Getting to Graduation: The Journey of Low-Income Black Females in the Community College

Rosline M. Sumpter

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GETTING TO GRADUATION: THE JOURNEY OF LOW-INCOME BLACK FEMALES IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the Black women and girls who find a way to get it all done and make it look flawless. I see you. We see each other. The world sees you. In the words of Drake, “You know it’s real when you are who you think you are.”
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With God, all things are possible. I could not have made it through this journey without God’s grace and mercy. To my parents, thank you for being the best parents in the world and treating me like I could conquer any and everything with hard work and dedication. Thank you for allowing me to be me.

I would like to acknowledge the gatekeepers at the colleges. You all were instrumental in helping me find participants for this study and your efforts are more than appreciated. Next, I would like to acknowledge my employer and all the support that was given in helping me to start and finish this degree. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my committee for pushing me (and allowing me to get to this point). Specifically, thank you to Dr. Doug Smith for guiding me through this journey and Dr. Spencer Platt for always being in my corner and stepping in when needed. I would also like to acknowledge my cohort mate and writing partner, Dr. Whitney Prowell. The dissertation process can be very lonely, but you asked if we could write together and I appreciate you for that. Jesse Ford…thank you for being my biggest supporter and I look forward to the day when I call you Dr. Ford.

I would also like to acknowledge the many individuals, personally and professionally, who prayed, asked questions, and supported me during this time. You all were instrumental in helping me get through this journey also. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the Center for the Study of Community Colleges for providing funding to support this research.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the journey to college completion for low-income Black females enrolled at the community college. Specifically, this phenomenological interview study sought to understand how low-income Black females define academic success and how the intersectionality of their racial/ethnic, gender, and social class identities promote or hinder their journey to college completion.

Data were gathered from interviews with 13 participants from three community colleges in South Carolina. A phenomenological design helped to answer three research questions: 1) How do low-income Black females in the community college describe and make sense of their journey to college completion? 2) How does the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status affect completion for low-income Black females at the community college? 3) How do low-income Black females in the community college define academic success? The findings from this study can guide discussions about how to best serve Black females in the community college.

A thematic analysis of the interview data revealed four themes. The first theme, Ambition, describes the strength and determination that participants possessed and relied on to guide them to completion. The second theme, Support, gives insight into the various support systems that helped participants in their journey to completion. The third theme, Balance, details the ways that participants managed school and other life responsibilities. The fourth theme, Campus Experience, describes the participant experiences at the community college, including the campus environment and culture.
Findings from this study are significant for community colleges looking to improve completion rates of Black females and better understand their experiences as they progress towards completion.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AACC ........................................................ American Association of Community Colleges
EFC ....................................................................................... Expected Family Contribution
FAFSA ................................................................Free Application for Federal Student Aid
IPEDS ............................................................... Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System
IRB ......................................................................... Institutional Review Board
NCES ................................................................. National Center for Education Statistics
SCTCS ................................................................. South Carolina Technical College System
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

*Being a college graduate is like owning a piece of the “American Pie.” It’s a great aspiration. A sort of coming of age and a milestone you reach that springboards you into adulthood.* - Alexandria

**Background**

Education is frequently referred to as the “great equalizer” for society. Access to a postsecondary education can lead to higher incomes and can help promote an individual from one income level to the next. College graduates also have lower levels of unemployment, lower incarceration rates, and higher levels of civic participation, including voting and volunteer work (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Although there are many personal and societal benefits of postsecondary education, only 39% of the United States population age 25 years and older have earned an associate degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). A closer examination of educational attainment by race/ethnicity and gender shows that only 22% of Black females age 25 and older have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2016a).

Community colleges enroll 41% of all undergraduates in the United States, including 40% of all first-time students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Additionally, 43% of all Black undergraduates, 52% of all Hispanic undergraduates, and 56% of all Native American undergraduates are enrolled at community colleges. Fifty-six percent of all community college students are women and
the average age for all community college students is 28. The diversity within community colleges highlight the importance of these institutions, particularly for providing educational access points for students from all backgrounds.

However, community colleges receive criticism related to their low completion rates. Twenty-five percent of all first-time, full-time community college students graduate within three years (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). When disaggregated by gender and racial/ethnic groups, these rates show huge disparities between student populations. These disparities have been highlighted in the literature by many scholars (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, & Kienzl, 2006; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Spangler & Slate, 2015; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014). Yet, scholars have overlooked Black females enrolled in community colleges, despite their recent enrollment trends.

Specifically, the examination of low-income Black females in the community college show gaps in the literature about community colleges. Federal Pell Grants, an indicator of financial need, comprise 34% of all federal aid received by community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the journey to college completion for low-income Black females in the community college. This study sought to highlight the need for more postsecondary research on Black females through the examination of their journey to completion of a college credential.

**Research Context**

Chapter Two provides a more detailed and complete review of the literature related to the proposed study. However, the practical context surrounding this study
stems from several key areas. First, community colleges play an important role in American society, yet research on these institutions is still an emerging area. Community college students comprise 41% of all United States undergraduate students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Longitudinal enrollment data and research have shown that low-income and minority students, especially African Americans and Hispanics, are more likely to begin their college career at the community college (Carnevale & Stohl, 2013; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2011).

Furthermore, in 2009, President Barack Obama set a national goal for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by the year 2020. Ten million additional people will need to earn a postsecondary credential in order to meet this goal (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Specifically, President Obama mentioned the role of community colleges in helping to meet this national completion goal. If five million people committed to one year of postsecondary education, community college credentials could help account for half of this goal.

Second, efforts towards meeting President Obama’s goal have highlighted conversations surrounding equity and access in higher education. Additionally, the spotlight on community college graduation rates have been met with criticism. Graduation rates are the most commonly used metric to measure success of an institution. Yet, the definition used by the U.S. Department of Education (i.e., first-time, full-time students), puts community colleges at risk when 63% of all students are part-time (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Furthermore, several studies have highlighted the personal and institutional characteristics that play a role in student
completion at the community college (Bailey et al., 2006; Johnson & Rochkind, 2009; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014; Zeidenberg, Scott, & Belfield, 2015).

Third, students from impoverished backgrounds need low-cost educational opportunities to meet their goals. In 2017-2018, the average annual cost to attend a public community college was $3,570 compared to $9,970 for a public four-year institution (American Association of Community College, 2018). The success outcomes for low-income students continues to be an area of interest for researchers, administrators and policymakers (Bombardieri, 2018). Additionally, recent studies have highlighted the various obstacles that students from poverty face when pursuing an education, such as food and housing insecurity (Blevins, 2018; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Hallett & Crutchfiled, 2017; Maroto, Snelling, & Linck, 2015; Wood & Harris, 2018) and financial aid (Chen & Hossler, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016).

Finally, females outnumber males by over 2 million more undergraduates (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017b). In the community college, women account for 56% of all enrollment (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Trends in female college enrollment and completion since the 1970s have spurred research on the gender gap in higher education (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008; Carbonaro, Ellison, & Covay, 2011). Research on the gender gap have also highlighted differences among racial/ethnic groups. The largest gap between males and females in educational attainment exists between Blacks. Resultantly, much of the research on graduation rates and Black students has focused on Black males or Black students holistically. However, an examination of
graduation rates for Black females, specifically at the community college, indicate that this population is not succeeding at comparable rates as their female counterparts. Furthermore, Black females at the community college are completing at rates similar to Black males, yet the majority of literature is focused on Black males.

**Rationale for Study**

Until Fall 2013, Black females enrolled in college at higher numbers than any other female minority group (NCES, 2016). Despite enrolling in college at high rates, the educational attainment and graduation rates of Black females suggest success in postsecondary institutions may not follow the same trend. Black females have consistently graduated at lower rates than other females. For public, two-year institutions, the federal graduation rate for the 2012 cohort of Black females is 11.8% compared to 22.5% for all females (NCES, 2016b). An examination of multiple cohorts indicate that the federal graduation rate for Black males and females at public, two-year institutions have been comparable. Yet, the extant literature is primarily focused on Black males (Glenn, 2003; Strayhorn, 2012; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014; Wood & Palmer, 2014).

Recent media headlines have touted Black women as the most educated group in the United States (Davis, 2016; Helm, 2016). These headlines cite statistics from the NCES that report the high percentages of degrees that Black women have earned compared to other Black students (i.e., Black males). While Black females do earn more degrees than Black males, the number of degrees earned in comparison to Black males does not equate to Black females being the most educated population. According to the United States Census Bureau (2016a), 22.2% of Black females age 25 and older have
earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. In comparison, 33.5% of White women and 34.2% of White men have earned bachelor’s degrees.

To meet the aforementioned challenges and those challenges posed in the background, there is a need for further inquiry that examines why Black females at the community college complete at lower rates than their female counterparts. Furthermore, the emphasis on low-income Black females addresses an area of research that is further lacking. Low-income students have been studied extensively as a group (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016). However, the emphasis on low-income Black females provides an additional layer of complexities that could affect college completion.

Statement of the Problem

Given the research and practice as reported in the literature, this study was guided by two considerations. First, there is a lack of postsecondary literature on Black females in the community college. Furthermore, additional research is needed to determine the impact of various predictors on academic success. While some of this research has been completed specific to Black females (Farmer, Hilton, & Reneau, 2016; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014), more research is needed on this population.

Next, the topics of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status have been approached individually throughout decades of higher education research. However, research on the intersection of all three areas is limited or dated (Matthews-Armstead, 2002). Without adequate research on the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, it is difficult to understand if and how these identities affect individuals. Furthermore, to address any potential barriers to success, the barriers must
first be identified. Conversely, to promote success, effective strategies or traits must also be identified. The intent of this study was not to view this intersectionality from a deficit approach but to understand how Black females make sense of these identities as they progress towards completion of a college credential.

**Researcher Perspective**

As a higher education professional who works at a state coordinating agency for community colleges, I brought certain experiences and perspectives to this research. First, I brought an understanding of the role of the community college and the students that they serve. Many students rely on these institutions as points of access to opportunities that otherwise are unavailable. For low-income students, this access is particularly important as community colleges provide a low-cost alternative to most other postsecondary institutions.

Furthermore, as an individual who identifies as Black and female, my purpose in conducting this study was not only to challenge beliefs of who Black women are and what they represent, but also to highlight successes. Oftentimes, Black women, and Blacks in general, are viewed from a deficit framework. As a Black woman, I am aware and have experienced various struggles related to the intersection of my gender and race/ethnicity. I also know that for Black women the walks of life often take a different path. As I conducted this research, researcher positionality and how that may have affected the research were considered.
Research Questions

Research questions for this study were based on the background of the problem, research context, researcher perspective, and rationale for the study. Specifically, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do low-income Black females in the community college describe and make sense of their journey to college completion?
2. How does the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status affect completion for low-income Black females at the community college?
3. How do low-income Black females in the community college define academic success?

Methodology

This study used phenomenology to examine the research questions. Phenomenology is a study of how individuals describe things and experience phenomena. It aims at description and interpretation, not explanations or analyses (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2014). Van Manen (2014) describes phenomenology as “a method of questioning than answering, realizing that insights come to us in that mode of musing, reflective questioning, and being obsessed with sources and meanings of lived meaning” (p.27). Phenomenological questions can be the result of a certain experience or a sense of wonder. Furthermore, phenomenology involves an investigation of the life-world, that is, “the way a person lives, creates, and relates in the world” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 48). Phenomenology asks the core question of what is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience for this person or group of people (Patton, 2015)? In phenomenological research, an assumption about an essence or essences to a shared
experience is critical and “these essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced” (Patton, 2015, p. 116).

Phenomenology was appropriate for this study because it seeks to understand the wholeness of low-income Black females’ experience in the community college and their journey to completion of a credential. Interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. Open-ended interview questions, guided by the interview protocol (Appendix D), were developed from the literature review and conceptual frameworks.

**Conceptual Framework**

To best address the research questions, a combination of two frameworks was used. The use of two frameworks underscores the importance of accounting for the intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Integration of the two frameworks brought a breadth of strengths to the study. Specifically, these frameworks were academic momentum and self-authorship.

Baxter Magolda (1998) described self-authorship as “the ability to collect, interpret and analyze information and reflect on one’s own beliefs in order to form judgments” (p. 143). Self-authorship involves the integration of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions of development. Adelman (1999, 2006) is credited with the concept of academic momentum to describe how a student’s academic course load is predictive of their likelihood to complete college. For the purposes of this study, academic momentum was defined as a significant event(s), outcome(s), or process(es) that served as a catalyst in the participants’ journey to completion of a community college credential.
Due to the intersectional nature of this study’s sample, the use of two frameworks was necessary. In a study based on low-income Black females and their journey to college completion, several complexities needed to be addressed. First, in any discussion about college completion, a consideration of academics is primary. Academic momentum can help account for the academic component related to college completion. The progression towards a college credential requires academic success. This study sought to understand how academic success is defined for low-income Black females who were able to earn a college credential.

Secondly, this study sought to draw on the framework of self-authorship. Self-authorship is not meant to be a linear trajectory or path (Baxter Magolda, 2008). The use of self-authorship provides another lens to view the journey to college completion based on external interactions and how those interactions are internally interpreted. Self-authorship can also serve as a framework for understanding how students facing poverty can overcome these challenges and still be successful academically. The use of these two frameworks was the attempt to account for the holistic picture of how these students achieved the success of earning a college credential despite any obstacles or circumstances associated with their social identities.

Procedure/Data Collection

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 Black females who completed a credential at one of the target community colleges or were within 12 credit hours of completing their credential. Participants were interviewed twice. Semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 and 240 minutes and took place in mutually agreed upon locations. Following each interview, participants were compensated with a
gift card worth $25. Interviews were recorded using a recording device and were transcribed by a third-party vendor.

Participants and Study Site

Study sites consisted of three technical/community colleges in South Carolina. The 16 technical/community colleges in South Carolina are strategically located across the state to ensure that every resident is within 30 miles of a two-year institution. Three target colleges were selected for the study based on Fall 2014 Black female enrollment, number of Black female graduates as of June 30, 2017, percentage of the college’s service area population who are Black females, and whether the college’s service area consists of high poverty counties. Additionally, the targeted colleges consisted of a diversity in overall college size, based on total enrollment, and degree of urbanization.

