overall sense of belonging on campus and the way in which they are integrated into the campus setting.

Upon investigating the lived experiences of African American first-generation female students at Dupont College using Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975), some students shared that the positive interactions helped them feel valued, important, cared about, and respected, which are associated with experiencing a sense of belonging on campus. Further, all students discussed the importance of having positive faculty/staff-student relationships and the impact that it had on their social and academic experiences at Dupont College. The positive interactions helped them feel valued, important, cared about, and respected, which are associated with experiencing a sense of belonging on campus. Despite not having access to social capital, all students found support through some of the campus resources, college mentoring, student clubs and organizations, and various academic support services. Those support services had a positive impact on students' college experience, and it helped them feel more confident and motivated to continue their journey at Dupont College.

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