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants for the study. Creswell (2007) defines purposeful sampling as the selection of individuals and sites for study that can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p.125). Participants must have met the following criteria:

- Enrolled at a South Carolina technical/community college in 2014 or after
- Identify as African American or Black AND female
- Come from a low-income background, identified through being a recipient of a Federal Pell Grant
- Completed a two-year college credential (i.e., certificate, diploma, or associate degree) OR is within 12 credit hours or less of completing a credential
Potential participants were identified with the help of gatekeepers, that is, staff members at the identified community/technical colleges who could provide access to the potential participants (Creswell, 2014).

Definitions of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions were used.

*Community College* - Community college is defined as any public two-year institution in the United States. The term community college was used with acknowledgment that public technical colleges or junior colleges are included.

*Graduation Rate* - Graduation rates refer to the U.S. Department of Education published rates that account for first-time, full-time students. Graduation and completion rates are used synonymously.

*Pell Grants* – Pell Grants are the federal grants awarded to undergraduates who demonstrate financial need. For the purposes of this study, Black female community college students who were recipients of Pell Grant awards were studied. Full Pell Grant award amounts for each academic year are: $5,645 (2013-2014), $5,730 (2014-2015), $5,775 (2015-2016), $5,815 (2016-2017), $5,920 (2017-2018), $6,095 (2018-2019).

*Poverty* - Poverty is defined as when a family’s income fails to meet the federally established threshold (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, n.d.). Poverty and low-income are used synonymously. A student’s status as low-income was defined as the recipient of a Pell Grant award during their tenure at the community college.
Findings

Four major themes represent the findings from this phenomenological study: ambition, support, balance, and campus experience. The first theme, ambition, represents the ambition and determination that participants possessed and helped them progress to completion. Support represents the internal and external support systems that guided the participants in their journey. Balance represents the management of school and family, work, and personal lives. The campus experience represents the interactions with the campus environment, both positive and negative.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the experiences of low-income Black females in the community college and their journey to college completion. Without adequate research on the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, it is difficult to understand if and how these identities affect individuals. Furthermore, to address any potential barriers to success, the barriers must first be identified. Conversely, to promote success, effective strategies or traits must also be identified. The intent of this study was not to view this intersectionality from a deficit approach but to understand how Black females make sense of these identities as they progress towards completion of a college credential. Findings provide insight into ways that community colleges can help this student population as they progress towards completion.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Education is frequently referred to as the “great equalizer” for society. Access to a postsecondary education can lead to higher incomes and can help promote an individual from one income level to the next. College graduates also have lower levels of unemployment, lower incarceration rates, and higher levels of civic participation, including voting and volunteer work (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Although there are many personal and societal benefits of postsecondary education, only 39% of the United States population age 25 years and older have earned an associate degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

In 2009, President Barack Obama set a national goal for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by the year 2020. Ten million additional people will need to earn a postsecondary credential in order to meet this goal (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Efforts towards meeting this goal have highlighted conversations surrounding equity and access in higher education. Specifically, President Obama mentioned the role of community colleges in helping to meet this national completion goal. If five million people committed to one year of postsecondary education, community college credentials could help account for half of this goal.

Community colleges enroll 41% of all undergraduates in the United States, including 40% of all first-time students (American Association of Community Colleges,
Additionally, 43% of all Black undergraduates, 52% of all Hispanic undergraduates, and 56% of all Native American undergraduates are enrolled at community colleges. Fifty-six percent of all community college students are women and the average age for all community college students is 28. The diversity within community colleges highlight the importance of these institutions, particularly for providing educational access points for students from all backgrounds.

However, community colleges receive criticism related to their low completion rates. Twenty-five percent of all first-time, full-time community college students graduate within three years (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). When disaggregated by gender and racial/ethnic groups, these rates show huge disparities between student populations. These disparities have been highlighted in the literature by many scholars (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, & Kienzl, 2006; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Spangler & Slate, 2015; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014). Yet, scholars have overlooked Black females enrolled in community colleges, despite their recent enrollment trends. Specifically, the examination of low-income Black females in the community college show gaps in the literature about community colleges. Federal Pell Grants, an indicator of financial need, comprise 34% of all federal aid received by community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to explore the journey to completion of a credential for low-income Black females in the community college. Therefore, this literature review seeks to examine the various areas of literature that support the study. First, the history of community colleges and their role in postsecondary education are examined. Next, measures of student success are defined. Specifically, the history of graduation
rates and the definition are made operational for the purposes of this literature review. Third, poverty in higher education is examined with an emphasis on social class and socioeconomic status. Fourth, an exploration of gender differences in higher education are explored, with a specific focus on Black female postsecondary literature. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of supporting data and information on Black females, educational attainment, and income inequalities to help support the need for this study. The consideration of Critical Race Theory in research on race is also examined.

**History of Community Colleges**

Community college students comprise 41% of all United States undergraduate students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Longitudinal enrollment data and research have shown that low-income and minority students, especially African Americans and Hispanics, are more likely to begin their college career at the community college (Carnevale & Stohl, 2013; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2011). During the Fall 2015 semester, 52% of Hispanic and 43% of African American undergraduate students were enrolled at community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Federal grant recipients, including the Pell Grant, accounted for 34% of student financial aid recipients at the community college.

The highlighted statistics indicate the role that community colleges play in educating minority and low-income students. Community colleges play a unique role in higher education and their origin is often overlooked in the historical context of higher education. In order to better understand the need for these institutions, it is important to
understand the history and purpose of community colleges. Furthermore, the historical context sheds light on why these institutions serve an important need in society.

**Historical Overview**

The rise of the community college can be traced back to the early twentieth century. Secondary school enrollments began to increase and the demand for college grew similarly. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 had established publicly supported institutions in every state (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). However, societal demands continued to affect schools. These demands helped pave the way for the creation of junior colleges.

Several prominent nineteenth- and twentieth-century educators, such as Henry Tappan, Nicholas Murray Butler, and David Starr Jordan, began to call for the abandonment of the freshman and sophomore classes at universities (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen et al., 2014). These reformers sought to expand access to higher learning but also relieve universities of the responsibility of teaching lower division courses (Dorn, 2017). This movement led to junior college proposals.

William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, and other educators who pushed for these junior college proposals wanted the American educational system to follow the European university and secondary school system. The European system utilized universities for higher-order scholarship and research while lower schools provided general and vocational education to students through age nineteen or twenty (Cohen et al., 2014). Junior colleges would serve more as grades 13 and 14. However, there were no states that implemented this model. Instead, junior colleges
developed outside the secondary system and emerged as local initiatives that included technical or vocational curricula (Thelin, 2004).

Junior colleges were defined as institutions that offered two years of instruction of strictly collegiate grade (Cohen et al., 2014). Over time, the term “junior college” was applied to the lower-division branches of private universities and other private organizations. The term “community college” became associated with the publicly supported lower-division institutions. In 1901, Joliet Junior College became the first public two-year college in the United States and still operates today (Bahr & Gross, 2016). The founding of Joliet Junior College was the result of Harper’s work with the local high school’s principal, J. Stanley Brown (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Junior colleges offered an affordable and geographically accessible option to college studies.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, junior colleges grew rapidly. By 1922, 37 of the 48 states housed a total of 207 junior colleges (Cohen et al., 2014). Most of these institutions were private. In 1920, the American Association for Junior Colleges, now known as the American Association of Community Colleges, was founded as a professional organization (Bahr & Gross, 2016). During this time period, discussions about junior colleges focused on whether they were expansions of secondary schools or truncated colleges (Cohen et al., 2014). However, the argument for junior colleges as an extension of the secondary system proved to be opposed to state laws that governed and funded junior colleges as institutions of higher education. As the shift to public control of junior colleges began during this time period, statewide systems formed, most notably in California (Bahr & Gross, 2016).
The Great Depression and World War II had taken tolls on the United States throughout the late 1930s and into the 1940s. As soldiers returned home from the war, Congress passed the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the G.I. Bill, to financially support veterans in their pursuit of education and ultimately jobs (Thelin, 2004). The G.I. Bill provided educational benefits, in the form of funding for tuition, fees, books and supplies, for a maximum of 48 months depending on the military service time. Veterans were guaranteed benefits and able to use the G.I. Bill at any institution of higher education that met government approval (Thelin, 2004).

Implementation of the G.I. Bill caused an influx of college enrollments.

In 1947, President Harry Truman’s Commission on Higher Education issued the *Higher Education for American Democracy* report. President Truman established the Commission on Higher Education to examine the functions of higher education in the democracy and the means by which colleges and universities can perform best but was particularly interested in ways to expand educational opportunities for everyone (Thelin, 2014). Most notably, the report devoted substantial attention to public community colleges and recommended that the number of community colleges be increased (Brint & Karabel, 1989). In fact, the Commission was chaired by an influential member of the American Association of Junior Colleges, George Zook. Zook strategically shifted the attention from the use of the term “junior colleges” to “community colleges” (Bahr & Gross, 2016). However, the report was perceived as controversial and moved too far and too fast in its suggestions for federal involvement in higher education. “It had neither the precedent nor the presidential clout to work its way into congressional subcommittees” (Thelin, 2004, p. 270).
An important aspect of the *Higher Education for American Democracy* report was that it called for an end to racial discrimination in higher education (Bahr & Gross, 2016). Additionally, the report emphasized that finances were the primary barrier faced by students from lower income families (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). Although the report’s recommendations were not taken into consideration or implemented by Congress, the report set the tone for future federal policies, including the Higher Education Act of 1965 that established financial aid, specifically the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant or Pell Grants.

By 1960, the high school graduation rate was 75% with 60% of those graduates entering college in the following year (Cohen et al., 2014). As a result of this growth, many states expanded their universities’ capacity to accommodate this increase in the number of students. In 1960, California’s Master Plan for Higher Education became the forerunner for statewide coordination and stratification of educational opportunities (Bahr & Gross, 2016). In 1961, South Carolina established an Advisory Committee for Technical Training and the state’s first technical education center opened in 1962 (Poland, 2013). Continued growth occurred throughout the country in the 1960s and 1970s as the number of community colleges nearly doubled (Bahr & Gross, 2016).

In 1984, Congress passed the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act. The purpose of the Act was to increase the quality of technical education in the United States. Through this Act, funding is provided for an increased focus on the achievement of career and technical education students and to strengthen the connections between secondary and postsecondary institutions while improving state and local accountability (United States Department of Education, 2007). The last reauthorization
of the Perkins Act was in 2006 and but new legislation, the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, was signed by the President in 2018 (Kreighbaum, 2018).

Today, community colleges are knit together by five interrelated principles: open access, comprehensiveness, lifelong learning, community centeredness, and teaching focus (Bahr & Gross, 2016). Their mission continues to promote access to education for all Americans. Diversity within the community college indicates the importance of these institutions. Seventeen percent of single parents, 36% of first generation students, and 12% of students with disabilities are enrolled in community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Myriad reasons account for the growth of community colleges, so it is important to understand these reasons within the historical context.

**Understanding the Rise of Community Colleges**

Scholars have highlighted several explanations for the formation and rise of community colleges. First, as the number of demands increased for schools at every level, the growth of community colleges continued. Schools were the answer to all of society’s problems, whether it was racial integration or problems related to high unemployment rates. Publicly supported schools that were easily accessible began to serve the role of training the youth. The success of community colleges thrived because there were no traditions to defend or alumni to question their role (Cohen et al., 2014).

A second explanation for the rise of community colleges was the need for trained workers. New technologies and industries required new knowledge and training that could be done by colleges (Cohen et al., 2014). Businesses and industries supported the
formation of these institutions so that they would have a ready supply of workers trained at the public’s expense. Community leaders supported the formation of these institutions because it led to community prestige.

Throughout history, community colleges remained on the periphery of higher education while meeting various societal needs. Many university leaders saw these institutions as buffers that capitalized on occupational education, accepted less prepared students, and organized continuing education classes and activities (Cohen et al., 2014). Today, some of these same perspectives and questions surround the role of the community college. There are expectations from the secondary (K-12) school system in addition to four-year institutions. Also, businesses and industry depend on community colleges to train their workforce.

Although often overlooked, community colleges will continue to fill a niche in society. In 2018, there were 1,103 community colleges in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Nine hundred eighty were public community colleges. These colleges serve both rural and urban areas and offer opportunities for individuals to pursue a postsecondary education. Today, community colleges face criticism and pressure from external forces to provide a variety of needs.

Like the American high school, the community college over the course of its history has attempted to perform a number of conflicting tasks: to extend opportunity and to serve as an agent of educational and social selection, to promote social equality and to increase economic efficiency, to provide students with a common cultural heritage and to sort them into a specialized curriculum, to respond to the demands of subordinate groups for equal education and to answer
the pressures of employers and state planners for differentiated education, and to provide a general education for citizens in a democratic society and technical training for workers in an advanced industrial economy. (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 9-10)

With the various roles that community colleges play, it is important that they continue to provide access and equity to individuals pursuing postsecondary education at these institutions. To meet these various needs, the curricula of the community college warrants examination.

**Curriculum in the Community College**

Community colleges were designed to meet the needs of the local community. Therefore, the curricular functions at the college can vary depending on state legislation. Curricular functions can include academic transfer preparation, occupational education, continuing education, developmental education, and community service (Cohen et al., 2014). In the earliest junior colleges, a central tendency was the emphasis on liberal arts and curricula that could be transferred with credit to senior colleges (Brint & Karabel, 1989). The vocational focus was present in some junior colleges but were seldom important features of the institution.

Academic transfer preparation refers to the offering of lower-division general education courses that qualify as the freshman and sophomore year at the university (Cohen et al., 2014). These transferable general education courses often fall under the Associate in Arts and Associate in Science degrees. To promote transfer between community colleges and four-year institutions, articulation agreements are either written into state education codes or agreements are developed individually by institutions.
A program designed to prepare individuals for entry level positions in business and industry is known as occupational education. Occupational education is also referred to as career, vocational, or technical education (Cohen et al., 2014). Although community colleges were founded on the mission to offer lower-level general education courses, technical education has become a parallel mission. Brint and Karabel (1989) suggested that the transformation of community colleges from being college-preparatory transfer program oriented to emphasizing terminal vocational training is often viewed from two different perspectives. These perspectives are discussed in the form of two different models.

The first model is the consumer-choice model, which describes how institutions are exclusively responsive to students’ curricular preferences. From an economic perspective, this model views students as highly rational economic maximizers. Therefore, they seek to obtain the highest possible rates of return for the lowest cost in time, effort, and expense. This model assumes that students realize that the rate of return for a liberal arts education has declined and there are high returns for low-cost vocational education.

The second model is the business-domination model, which emphasizes the power of large corporations to shape the educational system to serve their own interests (Brint & Karabel, 1989). In this model, businesses intervene in shaping the community college’s curricular offerings because they see vocational education as an opportunity to
train a labor force of narrowly educated but technically competent middle-level specialists. Social class is considered the primary unit of analysis in the business-domination model. Many believed that the community college was well designed to produce individuals with a particular combination of technical competence and social acquiescence that was required to occupy skilled but powerless positions in the corporate economy (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

However, Brint and Karabel (1989) put forth their own framework to account for the transformation of community colleges. This framework was the institutional model. The institutional model posits that “community colleges chose to vocationalize themselves but they did so under conditions of powerful structural constraints” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 16). The belief was that community colleges were in a subordinate position in the larger structure of educational and social stratification. Brint and Karabel (1989) emphasized that these models were most appropriate to describe community colleges in the 1970s and forward. However, these models still hold true today in some respects.

Developmental education is also known as remedial, compensatory, preparatory, or basic skills studies (Cohen et al., 2014). Students who are underprepared for college-level work are placed into developmental education. Placement is typically demonstrated through a placement test taken prior entrance to the community college. Developmental courses are not often applied towards the credits needed for an academic degree. More than two-thirds of community colleges students take at least one developmental course (Ganga, Mazzariello, Edgecombe, 2018).
In recent years, developmental education reforms have occurred due to the impact on college completion, workforce development, and the disproportionality of student populations who require developmental courses. These reforms have arisen due to several challenges. Examples of challenges include the inaccuracy of placement tests and students not making it through developmental course sequences (Ganga et al., 2018). Solutions to these challenges have included the elimination of placement tests and the use of alternate metrics, such as high school GPA, accelerated progression into college-level courses, and wraparound support services.

Continuing education and community service promote lifelong learning through courses that do not qualify for academic credit. These courses can range from professional or industry specific training, such as Lean Six Sigma, to personal enrichment courses, such as defensive driving. During the Fall 2016 semester, 41% of all community college students were enrolled for non-credit, or continuing education courses (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Continuing education courses are an understudied area of community colleges. However, several scholars have begun to explore this topic (D’Amico, Morgan, Robertson, & Houchins, 2014).

A criticism of the open access model for community colleges is the ability to provide individuals with low-cost access to an education but a poor pathway to completion. Bailey, Jaggars and Jenkins (2015) referred to this model as the “cafeteria college” or “self-service college.” Under the “cafeteria college,” students are left to navigate complex career and educational pathways. Students are provided many choices, including when to enroll, which courses to take, the number of courses to take, and what major to pursue. Furthermore, the “two-way stretch” has extended the diversity of
community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014). The “two-way stretch” refers to the community colleges’ reach into the K-12 system and the expansion into offering baccalaureate degrees. The various options and sometimes conflicting missions can make it difficult for students to commit to a pathway and ultimately reach their goals of completion or transfer.

The various curricular options for community college students can prove to not only be challenging for students but also for measuring outcomes. For the purposes of this study, two-year institutions are defined as public community colleges that offer a mixture of occupational and transferable programs. The term community college is used with acknowledgment that public technical college or junior colleges were included.

**Measures of Student Success – The Emphasis on Graduation Rates**

College student success can be measured in various ways. Commonly, graduation and transfer rates are used to define student success at the community college. However, these success metrics are often met with criticism. For the purposes of this study, the focus was on graduation rates. The history and emergence of graduation rates are explored. Graduation and completion rates are used synonymously.

**The Completion Agenda – American Graduation Initiative**

Early in his administration, President Barack Obama set a goal for America to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. An important part of this national goal is the role of community colleges. During a speech in 2009, President Obama stated “it’s time to reform our community colleges so that they can provide Americans of all ages a chance to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to compete for the jobs of the future” (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2009).
President Obama’s plan, specifically focused on community colleges, became known as the American Graduation Initiative.

The American Graduation Initiative called for an additional five million community college graduates by 2020, creation of a community college challenge fund, funding for innovative strategies to promote college completion, modernization of community college facilities, and creation of a new online skills laboratory (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2009). All of these initiatives promote community college partnerships with businesses and industry, four-year institutions, and secondary institutions to help individuals develop a clearer career pathway. Federal funding associated with some of the initiatives promotes best practices in encouraging student success.

In the years following President Obama’s national goal, several scholars emphasized the importance of community colleges in helping to meet the national college completion goal. Handel (2013) discussed the importance of partnerships between the community college and four-year institutions. As the share of minority students projected to attend college increases, the community college population is expected to increase. Minority students are more likely to begin their college careers at community colleges (Carnevale & Stohl, 2013; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2011). As a result, it is important that community colleges not only focus on completion but also pathways for students to obtain a high wage, high demand job or complete a higher degree. Community colleges are the gateways for students from diverse and underrepresented
groups (Handel, 2013). A focus on community colleges in meeting America’s completion goals highlights the importance of these institutions in educating individuals.

In an analysis of how community colleges can meet the American Graduation Initiative, Kotamraju and Blackman (2011) utilized 1,013 public community colleges’ graduation rates and completion data to estimate graduation rates and completions for the year 2020. Forty-four states were represented. This regression analysis provided several important conclusions. First, states with higher average unemployment rates typically had lower graduation rates. Displaced workers were more likely to enroll in community colleges to gain additional skills. However, these students were not likely to complete a credential. Secondly, community college academic and student support programs should be improved. These internal programs are crucial in helping students persist and ultimately complete a credential. Finally, the governance structure and central authority should reside within the community college. Community college systems that are separate from other higher education institutions can focus on issues and initiatives directly related to completion and student success.

Although the American Graduation Initiative is still a new concept and results are yet to be determined, graduation rates have always been an important topic in postsecondary education. Most importantly, this initiative has raised issues surrounding graduation rates and their value in measuring community college success. Alternative measures, such as the American Association of Community Colleges’ Voluntary Framework of Accountability, have sought to use other outcomes, such as transfer and wage earnings, to measure and compare community colleges (American Association of
Community Colleges, 2012). However, graduation or completion rates, as measured by the Federal government, are still used in decisions about funding and performance.

**Graduation Rates**

Graduation rates are one of the most commonly used measures of success of a postsecondary institution. These rates are defined as a measure of the share of students who enter college and graduate within a certain number of years (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Annually, all colleges and universities that receive federal funds are required to report graduation data to the United States Department of Education. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is where these data are reported and later published. Institutional graduation rates are calculated based on how many first-time, full-time students graduate within 150 percent of the normal time based on their degree level (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

When President Obama set the national college completion goal in 2009, graduation rates were emphasized. Rising student loan debt, unemployment and underemployment has called for many to question whether postsecondary institutions are doing what they were designed to do. Low graduation rates can draw criticism for many institutions, especially community colleges. To understand this criticism, it is important to understand the origin of graduation rates as a measure of student success.

Prior to 1985, national-level institutional data on college and university graduation rates did not exist. In 1985, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) began to require its member schools to report graduation rate data to compare the academic records and performances of student athletes and the overall student body (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Three years later, United States Senators Bill Bradley and
Edward Kennedy proposed a bill that would require higher education institutions that receive Title IV funds to submit an annual report to the Secretary of Education with information on graduation rates. During this time, a growing concern emerged in Congress that the increasing revenue from college athletics would make it easy for the educational mission of the university to be forgotten. This bill was referred to as the Student Athlete Right-to-Know Act.

Under this bill, institutions would be required to report: the number of students at the institution by race/ethnicity and sex; the number of students who received athletics-related aid by race/ethnicity, sex and sport; the completion or graduation rates for students at the institution who received athletics-related aid by race/ethnicity, sex and sport; the completion or graduation rates for students at the institution by race/ethnicity and sex; the average completion or graduation rate for the four most recent cohorts of students who received athletics-related aid by race/ethnicity, sex and sport; and the average completion or graduation rate for the four most recent cohorts of students by race/ethnicity and sex (Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act, 1990). The original intent of the bill was to help student-athletes make better informed decisions. However, Congress believed this information would be useful for all students making decisions about postsecondary educational institutions. Therefore, the word “athlete” was removed from the title of the bill. Congress passed the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act on November 9, 1990. In 2007, institutions no longer reported graduation rates for scholarship student-athletes to IPEDS. This information is collected and reported by the NCAA (Cook & Pullaro, 2010).
In 2008, the Higher Education Opportunity Act amended and extended areas of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Changes implemented in this Act required IPEDS to revise some of the surveys in the annual data collection. Specifically, IPEDS began to collect data on 200% graduation rates at all participating institutions. The purpose of this survey was to calculate the graduation rates for students who complete between 151 and 200 percent of the normal time (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Although this survey still only accounts for first-time, full-time students, it may account for students who began as full-time but later enrolled as a part-time student. Even with the extension to 200%, this is not much help for community colleges whose first-time students begin as part-time students or transfer to a four-year institution before completion. Furthermore, these rates only look at students who enroll in the fall.

**Alternatives to Traditional Graduation Rates**

As a response to criticisms of the federal graduation rate and based on recommendations from their Technical Review Panel, IPEDS implemented the Outcome Measures survey in 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). This survey was designed to account for progression and completion on a more diverse group of students. Four cohorts of students are included in the survey. These cohorts are full-time, first-time; part-time, first-time; full-time, non-first-time; and part-time, non-first-time. Completion and current enrollment status are analyzed for these cohorts at six and eight years after enrollment at the institution. Current survey reporting includes disaggregated totals for students who received the Pell Grant. The data gathered from this additional federal reporting survey could provide insight into other indicators of
completion success beyond the traditional graduation rates. However, data collected for the Outcome Measures survey are not disaggregated by race/ethnicity or gender.

Other organizations, such as the National Student Clearinghouse, have attempted to calculate their own graduation rates. The National Student Clearinghouse is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization of over 3,600 institutions that participate to share student data (National Student Clearinghouse, n.d.). One of the most noteworthy services is the ability for institutions to track students who left their institution. Institutions are able to see where these students enrolled and if they completed a credential. The ability to track transfer students is extremely important for community colleges and provides an alternate measure of success.

The Community College Research Center (2015) reported that 25% of community college students transfer to a four-year college within five years. Student transfer is defined as the movement within higher education providers and the institutional processes supporting students who may move with credit applicable to a degree or certificate (National Association for College Admission Counseling [NACAC], n.d.). Transfer has always been an important mission for the community college. As a result, transfer rates are another important measure of student success in the community college. Transfer rates are often combined with graduation rates to show a better measure of the successes of the community college. However, for the purposes of this study the focus was on graduation rates as defined by IPEDS because this remains the most commonly publicized metric for higher education institutions.
Completion

With the announcement of President Obama’s national college completion goal, many states, institutions, and organizations began to review their efforts in aiding students towards completion of a credential. College completion continues to be the ultimate outcome of a postsecondary education. For community colleges, the scrutiny behind their graduation rates begets the question of what more can be done to help students. Before brainstorming solutions, colleges must understand the various factors that affect students as they persist towards completion.

Mayhew et al. (2016) outlined several between-college and within-college effects that could affect educational attainment. Between-college effects are institutional attributes that can predict retention, persistence, and graduation. Examples of between-college effects that have been highlighted in the literature include institutional quality, institutional expenditures and resources, tuition, institutional racial and gender characteristics, institutional location, size, control and type, and state policies and allocations. Within-college effects are the variations that occur within institutions that may affect retention, persistence, and graduation. Examples of within-college effects include academic performance, programmatic interventions, financial aid, employment, experiences with faculty, interactions with peers, residence, learning communities, academic major, and social and academic integration/involvement.

Vasquez Urias and Wood (2014) examined Black male graduation rates at public, two-year institutions utilizing IPEDS data. The purpose of this study was to determine whether institutional characteristics had any influence on the graduation rates of Black males. Characteristics included institutional profile, institutional size, urbanization,
geographic region, and institutional governance. There were 646 public, two-year institutions included in the sample. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the differences in graduation rates by the various institutional characteristics. Graduation rates were defined using the 150% of normal time to completion.

Results indicated that Black males tended to graduate at higher percentages at institutions with greater levels of full-time attendance, smaller institutions, and institutions located in rural and town areas. Additionally, two-year, public institutions in the Southeast region had greater graduation rates than any other region. Limitations of this study were that it focused on broad characteristics. Further research should be conducted to determine what institutional level characteristics make a difference in facilitating higher graduation rates for Black males and other student populations.

Bailey et al. (2006) also examined community college institutional characteristics through the development of a model that adjusted simple graduation rates for institutional characteristics. Using IPEDS data, the authors applied a weighted least-squares procedure to estimate new completion rates. The final sample size consisted of 915 community colleges. The models consisted of characteristics, such as location, fall enrollment, and finance.

Results indicated a consistent negative relationship between enrollment size and completion. Colleges with a high share of minority students, part-time students, and women had lower graduation rates. Greater instructional expenditure per FTE was also a significant finding in likelihood of graduation. State location was also significantly related to graduation rates, which is comparable to Vasquez Urias and Wood’s (2014) findings for Black males several years later.
In a narrower study focused on a state, Spangler and Slate (2015) examined the graduation and persistence rates of Texas community college students based on ethnicity. The study sought to determine whether differences existed in the graduation and persistence rates of White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian community college students in Texas and what trends existed from 2000 to 2010. Data originated from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) and were based on 68 community colleges. Descriptive statistics were used to determine differences in graduation and persistence rates between ethnicities. Results indicated that significant differences in graduation and persistence rates existed between White and Black and Hispanic students. The limitations of this study were that it only used descriptive statistics to determine differences between ethnicities.

Monaghan and Attewell (2015) sought to understand the disparities between students who began at a community college and their bachelor’s degree attainment. Specifically, the authors sought to examine the number of course credits attempted and earned, whether students transferred, and how transfer students fared in terms of credit accumulation and degree completion. Using the Beginning Postsecondary Study (BPS) national study, transcript data were used to track student progress semester by semester. The comparison group for the community college students consisted of college students who attended minimally selective four-year institutions. Propensity score matching was used to reduce the bias in the sample. The total matched sample size consisted of 2,010 student records.

Results indicated that students who began at a two-year institution and aspired to obtain a BA attained the BA at 21 percentage points lower than the four-year entrants.
When adjusting for differences in background characteristics, this attainment gap decreased to 17 percentage points. A significant difference was not found in academic momentum or educational progress during the first two years for the groups. However, for the approximately 60% of community colleges students who did transfer to a four-year institution, only 58% of those students were able to transfer all or mostly all of their accumulated community college credits. On the other hand, transfers were just as likely to graduate with a BA as their counterparts who started at a four-year institution.

The results of Monaghan and Attewell’s (2015) study focused on BA attainment for students who began at community colleges and highlights the importance of the community college as a starting point for many students who want to obtain a bachelor’s degree or higher credential. Furthermore, this study highlighted the area of literature that focuses on community college students but narrows in on their aspirations for bachelor’s degrees. While this is an important area to study, there needs to be recognition that not all community college students intend to obtain a higher credential.

However, a common trend in the community college completion literature focuses on community college students who have transferred to a four-year institution or have aspirations to transfer. This trend highlights the importance of Monaghan and Attewell’s (2015) study and the focus on students who have completed a credential at the community college. Dadgar and Trimble (2015) highlighted the extent that sub-baccalaureate credentials increased wages for students and their effect on employment and hours worked. Although this study focused on one particular state (i.e., Washington), it compared outcomes for students who completed a credential compared to students who attended the community college and did not earn a credential.
Results showed substantial wage returns for women who earned long-term certificates and associate degrees compared to those who did not. For men, there were significant wage returns for earning an associate degree. Long-term certificates and associate degrees increased the likelihood of employment and hours worked for both men and women. For women, this likelihood of employment with an associate degree was 11 percentage points higher and nine percentage points higher for long-term certificates. Men saw higher percentage points at 11 and eight, respectively. This study underscored the importance that non-completion of a credential can have on individuals, particularly at the community college.

**Non-Completion**

When discussing college non-completion, it is important to understand the variances within how non-completion is defined. In general, non-completion refers to the instance where a college degree has not been earned. However, the terms dropout and stop-out are also frequently referenced. A dropout is commonly defined as an individual who leaves higher education and does not return. Tinto (1993) utilized a similar term, system departures, to refer to individuals who withdraw from all forms of higher education. Institutional departures is used to refer to individuals who leave institutions. This term is synonymous with stop-outs, which refers to individuals who may leave the institution but re-enrolls in higher education at a later date.

In 2009, Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, partnered with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to explore the myths and realities about why students fail to finish college. The report, *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them* (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009), surveyed over 600 adults, ages 22 to 30, about their experiences in
A key theme of the survey results indicated that half of the surveyed students who did not complete a postsecondary credential left due to the lack of balance between work and school. Furthermore, working was the top reason that the adults cited for not returning to school.

Additionally, nearly six out of every ten students who did not complete college said they paid for college costs themselves and did not get help from their parents or other relatives. In comparison, six out of every ten students who completed college did have help from parents or other relatives. Students who did not complete college also identified areas that would make college more affordable and convenient for them. These areas included: allowing part-time students to qualify for financial aid; offering more courses in the evenings, weekends, and summer; cut the cost of attending college by 25 percent; provide a day care for students; and provide more government loans.

Other studies surrounding non-completion have highlighted the financial implications of not completing college. In a report published by the U.S. Department of Education, Wei and Horn (2013) analyzed trends in non-completion across all institution types from 2001 to 2009 and the amount of federal loan debt incurred by non-completers. From 2001 to 2009, non-completers who started at a public two-year college did not show a statistically significant difference in borrowed loan amounts. Additionally, non-completers at public two-year institutions borrowed at a significantly lower rate than completers. However, non-completers on average borrowed more per credit hour (i.e., $80 versus $70) than completers but this difference was not statistically significant. Non-completers also had lower rates of employment than completers, which has been a finding for other studies (Zeidenberg, Scott, & Belfield, 2015).
Zeidenberg, Scott, and Belfield (2015) linked non-completers with completers according to their program of study to calculate labor market returns. Utilizing transcript level data from the North Carolina Community College System, the authors used a machine learning algorithm to match non-completers to particular programs based on their course-taking patterns. This algorithm set up an intent versus goal factor for non-completers. The dataset consisted of all first-time-in-college, credit seeking students across all 58 North Carolina community colleges. Results indicated that overall non-completers earned less but non-completers who were on the certificate track have the worst labor market outcomes. This difference was 36% less than those who completed a certificate. Additionally, the authors found that the penalty for non-completion was very different depending on whether intent or goal was used in the algorithm. Comparisons by gender indicated the earnings gap between females who earned associate degrees and those who did not was 41%. For males, the gap was 23%. These results mirrored the findings from Dadgar and Trimble (2015).

**Student Departure from Higher Education**

A discussion about academic success in higher education cannot be complete without a discussion about why students leave college. Vincent Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model of student departure is one of the most widely used frameworks for examining student persistence in higher education. Tinto (1993) conducted a longitudinal analysis that examined why students leave college. College departures can be based on several reasons, including pre-entry characteristics, gender, age, and race/ethnicity. However, these characteristics can aid in an incongruence between academic and social integration.
Tinto (1993) emphasized that academic and social mismatches result in student departures from the higher education system. This study was based on students at four-year institutions. Scholars have studied the applicability of Tinto’s model to the two-year college student. While some of the literature has suggested that the model does not apply to two-year college students, there are many that suggest the opposite but with limitations (Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983; Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2010; D’Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine, & Ginn, 2014).

Pascarella, Duby, and Iverson (1983) tested Tinto’s model and suggested a reconceptualized model for commuter college campuses. This study sought to determine whether the model could be generalized to non-residential institutions. Additionally, the study sought to extend the model through the consideration of the concept of intention to leave or stay. Results indicated that student persistence was influenced by structural integration (i.e., grades) and normative integration (i.e., intellectual development). However, social integration had a negative influence on student persistence in non-residential campuses. Intent to continue at the institution was the strongest predictor of student persistence or withdrawal decisions. Inclusion of the concept of intention was recommended for the reconceptualized model.

In Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition, Tinto (1993) outlined several features that should be considered when studying student departure: the individual tracking of students from entry to departure, distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary departure, institution-specific characteristics, and policy relevance. There are two types of departures: voluntary and involuntary. Involuntary departures are controlled by the institution. Voluntary departures are based
on the student. Additionally, Tinto indicated a limitation of institutional action. In order to best understand why students depart, an analysis of individual students is vital.

To better understand individual experiences, Karp, Hughes, and O’Gara (2010) sought to understand student persistence in community colleges through qualitative methods. In-depth interviews were conducted with first-time students enrolled in their second semester at a community college. Questions focused on the students’ experiences in college, resources utilized, and challenges in completing their degrees. Integration, or sense of belonging, was the primary focus of the study. Results indicated that 70% of the students felt a sense of belonging on campus and 90% of those students returned to the college the next year.

Furthermore, Karp, Hughes, and O’Gara (2010) found that student integration was facilitated through participation in information networks. These information networks were developed through classroom structures, such as first-year seminar courses. Through these types of courses, students were exposed to different staff members at the college, developed a social or peer network with other students in the course, and built rapport with the faculty member and used them for guidance and support. This type of integration supports the application of Tinto’s (1993) model for community college students.

Tinto (1993) also referenced the role of student intentions in departure from higher education. Specifically, the role of individual commitments can play a role in whether a student completes college or not. There are two forms of individual commitments that were outlined by Tinto (1993): goal and institutional. Goal commitment refers to an individual’s commitment to personal education and occupational
goals. Institutional commitment refers to the individual’s personal commitment to the institution where they are enrolled. Individual intentions and commitments are difficult to measure and rarely collected by institutions.

Although the evidence that Tinto’s (1993) model is useful for some aspects of studying community college students, literature on the applicability of the theory on minority racial/ethnic groups is limited. Typically, the model has been used in combination with other conceptual frameworks or theories (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) used Tinto’s (1993) model with Astin’s (1993) input-environment-outcome (IEO) model to examine the satisfaction and retention among African American men at community colleges. Results indicated that the use of multiple frameworks helped explain the factors that contributed to satisfaction and retention. Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2011) examined factors that contributed to the success of academically underprepared Black males who completed at HBCUs. Results indicated that familial support was important to the success of the Black males in the study and underscores the importance of including support systems outside of the institutional environment when applying Tinto’s (1993) model to minority students.

Overall, Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model provides guidance on factors that should be considered when studying why students do not complete college. The utilization of Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model on a study examining Black female completion and non-completion in the community college is warranted. However, as demonstrated in the literature on minority students in community colleges (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012), an additional framework or model could be necessary. This is
especially true considering the complexities of studying Black females, whose
intersection of race and gender provide unique experiences.

Furthermore, Tinto’s work came at a time prior to databases, such as the National
Student Clearinghouse. The National Student Clearinghouse was founded in 1993 and
allows institutions to track the patterns of students (National Student Clearinghouse,
n.d.). Participating institutions are allowed to track students who applied to their
institutions but did not enroll or track students who enrolled at the institution and left
before completion. This useful resource provides institutions with the ability to learn
more about the patterns of their students, particularly those who leave before completing
a credential.

**Poverty and Higher Education**

As previously mentioned, community colleges were built on the mission of access
and equity. This mission is prevalent among students from low-income or poverty
backgrounds who are in search of low-cost educational opportunities to meet their goals.
In 2017-2018, the average annual cost to attend a public community college was $3,570
compared to $9,970 for a public four-year institution (American Association of
Community College, 2018). The success outcomes for low-income students continues to
be an area of interest for researchers, administrators and policymakers (Bombardieri,
2018).

In its simplest definition, poverty is defined as a lack of resources or means, such
as finances or goods. For the purposes of this study, poverty was defined as when a
family’s income fails to meet the federally established threshold (United Nations
Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (n.d.) defines this type of poverty as income poverty. Though there are several types of poverty, or lack of resources, that should be acknowledged within higher education, financial concerns are often the most common among college students. With the high cost of tuition and fees associated with attending a postsecondary institution, access to a college education becomes inaccessible for someone who is also facing poverty.

Recent studies have focused on food and housing insecurity in higher education (Blevins, 2018; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Hallett & Crutchfiled, 2017; Maroto, Snelling, & Linck, 2015; Wood & Harris, 2018). Results from these studies have indicated and supported evidence that two-year college students are more likely to be food or housing insecure (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017) and minority students, particularly Black and Latino students, are disproportionately affected by food and housing insecurity (Wood & Harris, 2018). Other studies have focused on the importance of financial aid for students and the impact that it has on completion or other academic success outcomes (Chen & Hossler, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016). To better understand the complexity of poverty and low-income, it must be approached from multiple perspectives.

**Social Class, Socioeconomic Status, and Capital**

Community colleges are known for serving students from low socioeconomic statuses. This position in society brings a social justice aspect in the mission of the community college. Providing access to an education to students from low socioeconomic statuses can help with social mobility and bridging the income gap, particularly for students from minoritized backgrounds. The link between achievement,
gender, and race/ethnicity becomes more complicated when socioeconomic status is also considered.

When discussing social class, the theories of Bourdieu are often quoted. Bourdieu (1986) introduced the notion of capital. Capital is a form of accumulated labor that is appropriated by agents or groups of agents that enable them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Bourdieu (1986), capital appears via three different appearances: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital is immediately available and convertible into money or institutionalized as property rights. Bourdieu (1986) posited that economic capital is the root of all other types of capital. Additionally, all forms of capital are reducible to economic capital.

Social capital is the linkage between the total of the actual or potential resources of a network of institutionalized relationships that gives members of the network a collective benefit or credit. The institutionalized relationships are of mutual acquaintance and recognition. These relationships only exist in the practical state and could be socially instituted. For example, the name of a family, class, or tribe could guarantee social capital. The social obligations or connections that are a result of social capital are often converted into economic capital. Bourdieu (1986) also emphasized the reproduction of social capital. The reproduction of social capital presupposes that there is an unceasing effort of sociability or a continuous series of exchanges where recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed.

Cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital exists in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body. It requires an investment of time by the individual. Culture and cultivation are
how cultural capital is embodied. For this reason, the embodied state of cultural capital is not easily transmitted. Objectified cultural capital exists in the form of cultural goods, such as books, pictures, or other objects. However, it is only as effective as it is appropriated by agents through implementation and investment. Institutionalized cultural capital refers to recognition of capital, such as academic qualifications or credentials.

Yosso (2005) challenged Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory due to its implication that White, middle class is the standard from which cultural capital is measured. This perspective implies that minoritized individuals come from communities that are culturally poor. Using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens, Yosso (2005) posited a community cultural wealth perspective for communities of color. There are at least six forms of capital for community cultural wealth: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant.

Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. Linguistic capital refers to the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style. Familial capital refers to the cultural knowledges nurtured among kin that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition. Social capital is the networks of people and community resources. Navigational capital refers to the skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Resistant capital refers to the knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality.

While various types of capital are omnipresent in society, certain types of capital are more valued over others. In higher education, individuals with social, economic, or
cultural capital are able to enroll in certain institution types and navigate institutional structures and resources. Furthermore, the social identities that students develop based on their possession or lack of various forms of capital can impact their experiences. Martin, Williams, and Young (2018) explored how social class and social class identity have been studied or excluded in higher education research and practice. Drawing from several frameworks and definitions, the authors defined social class “as a network of values and beliefs an individual uses to understand their socioeconomic and sociocultural experiences; this network is best understood by acknowledging the larger systemic structure of classism and the influence it exerts on one’s class-based experiences” (Martin, Williams, & Young, 2018, p. 12).

Socioeconomic status or social class are the invisible identities that students bring with them to campus. For students from low-income backgrounds, their socioeconomic status should not determine their destiny. As Yosso (2005) posited for minoritized populations, students bring various other forms of capital that can aid in navigating postsecondary spaces. Furthermore, socioeconomic status and capital continues to be a budding area of literature as political and societal changes highlight the increasing gaps between racial/ethnic groups and other populations. This study, focused on low-income, Black females, sought to highlight the strengths or types of capital that these students used to aid in their completion of a community college credential.

**Low-Income College Students**

An abundance of higher education literature is focused on students from low-income backgrounds. Literature focused on low-income students in the community college indicate room for improvement in helping these individuals reach their
postsecondary goals and ultimately resolve their experiences in poverty. The literature also indicates that gender and race/ethnicity play a role in increasing disparities among different student populations.

Mamiseishvili and Deggs (2013) examined the persistence and transfer outcomes of low-income students who enrolled in public two-year institutions. Using the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) national longitudinal survey, the study specifically investigated the effect of demographic characteristics, in-college attributes, environmental factors, and personal goals. Demographic characteristics consisted of variables such as gender, race/ethnicity, parents’ education level, and delayed enrollment. In-college attributes consisted of variables such as first-year GPA, remedial courses, academic integration, and social integration. Environmental factors consisted of financial aid, enrollment intensity, and hours of employment. Personal goals consisted of degree aspirations, steady work, being financially well-off, and being a community leader.

The quantitative study used multinomial logistic regression with a sample size of 1,350 low-income students who enrolled at a public, two-year institution. The outcome variable was the three-year retention status. Results indicated that 40% of students left without returning, 39% completed their program or were still enrolled, and 21% transferred to another institution. The regression model revealed that gender, race/ethnicity, GPA, academic integration, enrollment intensity, and degree expectations significantly and positively contributed to the likelihood of persistence/completion of a degree. Females and full-time students were more likely to complete a degree. African Americans were 0.7 times less likely to persist. The findings of Mamiseishvili and Deggs’ (2013) study highlight the importance of this study. Their findings showed
Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015) explored factors influencing the decision of low-income students to enroll and be successful in community college. This qualitative study consisted of interviews with 18 low-income college students who successfully persisted to their second year of study at four community colleges. Low-income students were defined by their receipt of federal Pell Grants. Participants came from diverse backgrounds, including race/ethnicity, gender, and age. The study sought to examine factors that influenced the student’s decision to attend college, financial concerns, motivations and strengths, college programs that contributed to success, and people who supported and encouraged their academic achievements.

Results from the study indicated that most of the participants cited the desire for stable employment and the opportunity to escape the vicious cycle of poverty as their reason for enrolling in higher education. Specifically, 16 of the 18 participants enrolled in higher education to create new job opportunities for themselves. All participants indicated that finances affected aspects of their college experiences. For example, the cost of college was the predominant consideration in the college selection process. Textbook costs were a concern for all participants. Inadequate housing, food insecurity, and/or reliable transportation were cited as major factors for 16 of the 18 participants. These factors forced many of the participants to apply for student loans.

Motivating factors for the participants included their desire to set a positive example for their children and improve their job opportunities in order to break the cycle
of poverty. Positive relationships with faculty and staff helped participants successfully transition into higher education. This was particularly important as all participants felt ill-prepared for college. Lack of confidence, financial resources, and academic skills were cited as limitations that they needed to resolve in order to be successful. However, the participants cited phrases, such as “hard work,” “determination,” and “dedication” as their strengths. Self-management and good student skills were also mentioned as strengths. College programs that aided in their success provided textbook, transportation, and child care assistance.

Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons’ (2015) study was significant because it gave insight into the lived experiences of students from low-income backgrounds who were experiencing success at the community college. Additionally, the study gave the participants a voice in what they felt others should know or understand about their experiences in poverty. The study also suggested that self-concept and the marginalization of low-income students in higher education should be studied. The findings of Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons’ (2015) study are significant because this study sought to understand the experiences of low-income Black females in the community college as they progressed towards completion. Specifically, this study sought to challenge any misconceptions about the community college experience, particularly for students who are from a certain socioeconomic status, gender, or racial/ethnic group.

Bell, Hackett, and Hoffman (2016) explored student satisfaction and success in community colleges situated in low-income environments. The uniqueness of this study is that it was set in an urban environment where low socioeconomic status was a variable
that was a condition of the environment and affected all students at the institution. The study took place in the second poorest urban city in the United States, San Bernardino, California. At the time of the study, the city’s unemployment rate was 22.4% and the per capita income was $14,849. Data for the study were obtained from an internally developed campus climate survey that was administered at the college every two to four years. For the survey results reviewed, 635 students were included in the sample.

This quantitative study used exploratory factor analysis and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Exploratory factor analysis was used to group the survey items into four student involvement scales (i.e., student services involvement, retention programs, African American programs, and Latino programs) and three campus climate scales (i.e., satisfaction, caring environment, and institutional characteristics). Findings indicated that African American students were found to have relatively high levels of involvement in student service programs and programs designed to support specific ethnic groups. Additional results indicated that students placed significant importance upon the quality of their interactions with office workers at the college and the physical appearance of the campus.

Limitations of Bell et al.’s study include the time constraint of one survey examination. Additionally, the study presented correlational evidence that does not imply causation. Furthermore, the study does not correlate the findings to student outcomes of success, such as completion or retention. The authors suggested that future studies should utilize longitudinal and mixed method approaches.

Also focused on a particular geographic area, Pizzolato and Olson (2016) investigated the experiences of experiences of students in state welfare-to-work
programs. Welfare-to-work programs are designed to provide services to help individuals find work and move towards self-sufficiency. These programs provide assistance in the form of tuition and fee waivers, childcare assistance, and other financial support. Specifically, the authors sought to determine how poverty and community colleges function as developmental contexts for students’ epistemological development and what those epistemologies look like.

This one-year exploratory study of students at a community college was limited to females based on prior literature. The sample included 45 females of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and age. Interviews were conducted twice during one academic year. Findings indicated that the study participants collectively experienced disenfranchisement. Specifically, participants emphasized the value of absolute submission to authority and how this impeded their abilities to see themselves as having worth and/or being able to think for themselves.

These studies highlight the various challenges that low-income students could face when enrolled in postsecondary education. Low-income students have been studied using both quantitative and qualitative methods. As highlighted in the findings of Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015), low-income students seek out higher education to obtain stable employment but personal factors, such as housing and food insecurity, are major concerns. Additionally, as found in Mamiseishvili and Deggs (2013), gender and race/ethnicity have impacts on low-income students and their journey to college completion. The low-income literature further highlights the need to study the impacts of poverty based on gender, as examined by Pizzolato and Olson (2016).
Gender Differences – Blacks in Higher Education

Female undergraduates outnumber males by over 2 million (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017b). In the community college, women account for 56% of all enrollment (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). During the 2014-15 academic year, females earned 61% of all associate degrees and 57% of all bachelor’s degrees (NCES, 2017a). Trends in female college enrollment and completion since the 1970s have spurred research on the gender gap in higher education (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008; Carbonaro, Ellison, & Covay, 2011). Research on the gender gap has also highlighted differences among racial/ethnic groups. The largest gap between males and females in educational attainment exists between Blacks.

Davis and Otto (2016) utilized data from the National Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS 88) to examine gender differences by academic, social, economic, and ecological predictors of postsecondary educational attainment. Predictor variables included college enrollment, academic determinants, social determinants, social class and family financial resources, and school poverty. The total sample size consisted of 573 Black male and female students and 5,815 White male and female students. Multivariate analyses were conducted three times: one analysis with Blacks alone, one with Whites alone, and one with Blacks and Whites together.

Results indicated that when only accounting for gender, Black females had 14% greater odds of enrolling in a four-year college than Black males. When accounting for the main effects of each predictor, academic intensity of coursework, high school GPA, and parental expectations had the largest impacts on college enrollment for Black
students. Test scores and peer influence affected Black males and females differently. For Black females, a one unit increase in math/reading composite test scores led to a two percent increase in the odds of enrolling in a four-year college, whereas a one unit increase led to no significant change for Black males. The effect of friends’ influence was stronger for Black males than females. For every unit increase in the peer influence scale, the odds of enrolling in college were 1.16 for Black males and 0.66 for Black females. Davis and Otto (2016) concluded that Black males’ poorer academic performance and their lower levels of positive social influence contribute to the Black gender gap in college enrollment. The authors suggested that policymakers and future research focus on improving the academic performance of Black males and examining additional causes of the poorer academic performance.

In an earlier examination of the Black gender gap in educational attainment, McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, and Shwed (2011) analyzed trends in college completion using decennial census data from 1940 to 2000 from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) and logistic regression. The sample was limited to Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites between 22 and 28 years old. An important note from the study was that the authors emphasized that at no point from 1940 to 2000 did a larger proportion of Black men complete college than Black women. Findings from the study indicated that Black males were the most disadvantaged of the four population groups. Black males lagged behind Black women more than White men lagged behind White women in college completion.

Age was also found to be important in comparisons of educational attainment rates. Additional findings from the study suggested three probable reasons for students
taking longer to complete college: college is costly (economic), college academic work is
difficult (academic), and the labor market and military provide alternative opportunities
(environmental). The authors suggested additional research is needed to determine the
impact of each of those factors in addition to the causes and consequences of the Black
gender gap in college completion.

The findings from Davis and Otto (2016) and McDaniel et al. (2011) make strong
arguments that Black males and their educational attainment gap should be further
researched. When compared to Black females, Black males enroll and complete at lower
rates. However, this comparison does not mean that all is well with Black females. In
any one-to-one comparison, the groups are either equal or one group is dominant. When
compared to groups other than Black males, Black females fall short in key outcomes,
such as completion rates. Yet, the focus is always on Black males.

Black Male Exceptionalism and Intersectionality

Butler (2013) explored the concept of “Black male exceptionalism.” Black male
exceptionalism refers to the special focus on Black males due to the various detriments
that they face in society. In short, Black male exceptionalism is equated to Black males
as an endangered species. There are two ways that statistics are used to suggest Black
male exceptionalism. First, data about African Americans that include both men and
women are used to support the case for special interventions for African American men
(Davis & Otto, 2016; McDaniel et al., 2011). Second, data about African American
males are used to support special interventions, however the corresponding data for
African American females are not included. Additionally, interventions focused on
African American females are advocated for only when they benefit African American males.

Furthermore, Butler (2013) compared the types of programs devoted to Black males to the type of programs (or lack thereof) devoted to Black females. The primary argument was that “African American males are uniquely and profoundly disadvantaged in American society as a consequence of being Black and Male” (p.495). This statement implied that the combination, or intersection, of being Black and male in American society has resulted in oppression that is uniquely experienced by this group. The intersection of these two identities is best explained by the concept of intersectionality.

Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to describe the multidimensionality of Black women’s experiences based on their race and sex. Originally based in legal scholarship, intersectionality reflects the interaction of race and gender. Beyond race and gender, intersectionality posits that an individual’s social identities can converge to influence their beliefs and experiences. In studies of gender, these identities must be considered when constructing thoughts and beliefs. Collins (2009) emphasized the power dynamic that should also be taken into consideration. Collins’ work provided an additional foundation for intersectionality due to her study of oppression, dominance and other inequalities related to the experiences of Black women.

Additionally, Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) framed the field of intersectional studies into three loosely defined sets of engagements. These engagements are: applications of an intersectional framework or investigations of intersection dynamics; discursive debates about the scope and content of intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological paradigm; and the political interventions employing an
intersectional lens. The authors emphasized the link of intersectionality and the analysis of power. Critiques of intersectionality focus on its alleged emphasis on categories of identity versus structures of inequality.

Intersectionality provides a reality of life. Multiple social identities shape our perspectives and beliefs. Furthermore, a single identity cannot accurately reflect our behaviors and thoughts. In the case of African American males, the identity as an African American can signify oppression. However, the identity as a male signifies a set of privileges. For this reason alone, the justification for initiatives focused on African American males can be seen as a positive promoter based on the emphasis on an oppressed group. However, the lack of acknowledgement of the experiences of African American females implies that male privilege must be protected.

McCall (2005) discussed the complexities and methodological concerns that come with studying intersectionality. Disciplinary boundaries must be overcome to help embrace the multiple approaches in the study of intersectionality. Shields (2008) posited that intersectionality provides a foundation for accurately dealing with two issues when studying gender. The first is that intersectionality promised a solution and language for the impossibility of talking about gender without considering other dimensions of social structure and social identity that play a formative role in gender’s operation and meaning. Next, intersectionality is an applicable descriptive solution to the multiplying features that create and define social identities.

The intersection of gender and race is only the starting point for discussions about African American males and females. Social structures of inequality have affected African American males in disproportionate ways. However, the overemphasis on
alleviating these inequalities could result in other social structures of inequalities that affect African American females. Therefore, additional research on Black females in higher education is needed and can help explain gaps in achievement or additional measures of success across race/ethnicity and gender.

**Black Females in Higher Education**

African American/Black females are extensively studied in several disciplines, including African American/Black Studies, Psychology, Sociology, and Medicine but they have long been overlooked in higher education research. Traditionally, the majority of higher education research on Black females focuses on faculty and administration (Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017; Grant & Ghee, 2015) and not the student. Furthermore, the dearth of extant literature on Black female students in higher education is further lacking in the focus on Black females who attend community colleges. Community colleges enroll 43% of all Black undergraduate students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Unfortunately, community college literature on Black students often focuses on Black students holistically or specifically Black males (Hackett & Sheridan, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014).

Recent media headlines have touted Black women as the most educated group in the United States (Davis, 2016; Helm, 2016). These headlines cite statistics from the NCES that report the high percentages of degrees that Black women have earned compared to other Black students (i.e., Black males). As previously mentioned, Black females do earn more degrees than Black males. However, the number of degrees earned in comparison to Black males does not equate to Black females being the most educated population. According to the United States Census Bureau (2016a), 22.2% of Black
females age 25 and older have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. In comparison, 33.5% of White women and 34.2% of White men have earned bachelor’s degrees.

False narratives such as the aforementioned media headlines often perpetuate ideas that Black females are the new model minority. Kaba (2008) defined model minority as a group that once experienced severe economic, social and political isolation and managed to rise up despite those difficulties. Frequently, this term is associated with Asian Americans. However, a closer examination of postsecondary student outcomes challenges these narratives about Black females.

**Black Female College Enrollment and Completion**

Until Fall 2013, Black females enrolled in college at higher numbers than any other female minority group (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Despite enrolling in college at high rates, the educational attainment and graduation rates of Black females suggest success in postsecondary institutions may not follow the same trend. Black females have consistently graduated at lower rates than other females. For public, two-year institutions, the federal graduation rate for the 2014 cohort of Black females is 14.7% compared to 25.8% for all females (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018c). An examination of multiple cohorts indicate that the federal graduation rate for Black males and females at public, two-year institutions have been comparable (Table 2.1). Yet, the extant literature is primarily focused on Black males (Glenn, 2003; Strayhorn, 2012; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014; Wood & Palmer, 2014).
Table 2.1

IPEDS 150% Graduation Rates (%) for Black Males and Females for Degree/Certificate Seeking Students, Selected cohort entry years 2010-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public 2-year institutions</th>
<th>Black Females</th>
<th>Black Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010 starting cohort</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 starting cohort</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 starting cohort</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013 starting cohort</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014 starting cohort</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2002 through Spring 2013 and Winter 2013-14 through Winter 2017-18, Graduation Rates component. (This table was prepared September 2018.)

The data presented in Table 2.2 should spark discussions about what is happening to Black students at public, two-year institutions and why their graduation rates are consistently half of the overall rates for their gender across multiple cohorts. Additionally, Black females specifically complete at much lower rates at public, two-year institutions (2014 cohort – 14.7%) than at private, two-year institutions (2014 cohort – 59.9%) and for-profit, two-year institutions (2014 cohort – 49.4%) [National Center for Education Statistics, 2018c]. One plausible explanation is the transfer mission of the public, two-year college. Many two-year colleges were founded on the function of conducting lower-division general education courses for the universities as part of their institutional purpose (Cohen et al., 2014). Additionally, the Community College Research Center (2015) reports that 25% of community college students transfer to a four-year college within five years and only 20% of these students earn an associate degree or certificate first.

Black females completing at lower rates than other female groups is not unique to two-year institutions. At four-year institutions, the 2011 female cohort completed at a
rate of 63.0% after six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018b). For the same cohort, Black females completed at 43.9%. This rate was only higher than American Indian/Alaska Native females who completed at 38.9%. At public, four-year institutions, Black females in the 2011 cohort completed at 45.0%. This rate was the second lowest rate. Black females completed at the second lowest rate for several cohort years with completion rates higher than only those of American Indian/Alaska Native females. At for-profit, four-year institutions, Black females completed at much lower rates than at any other four-year institution type. Black females in the 2011 cohort at for-profit, four-year institutions completed at 13.8%, lower than any other female group except American Indian/Alaska Native. Table 2.3 lists the completion rates for all female groups at four-year institutions.

The federal graduation rate only accounts for first-time, full-time degree or certificate-seeking students who complete a credential with 150% of the normal time (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). For example, the graduation rate for a student enrolled in an associate degree program would be counted at three years. As previously mentioned, this definition of the graduation rate is particularly problematic for community colleges where 63% of all students are part-time (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Future research on the graduation/completion rates of Black females should examine the transfer patterns for non-completers and the completion of part-time and transfer-in students.
### Table 2.2

**IPEDS 150% Female Graduation Rates (%) by Race/Ethnicity for Degree/Certificate Seeking Students at Two-Year Institutions, Selected cohort entry years 2010-2014**

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<tr>
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--- Not available, ‡ Reporting standards not met (too few cases).

**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2002 through Spring 2015, Winter 2013-14, and Winter 2014-15 through Winter 2017-18, Graduation Rates component. (This table was prepared September 2018.)
Table 2.3

IPEDS 150% Female Graduation Rates (%) by Race/Ethnicity for Bachelor’s Degree-Seeking Students at Four-Year Institutions, Selected cohort entry years 2007-2011

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--- Not available, ‡Reporting standards not met (too few cases).
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2002 through Spring 2015, and Winter 2013-14 through Winter 2017-18, Graduation Rates component. (This table was prepared September 2018.)
Postsecondary Research on Black Females

The lack of literature specifically on Black females has been highlighted by several scholars. Winkle-Wagner (2015) conducted an integrative literature review across methodologies and academic disciplines to explore how Black college women have been studied and the information that has been gathered from studies. The review found 119 studies of varying methodologies. Three areas of research emerged as themes: individual Black female attributes, skills or identities as the center of college success; the role of relationships in college success; and the role of institutional support in Black women’s college success. Results indicated the focus of college success for Black women was primarily on individual factors, such as identity, self-efficacy, self-esteem or coping mechanisms.

In a rare study focused on Black women in the community college, Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) explored the relationship between background traits, expectations, engagement, performance, and students’ satisfaction with college. The sample consisted of 315 African American or Black women enrolled at the community college in a transferable degree program (i.e., associate of arts or associate of science), who also completed the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ). Results from the hierarchical regression analysis found several significant relationships. Age was found to be the strongest predictor of Black women’s satisfaction at the community college. Older Black women tended to be more satisfied with their community college experience. Interaction with faculty members and academic performance (i.e., GPA), were also positively associated with satisfaction with the community college experience. An inverse relationship between family responsibilities
and satisfaction was found. Black women who reported that their family responsibilities greatly affected their schoolwork tended to be less satisfied with their community college experience.

Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) highlighted important variables (i.e., age, interaction with faculty members, and academic performance) that contributed to the satisfaction of Black women at the community college. However, future research should focus on the correlation between satisfaction and outcomes, such as completion and/or retention. An important finding was the inverse relationship between familial responsibilities and satisfaction. Wood (2012) examined data from the national Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) longitudinal study and found that 26.9% of Black males enrolled in public, two-year colleges departed due to family responsibilities. This finding was significantly greater for Black males when compared to non-Black males. However, the percentage of Black males who departed college due to family responsibilities decreased in the second year, which suggests that family responsibilities may have a greater influence on departure in the first year. Although Wood (2012) focused exclusively on Black males, the study provides evidence to support Strayhorn and Johnson’s (2014) findings that familial responsibilities can have an impact on Black students in the community college.

National datasets to examine topics related to Black female students in the community college have been used by researchers. Walpole, Chambers, and Goss (2014) conducted an exploratory analysis of Black female community college student persistence, degree attainment, and graduate school attendance. Utilizing data from the Beginning Postsecondary Survey (BPS) and Baccalaureate and Beyond (B&B) national
datasets, the study explored how Black women compared to other women and African American men on these outcomes. The BPS sample consisted of 89,098 Black females and the B&B sample consisted of 10,200 Black females. The study consisted of both descriptive information to determine differences in retention, associate degree attainment, bachelor’s degree attainment, and graduate school attendance by race, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES) and a multivariate analysis using logistic regression.

Results confirmed that Black women were more likely than any other women racial/ethnic group to attend community colleges. Additionally, Black women were significantly less likely to have attained a certificate or degree or still be enrolled five years after first enrolling in a two-year college compared to other women. After five years, women who began at a two-year college attained associate degrees at a rate of 15%, while Black women had attained associate degrees at a rate of 4%. This same pattern was true for bachelor’s degrees. All women who began at a two-year college attained bachelor’s degrees at a rate of 11% compared to Black women at 3%. In comparison to Black men, Black women were significantly more likely to leave college without a degree or certificate.

A review of parental education differences indicated that Black women were significantly more likely than all women to have parents whose highest level of educational attainment was a high school diploma. For Black women who did earn a degree within five years, their first year GPA was a significant variable in the logistic regression. However, this variable slightly lowered the odds of degree attainment within five years. Walpole, Chambers, and Goss (2014) suggested that women with lower GPAs are more apt to seek help in their coursework which can result in better student
engagement and ultimately increased retention. Furthermore, high-performing Black women may be under matched at less selective institutions, where they are less likely to persist (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2011).

Additional results from Walpole, Chambers, and Gross (2014) indicated that Black women who complete bachelor’s degrees continue to graduate school in high percentages. This statement held true regardless of the type of institution where the student began. The focus on the continued enrollment of Black females at the community college, including stop-outs and dropouts, and overall persistence to transfer or degree was recommended for future research. Additionally, future research should study the needs of high-performing Black females at the community college.

Black female college completion has recently been examined at the four-year institution. Farmer, Hilton, and Reneau (2016) focused on the retention and graduation of Black females enrolled at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Specifically, the study sought to determine the relationship that exists between select pre-college and college level variables and the retention and graduation of Black females, and which of these variables best predict graduation for Black females. Data from a public, southern region, four-year HBCU were utilized to conduct multivariate statistical techniques. The sample size was 785 first-time in college Black females.

Pre-college variables included age, high school GPA, SAT and ACT scores, and Advanced Placement (AP) and International baccalaureate (IB) credits. College level variables included enrollment in mathematics, reading, and English remedial courses, hours attempted in year one of college, hours earned in year one of college, cumulative year one GPA, cumulative year four GPA, family income, and student dependency as
determined by the Free Application for Student Financial Aid (FAFSA). A correlation analysis indicated significant relationships between family income, enrollment in developmental math, hours attempted in year one, hours earned in year one, and cumulative GPA in year one on first year retention. Scores on the SAT and ACT, high school GPA, family income, hours attempted in year one, hours earned in year one, cumulative GPA in year one, cumulative GPA in year four, and dependency status were all significantly related to the six-year graduation rate.

Farmer, Hilton, and Reneau (2016) used logistic regression to determine the predictors of graduation for Black females. Results suggested that students who took developmental English and math were more likely to graduate within six years. It should be noted that a small percentage of the cohort needed to complete developmental courses, (i.e., 13% for English and 28% for math). Another predictor of increased odds to graduate in six years was the first year cumulative GPA. Additionally, all predictor variables considered together only accounted for 44% of the variance in whether Black females graduate within six years. It is important to note that this study is focused on one institution, variables utilized were ones that were available, and the study only reviewed one cohort of students. However, this study presented variables that can be utilized in a similar study on Black females in the community college (e.g., developmental course enrollment).

In addition to the quantitative studies on Black females, qualitative studies provide insight into factors that contribute to their academic success. Winkle-Wagner, Luedke, and McCallum (2017) explored the importance of confidence in Black women’s success. This qualitative study sought to gather wisdom and advice from Black women
college alumnae on what they would tell young Black women who aspire to obtain a bachelor’s degree. Participants in the study were 18 Black women from the Detroit metropolitan area who earned at least a bachelor’s degree between 1955 and 2013. Throughout the interviews, confidence emerged as a common theme among the participants. Specifically, participants spoke to the importance of building their own confidence and ignoring outside influence and asserting their confidence by being an advocate for oneself. An important note from the study was the participants’ emphasis on the structural challenges that they faced in college. Self-confidence and assertiveness was needed to overcome these challenges.

Although Winkle-Wagner, Luedke, and McCallum (2017) focused on women who obtained bachelor’s degrees, their finding about structural challenges echoes previous literature about the importance of institutional characteristics and resources. Zamani (2003) stated that Black women’s membership in two marginalized groups (i.e., Black and female), often makes them invisible in colleges and universities. Several suggestions were made to help meet the needs of Black females at colleges and universities: create a substantive African American presence at majority institutions through a firm commitment to attracting African American students, develop and maintain programs and policies that attend to the special concerns and needs of Black women on campus, allocate financial and human resources to support institutional efforts that seek to address racial and gender bias, and augment curriculum and classroom experiences to be more inclusive of Black women and foster academic development, particularly in White male-dominated disciplines.
More recent work has acknowledged the need for more research on Black females in higher education. Commodore, Baker, and Arroyo (2018) posited a student-centric conceptual model of Black women college student success. The model focused on three phases: prior to college, during college, and after college. The “prior to college” phase consisted of diverse experiences and characteristics and the model minority myth. Diverse experiences and characteristics are included in the model in an attempt to account for the differences and diversity among Black women. Yet, inclusion of the model minority myth phenomenon homogenizes the group based on the assumptions of others (i.e., Black women will succeed automatically and independently).

The “during college” phase consisted of three key concepts, identity development, external assets, and values and commitments, and three interacting concepts, non-cognitive skills development, achievement and challenges. Identity development is the maturation process. External assets are the support systems in and outside college. Values and commitments are self-identified priorities. Non-cognitive skills development refers to adding and refining abilities required for self-defined fulfillment and obtainment. Achievement is reaching or exceeding self-defined goals. Challenges are pervasive environmental-structural barriers to positive progress that a Black woman faces throughout the college persistence process. The final phase, “after college,” consists of holistic success. Holistic success is a broad and simplistic term that signifies maturation and well-roundedness beyond the attainment of a credential.

Although in its infancy, Commodore, Baker, and Arroyo’s (2018) conceptual model of Black women college student success is an attempt to integrate the extant literature on Black females into a testable model for future research. However, the model
was conceptualized based on the assumption that the student persists through college without stopping out. Additionally, the model focuses on the student and does not account for institutional and structural challenges and barriers.

**Research Context**

The postsecondary literature on Black females highlights the areas that have interested educational researchers. However, to adequately address a study that examines the journey to college completion for low-income Black females, it is important to take a closer look at the data that inform the significance of this study. This section gives an overview of several areas related to Black females and the statistics that inform the importance of studying this population of students. Furthermore, this section examines national and state-level data to showcase the importance of studying this population.

For standardization, poverty was measured by the metric used by the United States Census Bureau. The United States Census Bureau (2017) utilized money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty. Money income is income from earnings, unemployment and workers’ compensation, Social Security, child support, trusts, dividends and a variety of other before tax income. For families, all income is added together to determine poverty status. All family members have the same poverty status.

Poverty thresholds are the dollar amounts used to determine poverty status. These thresholds vary by the size of the family and age of the members. The United States Census Bureau assigns individuals or family to one of 48 possible poverty thresholds. The same thresholds are used throughout the United States regardless of geography. Poverty status is not determined for individuals in institutional group quarters (e.g.,
prisons or nursing homes), college residence halls, military barracks, living situations without conventional housing, or unrelated individuals under the age of 15 (e.g., foster children).

**National Data**

In 2016, the official United States poverty rate was 12.7% (Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2017). Of all Blacks in the United States, Black females in poverty represented 14.8% of the Black population (United States Census Bureau, 2016c). When compared to all United States citizens who are in poverty, Black females account for 12.1% of the poverty population. As it relates to poverty, 33.8% of Black families with children headed by a single working mother were in poverty, compared to 21.0% of White families (United States Department of Labor, 2016c).

In a report published by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, DuMonthier, Childers, and Milli (2017) utilized data from the United States Census Bureau and several other organizations to paint a picture of the status of Black women in the United States. The report highlighted key areas, such as employment and earnings, political participation, work and family, poverty and opportunity, violence and safety, and health and well-being. Key findings indicated that more than six in ten (62.2%) of Black women are in the workforce, Black women’s median earnings of $34,000 for full-time, year-round work lag behind most women’s and men’s earnings, and about 28% of employed Black women work in service occupations. Additionally, Black women experience poverty at higher rates than Black men and women from all other racial/ethnic groups, with the exception of Native American women.
Black women’s participation in the labor force (i.e., more than six in ten) ranks as the highest labor force participation rate among women and the only racial/ethnic group of women with a higher labor participation rate than their male counterparts (DuMontheir, Childers, & Milli, 2017). However, median earnings for Black women still lag behind White males and overall female earnings. Black women earned 60.5% of White male earnings, 80.2% of White women earnings, and 82.4% of Black male earnings (United States Department of Labor, 2016). The United States Department of Labor (2016) found that in 2015, over 9 in 10 Black women in the labor force had at least a high school diploma and 3 in 10 were college graduates. Additionally, Black women with a college degree earned over two times more than Black women with no high school diploma and their unemployment rate was four times lower.

A particular note is the percentage of Black women who are in service-related occupations. In 2015, nearly 28% of Black women were in service-related occupations compared to 17% of White women (United States Department of Labor, 2016). This is significant because service jobs offer the lowest wages among all occupational groups (United States Department of Labor, 2015). Additionally, low-wage, female-dominated occupations employ high proportions of Black women (DuMontheir, Childers, & Milli, 2017). Table 2.4 lists these occupations and the percentage of women workers who are Black, percentage of women workers who earn less than $15 per hour, and the percentage of women workers living in poverty.
Table 2.4

*Women in Low-Wage, Female-Dominated Occupations and Proportion Black, 2014*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Women Workers Who are Black (%)</th>
<th>Women Workers Who Earn Less than $15/Hour (%)</th>
<th>Women Workers Living in Poverty (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food servers, non-restaurant</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and home care aides</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous healthcare support occupations, including medical equipment preparers</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashiers</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>82.2</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined food preparation and serving workers, including fast food</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer service representatives</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maids and housekeeping cleaners</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical assistants</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter attendants, cafeteria, food concession, and coffee shop</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool and kindergarten teachers</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher assistants</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care workers</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairdressers, hairstylists, and cosmetologists</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptionists and information clerks</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosts and hostesses, restaurant, lounge, and coffee shop</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation and fitness workers</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiters and waitresses</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous personal appearance workers</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonfarm animal caretakers</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lower wage earnings, poverty rates, and opportunities for employment based on educational level are all important reasons for focusing on Black females as a student population. Completion of a college credential is one pathway for facing the various obstacles that Black females face in the United States. This national perspective on the status of Black females indicates that there are still areas where improvements can be made.

**South Carolina**

There are 46 counties in the South Carolina with a total population of 4,693,266 (United States Census Bureau, 2016b). In 2016, the United States Census Bureau (2016b) estimated that 17.2% of South Carolina’s population lived below the poverty level. Out of the 46 counties in the state, 34 counties had poverty rates higher than the state rate. Table 2.5 lists all counties, population poverty rates, and poverty rates for Black females. Dillon (30.6%), Allendale (29.7%), and Williamsburg (29.3%) counties have the highest poverty rates in the state but only account for 1.5% of the state’s total population collectively.

Table 2.5

**South Carolina County Population and Poverty Rates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>% Population - Black Female</th>
<th>% Poverty - Population</th>
<th>% Poverty - Black Female</th>
<th>% Black Female - All Poverty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbeville</td>
<td>24,247</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>% Population - Black Female</td>
<td>% Poverty - Population</td>
<td>% Povery - Black Female</td>
<td>% Black Female - All Poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aiken</td>
<td>162,435</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allendale</td>
<td>8,487</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anderson</td>
<td>189,850</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamberg</td>
<td>14,069</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnwell</td>
<td>21,446</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>39.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaufort</td>
<td>169,824</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berkeley</td>
<td>195,416</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calhoun</td>
<td>14,652</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charleston</td>
<td>368,671</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherokee</td>
<td>55,481</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chester</td>
<td>32,225</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chesterfield</td>
<td>45,530</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarendon</td>
<td>32,301</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleton</td>
<td>37,181</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darlington</td>
<td>66,163</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dillon</td>
<td>30,849</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorchester</td>
<td>146,153</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edgefield</td>
<td>23,723</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairfield</td>
<td>22,673</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>135,109</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgetown</td>
<td>60,188</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenville</td>
<td>469,962</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenwood</td>
<td>67,182</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>% Population - Black Female</td>
<td>% Poverty - Population</td>
<td>% Poverty - Black Female</td>
<td>% Black Female - All Poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hampton</td>
<td>18,780</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horry</td>
<td>296,392</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasper</td>
<td>26,693</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kershaw</td>
<td>62,678</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lancaster</td>
<td>81,634</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurens</td>
<td>64,086</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>16,557</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexington</td>
<td>274,252</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marion</td>
<td>31,646</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marlboro</td>
<td>24,550</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCormick</td>
<td>8,524</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newberry</td>
<td>36,560</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oconee</td>
<td>74,704</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orangeburg</td>
<td>86,835</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>41.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickens</td>
<td>113,470</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richland</td>
<td>371,217</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saluda</td>
<td>19,885</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spartanburg</td>
<td>286,108</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumter</td>
<td>105,172</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union</td>
<td>27,446</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamsburg</td>
<td>30,950</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>241,310</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>4,693,266</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In South Carolina, Black females account for 14.7% of the total population (United States Census Bureau, 2016c). Black females in poverty account for 4.4% of the total state population but 30 counties account for Black female poverty rates above the state average. Allendale (15.3%), Williamsburg (13.0%), Lee (11.8%), Marion (11.4%), and Dillon (10.7%) counties account for the highest rates of Black females in poverty. Allendale (40.3%), Williamsburg (36.3%), and Lee (33.7%) also account for the state’s highest percentage of Black females out of their total county population.

Most of the counties where the Black female averages are above the state average are clustered in the same areas and span across the state. Notably, most of these counties fall along the Interstate-95 corridor. The I-95 corridor is often referred to as the “Corridor of Shame” due to the poverty rates and lack of resources allocated to the secondary school system. Forty (40) school districts located in counties along the I-95 corridor filed a lawsuit against the state claiming lack of funding and resources (Abbeville v. State of South Carolina, 1993). Nearly 20 years later, the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled in favor of the districts stating that the state failed to provide the “minimally adequate education” as required by law. Yet, the Court put the onus back on lawmakers to figure out what needed to be done.

**Enrollment.** During the Fall 2014 semester, there were 91,726 credit students enrolled across the 16 technical/community colleges in the South Carolina Technical College System (SC Technical College System, 2018). Of those 91,726 students, 56,083
were female (61.1%) and 35,643 were male (38.9%). Part-time students accounted for 56.2% of all enrollment. Black students accounted for 32.0% of all Fall 2014 enrollment. Since the purpose of this study focused on completion, there was a particular interest in first-time students who are degree-seeking. Degree-seeking is defined as any student who was enrolled in a certificate, diploma, or associate degree program.

Degree-seeking, first-time students accounted for 19.9% of all Fall 2014 enrollment. Table 2.6 lists the number of degree-seeking, first-time students by race/ethnicity and gender and their percentage of the total Fall 2014 enrollment. In the SC Technical College System, Black female, degree-seeking, first-time students comprised 3.7% of the total Fall 2014 enrollment. Black female, degree-seeking first-time students accounted for the third largest enrollment of degree-seeking, first-time students in Fall 2014, behind White females and White males. The average age for Black female, degree-seeking, first time students was 22.8 years old, compared to an overall degree-seeking, first time student average of 21.4.

Table 2.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>% of Total Fall 2014 Enrollment</td>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>% of Total Fall 2014 Enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan Native</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>&lt;0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>3,417</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2,507</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>% of Total Fall 2014</td>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>% of Total Fall 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>&lt;0.1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>&lt;0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Resident</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>&lt;0.1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>&lt;0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and Ethnicity Unknown</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more Races</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>5,142</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>4,933</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total First-Time Students</strong></td>
<td><strong>9,734</strong></td>
<td><strong>10.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>8,512</strong></td>
<td><strong>9.3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: SC Technical College System, 2018*

During the Fall 2014 semester, 66.2% of all degree-seeking, first-time students were full-time. Black female degree-seeking, first-time students enrolled full-time at a rate of 54.3%. The average amount of enrolled credit hours for the Fall 2014 semester for all degree-seeking, first-time students was 11.5, compared to 10.5 credit hours for all Black female first-time students. For part-time Black female degree-seeking, first-time students, the average number of enrolled credit hours was 7.3, which is comparable to the overall degree-seeking, first-time student part-time average of 7.2. This average seems reasonable due to financial aid requirements for part-time students (i.e., enroll in a minimum of 6 credit hours). A comparison to Black male first-time students show comparable enrollment in the overall average number of enrolled credit hours (10.4), average number of enrolled credit hours for part-time students (7.2), and the percentage of full-time students (54.3%).

Programs in the SC Technical College System are categorized by one of sixteen career clusters. Nearly sixty percent (59.6%) of all degree-seeking, first-time student
enrollment was in the General career cluster. The General career cluster houses transferable degrees, such as the Associate in Arts and Associate in Science. The Manufacturing career cluster accounted for the second highest enrollment for all degree-seeking, first-time students at 7.7%, followed by the Health Science career cluster at 7.5%.

For Black female degree-seeking, first-time students, 54.6% enrolled in the General career cluster, followed by Health Science (14.5%), and Business, Management, and Administration (10.1%). Enrollment in the Health Science career cluster is of particular note considering the high percentages of Black women in low wage, health-related occupations (DuMontheir, Childers, & Milli, 2017). Table 2.7 lists enrollment by career cluster for Black female degree-seeking, first-time students and all degree-seeking, first-time students during the Fall 2014 semester.

Table 2.7

*Enrollment and Percentage by Career Cluster for Black Female and All First-Time Students in SC Technical College System, Fall 2014*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster Name</th>
<th>Black Females</th>
<th></th>
<th>All</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>% of Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture and Construction</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts, A/V Technology and Communications</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business, Management and Administration</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>1,196</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Training</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>1,865</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>10,873</td>
<td>59.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cluster Name</td>
<td>Black Females</td>
<td>All</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>% of Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Science</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>1,366</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality and Tourism</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, Public Safety, Corrections and Security</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1,403</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing, Sales and Services</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation, Distribution and Logistics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;0.1</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,417</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>18,246</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SOURCE: SC Technical College System, 2018*

Detailed enrollment information has been presented on Fall 2014 first-time student, degree-seeking Black females in the SCTCS. The Fall 2014 cohort is used because it is the most recent cohort that has had enough time to graduate according to the federal graduation definition (i.e., 150% normal time to completion). Figure 2.1 shows the semester enrollment trends for first-time student, degree-seeking Black females from Fall 2014 to Summer 2018. From Fall 2014 to Fall 2017, the overall first-time student, degree-seeking Black female enrollment has decreased by 17.5%. However, a year-to-year fall trend shows a 4.8% increase from Fall 2016 to Fall 2017.
Figure 2.1. Black female, first-time student enrollment in the SCTCS. This figure shows the Black female, first-time student, degree-seeking enrollment in the SC Technical College System.

**Graduation Rates and Completions.** In the SC Technical College System, graduation rates for Black females are significantly lower than those for White women and White men. However, the rates for Black women are comparable to Black men. Table 2.8 lists the graduation rates for these groups, in addition to the overall graduation rate and graduation rates for all women and all men. These rates are based on the IPEDS graduation rates (i.e., first-time, full-time and 150% of normal completion time) across several cohorts.

Table 2.8

| IPEDS 150% Graduation Rates (%) by Selected Race/Ethnicity and Gender for Degree/Certificate Seeking Students in SC Technical College System, Selected cohort entry years 2011-2014 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
|                                              | Total   | All Men | All Women | Black Women | Black Men | White Women | White Men |
| Cohort 2011                                      | 11.7    | 6.4     | 5.2       | 1.0          | 0.8       | 3.7          | 5.0        |
For the Fall 2014 cohort of Black females (n=3,417), 277 females completed as of the 2016-2017 academic year (i.e., June 30, 2017). When including full-time and part-time students, this increases the graduation rate for first-time Black females to 8.1% across a three-year period. The 277 graduates earned 324 awards. Table 2.9 lists the number and percentage of awards by career cluster.

Table 2.9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Completions</th>
<th>% Completions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Architecture and Construction</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts, A/V Technology and Communications</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business, Management and Administration</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Training</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Science</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality and Tourism</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, Public Safety, Corrections and Security</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing, Sales and Services</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cluster Completions % Completions
Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics 2 0.6
Transportation, Distribution and Logistics 2 0.6
Total 324 100.0

SOURCE: SC Technical College System, 2018

Out of their total first-time Fall 2014 Black female enrollment, Williamsburg (28.3%), Edgefield (26.1%), and Oconee (18.2%) counties had the highest percentage of Black female completers. Edgefield (n=23) and Oconee (n=11) counties had small numbers of enrolled Black females. Williamsburg county enrolled a total of 99 first-time Black females during the Fall 2014 semester. Richland county had the highest number of first-time Black females enrolled during the Fall 2014 semester (n=382) and 4.5% of those females completed within three years.

Course Success. An analysis of the courses that Black females completed in the SC Technical College System show differences between completers and non-completers. During the first semester of enrollment (i.e., Fall 2014), Black female completers earned an average semester GPA of 3.12 compared to a 2.09 GPA for Black female non-completers. Table 2.10 shows the average GPA across academic years. On average, Black female completers earned higher GPAs than non-completers.

Table 2.10
Black Female Completers and Non-Completers GPA Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Completers</th>
<th>Non-Completers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2014 - Average GPA</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Year 2014-2015 Average GPA</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Year 2015-2016 Average GPA</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Year 2016-2017 Average GPA</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: SC Technical College System, 2018
Black female completers also had a higher course success rate compared to non-completers. Course success is defined as courses that were passed with a C grade or higher. The course success rate for Black female completers was higher across both college-level courses and developmental courses. In Fall 2014, Black female completers had a course success rate of 92.1% across all non-developmental courses compared to 59.4% for Black female non-completers. For developmental courses, Black female completers had a course success rate of 92.0% compared to a rate of 63.2% for non-completers.

An examination of GPA and course success is important because differences in completers and non-completers can indicate areas for further exploration. Tinto (1975, 1993) posited that academic mismatches contribute to student departures from the higher education system. Furthermore, not performing well in classes is a clear indicator of whether progression into subsequent classes occurs. Academic success also has a direct relationship to some forms of financial aid (e.g., scholarships and federal loans). If satisfactory academic progress is not made, then students may no longer be eligible for federal student aid (Federal Student Aid, 2018).

**Financial Aid.** The Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is a number that determines students’ eligibility for federal student aid (United States Department of Education, 2013). Formulas used to determine the EFC are provided through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The EFC is subtracted from the students’ cost of attendance to determine the need for federal student financial assistance. Federal student financial assistance includes Federal Pell grants, subsidized Stafford loans, Federal Work Study, Federal Perkins loans, and Federal Supplemental Educational
Opportunity Grants (FSEOG). Dependent students and independent students with spouses whose income threshold is $24,000 or less qualify for an automatic zero EFC.

During the Fall 2014 semester, 3,103 degree-seeking, first-time student Black females (90.8%) received financial aid. The maximum Federal Pell Grant award in 2014-2015 was $5,730 (Federal Student Aid, 2014). Of the Black females who received financial aid, 86.9% received Federal Pell Grants, 12.9% received state merit-based scholarships, and 14.9% received state lottery tuition assistance. Over forty percent (i.e., 43.7%) of Black female Federal Pell Grant recipients qualified for the full Pell Grant award of $2,865 for the Fall 2014 semester.

Two hundred sixty-five Black female completers, 95.7% of all completers from the Fall 2014 cohort, received financial aid during their first semester. Eighty-six percent (86.0%) of Black female completers received Federal Pell Grants, 32.8% received state merit-based scholarships, and 20.4% received state lottery tuition assistance. Over half (56.1%) of Black female completers who received the Pell Grant received the full award amount.

The amount of financial aid received by Black female completers show descriptively that a higher percentage of completers received some type of financial aid. Several studies have indicated the importance of financial aid on student outcomes (Chen & Hossler, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016). The descriptive statistics suggest further research is needed on the correlation of financial aid and completion.
Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Research on Race

The literature presented thus far has highlighted the importance of studying low-income, Black females in the community college. Discussions about research on Black females also warrant the consideration of Critical Race Theory (CRT). The use of CRT has become a popular framework for studying students of color, particularly Black students (Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2018; Lee, 2018). However, the use of CRT is not always the appropriate framework for studying students of color. Despite its inappropriateness as the framework for this study, CRT does provide an additional layer to better understand the importance of studying low-income Black females in the community college.

This section seeks to address the importance of CRT through a discussion of its tenets. There are six tenets that comprise CRT: 1) racism is ordinary (i.e., racism exists); 2) interest convergence; 3) the social construction thesis (i.e., races and races are products of social thought and relations); 4) different racialization consequences; 5) intersectionality and anti-essentialism; and 6) the unique voice of color or counter-storytelling (Delgado & Stafancic, 2001). Frequently, only the first five tenets of CRT are cited among theorists.

The first tenet of CRT addresses racism and its normalcy. Race, racism, and other forms of domination and subordination are prevalent in American society. Most importantly, these areas address how America operates and functions. Furthermore, CRT posits that racism is difficult to address because it is unacknowledged. The acceptance of race as a permanent fixture in society is the only way to make meaningful change. Scholars employing CRT should not ask how racism can be eradicated but how interests
and cultural artifacts serve as vehicles to limit and bind people of color (Tate, 1997). Related to the permanency of racism is the notion of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993). In other words, being a White individual has benefits and privileges.

Using the first tenet of CRT in the context of postsecondary education, a study on Black females in the community college must acknowledge that racism exists within the systems and structures of education. The presence and normalcy of racism can present challenges for Black females as they matriculate into community colleges and persist to graduation. In *Overcoming Educational Racism in the Community College* (Long, 2016), several authors presented strategies for promoting a culture of academic achievement and overcoming barriers that prevent minority students from succeeding. These strategies provide tested practices that have resulted in success for minority students.

Next, the tenet of interest convergence suggests that there is little incentive for Whites to eliminate racism unless the elimination also advances their interests. This tenet is also called material determinism. Using *Brown v. Board of Education* as an example, Bell (1980) argued that gains in communities of color will only occur when they coincide with the self-interests of Whites. In other words, circumstances only change when it is a benefit to the dominant group. For Black female college students, low completion rates have not been widely addressed in the literature. It is plausible to suggest that research on Black females will continue to be minimized unless there is a clear benefit or connection to students from other racial/ethnic groups or specifically the dominant group.

Third, the social construction thesis states that race and races are products of social thought and relations. Race is a social construct that can be manipulated or retired when convenient. Race is not objective, inherent or fixed. No biological or genetic
identity can be associated with race. Critical Race Theory seeks to examine society’s fascination with race instead of other characteristics, such as personality, intelligence and moral behavior.

Next, CRT theorizes that different minority groups are racialized at different times. In other words, society popularizes various minority groups at different times throughout history. Social conditions or the labor market can shift these images of minority groups. The history of each race is ever evolving. In the case of Black females, the media perpetuated the narrative that Black females are the most educated group in the United States (Davis, 2016; Helm, 2016). This narrative led many to believe that systemic oppression no longer existed if Black females could become the most educated group in the United States. However, in learning that this narrative was false, many still did not probe about the status of Black females and their college success.

The fifth tenet of intersectionality and anti-essentialism posits that no individual has a single, easily stated, unitary identity. Identities can overlap and conflict. Additionally, loyalties and allegiances can overlap and conflict. Intersectionality is the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how the combination of these characteristics play out in various settings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Essentialism is the search for the proper unit of social analysis and change and therefore deals with narrowing something down until the heart of the matter stands alone. Anti-essentialism is the non-accounted differences that can cause some groups to be better or worse off than others. Studying Black females and completion seeks to identify how the intersection of race, gender, and socioeconomic status affect these students at the community college.
Finally, the last tenet of CRT theorizes a unique voice of color. Through this voice, minorities are potentially able to communicate unlikely matters to their White counterparts. Furthermore, status as a minority presupposes a competency to speak about race and racism. The voice provides insight into political and structural systems that individuals of color experience. An examination of low-income Black females in the community college and their journey to completion warrants the use of the student’s voice to fully understand the essence of their experience.

In this research study on Black female completion in the community college, CRT would be an appropriate framework, particularly since this was a qualitative study where students share their experiences. The use of CRT would be based on the ontological and epistemological assumptions that race and racism exist. Furthermore, using CRT as a framework would give the participants a voice through the methodology of storytelling and narratives. Finally, the analysis could provide evidence that facilitates change in the educational institution.

Although this study did not seek to use CRT as a lens to conduct the study, it is acknowledged that several tenets of CRT were present. For example, without the existence of race and racism, this study serves little significance. The existence of race and racism is why inequalities occur. Additionally, intersectionality of the three aforementioned identities (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status) was the cornerstone of this study. However, CRT is a critical theory that seeks to create change and challenges power structures. Using CRT as a framework would have suggested that low-income Black females at the community college are oppressed due to the intersection of their identities. The purpose of this study was not to assume that these identities have
negatively affected Black females but to understand how and if these identities have had an impact on their journey to college completion. Therefore, the use of CRT for this study was not warranted. Chapter Three provides a detailed discussion of the conceptual frameworks that were used for this study.

**Conclusion**

This literature review has outlined the pertinent areas of literature related to community colleges, Black females, students from low-income or poverty backgrounds, and college completion. In the analysis of this literature some key areas rose to the forefront in limitations. These areas served as the guiding topical areas for this study focused specifically on low-income Black females who completed a community college credential.

First, a dearth of literature on Black females in postsecondary education, specifically Black females in the community college, warrants this study. Additionally, the extant literature on Black females has tiptoed around longitudinal studies of Black females and outcomes, such as graduation/completion rates. Furthermore, studies addressing educational attainment are often in comparison to Black males, which frequently view Black females as the advantaged group. Viewing Black females from a comparative lens to Black males is misguided and is disadvantageous to both groups. Additionally, studies focused on Black college students holistically are often viewed from a deficit approach.

In their examination of the Black gender gap in educational attainment, McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, and Shwed (2011) suggested three probable reasons for students taking longer to complete college: college is costly (economic), college
academic work is difficult (academic), and the labor market and military provide alternative opportunities (environmental). The authors suggested that additional research is needed to determine the impact of each of those factors. While some of this research has been completed specific to Black females (Farmer, Hilton, & Reneau, 2016; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014), more research is needed on this population.

This study sought to provide a holistic analysis on Black females’ experiences in the postsecondary sector, specifically at the community college where many Black females begin their postsecondary career. This analysis sought to explore both academic and personal variables to determine any uniqueness to Black female success. Furthermore, Black females should be given the voice to tell their own stories and define their own academic success. This study sought to do that.

Finally, the topics of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status have been approached individually throughout decades of higher education research. However, research on the intersection of all three areas is limited or dated (Matthews-Armstead, 2002). Matthews-Armstead (2002) examined the life histories and social relationships of Black women from poor communities and their decisions to enroll in college or not. This qualitative study found that perceptions of self, family interactive patterns, and perceptions of connectedness influenced the participants’ decision of whether to enroll in college. Specifically, both collegebound and non-collegebound emphasized the importance of a sense of empowerment.

In the nearly two decades since Matthews-Armstead (2002) conducted her study, Black female college enrollment has increased but economic downturns have affected all Americans. In 2016, Black females earned 63% of White men’s earnings compared to
White women who earned 79% of White men’s earnings (American Association of University Women, 2018; United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Black females still face obstacles that are likely due to their status as Black and female. However, when socioeconomic status is accounted for, these obstacles are amplified based on the additional intersectionality.

Without adequate research on the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, these identities are misunderstood. Furthermore, to address any potential barriers to success, the barriers must first be identified. Conversely, to promote success, successful strategies or traits must also be identified. The intent of this study was not to view this intersectionality from a deficit approach but to understand how Black females make sense of these identities as they progress towards completion of a college credential.

Given these remaining gaps in the literature, this study sought to examine how low-income Black females make sense of their journey to college completion, how they define academic success, and the impact that their racial/ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic identities have on their journey to completion. Chapter Three provides a detailed outline of this study and how this study sought to address these limitations in the literature.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN

Chapter Two examined the literature related to the key topics for this study on low-income Black females in the community college. A history of the community college and background information on completion, non-completion, and poverty in higher education were all examined in the proceeding chapter. This chapter outlines the methods and methodology for this research study. The guiding vision for this study was to understand how low-income Black females enrolled in the community college make sense of their journey to college completion. To adequately address the research question, a qualitative study was employed. This chapter addresses the epistemological and conceptual frameworks, statement of the problem and research questions, and research design.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Community colleges are gateways for students from diverse backgrounds due to their equity and access mission. Now, more than ever, students from low-income backgrounds face challenges of attending college due to rising costs. Three research questions guided this study:

1) How do low-income Black females in the community college describe and make sense of their journey to college completion?

2) How does the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status affect completion for low-income Black females at the community college?
3) How do low-income Black females in the community college define academic success?

**Positionality Statement and Connection to the Research**

As a Black female, I understand and have experienced the roles, oppression, and successes that have come with the intersection of my racial/ethnic and gender identities. Growing up in a middle-class household, I bring certain cultural and social capitals which allow me to view this topic from a certain perspective. Although I grew up in a middle-class household, I did not realize that I was middle-class until my first year of college when my dad and I completed the FAFSA. On this form, I had to enter my parents’ income, investments, and asset values. It was then I realized we were middle-class.

As a child, I grew up with food always being present, paying for school lunch at full price, always having new shoes or clothes for the school year, and never missing a field trip due to costs. My parents instilled a strong work ethic in me and as a result, I felt if I worked hard, I could accomplish anything. This may be described as a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality. However, I have come to know that many people can work hard and strive to obtain resources, financially especially, and still be hindered or face obstacles that are not in their control. Systemic and institutional structures are designed to hold certain people down, whether it be race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

Additionally, as a South Carolina native I grew up with race being omnipresent. My grandmother was born in 1916 and my parents were born in 1955 so discussions about race always occurred at home. The secondary schools I attended were always equally represented in terms of White and Black students. Other racial/ethnic groups
were also present due to the proximity of a military base and the frequent transition of personnel from various parts of the country. Even with a somewhat diverse school population I always knew I was Black. Growing up as a good student and being known as the “smart girl,” I often found myself in classrooms or activities where I was the only Black child. When I was named the valedictorian of my high school graduating class, it was met with objection from the salutatorian’s mother. While I cannot specifically point to my race or gender being a factor in the objection, it was hard not to believe this White woman was not upset that her White male son was not academically superior to a Black female. Nevertheless, I graduated as number one out of 263 students.

While my experience in South Carolina taught me about race relations, it was also a topic when I moved to Baltimore, Maryland. As a Southerner, I was always told the north was more progressive on social issues and diverse. I moved to Maryland with high expectations and excitement to be in a city that was majority African American. I was surrounded everywhere by people who looked like me until I arrived on the university campus for my job and went back to being one of only a few Black people. Even though I was in the northern part of the eastern United States, conversations about race were still present with coworkers and friends. I was not the only one who was frequently aware of their racial identity in social spaces and this was comforting.

Maryland also gave me an eye-opening experience about socioeconomic status. During my time there, I experienced a period of living paycheck to paycheck. I distinctly remember a time when I walked into the grocery store with approximately $20 in my bank account and another week until my next paycheck. Figuring out how to pay for food, gas, and other bills was stressful. Although my situation was temporary, I realized
there are many people who live that way every day with no way out. It also made me realize how socioeconomic status is often a hidden identity. While living paycheck to paycheck and only driving to work and home to save gas, no one knew my struggle nor did I want them to know. I did not want to be judged because I made poor financial decisions. However, I knew my situation was temporary.

My purpose in conducting this study was not only to challenge beliefs of who Black women are and what they represent, but also to highlight successes. Oftentimes, Black women, and Blacks in general, are viewed from a deficit framework. As a Black woman, I am aware and have experienced various struggles related to the intersection of my gender and race/ethnicity. I also know that for Black women the walks of life often take a different path.

Additionally, I identify with the Strong Black Woman mantra often placed on Black women. As a Black female, I grew up around many strong Black women who taught me the value of hard work, strength, independence, and resiliency. My mother, grandmothers, aunts, and older cousins showed me various examples of womanhood. I used these examples to shape who I am today and who I aspire to become. My identity as a Black woman comes as a package that is always at the forefront. I was always taught to be self-sufficient and internalized images of what that meant and who embodied that image. I have often been called an “overachiever” and told that I always seem to have it together. No matter what the façade indicated, there were often periods of stress, anger, or loneliness that was only present in my personal spaces.

Finally, as an employee of the state agency and the coordinating body for the state’s community colleges, I bring certain perspectives from this point of view. On a
daily basis, I interact with professionals from the community colleges in the state and am committed to ensuring that students have the opportunity to gain a higher education. Through my work, I know what opportunities are available to students and what is considered fair. I also know the types of students that our community colleges serve and often work with the quantitative data that provides insight into the successes and challenges of the students and colleges.

As I conducted this research, it was important that I considered researcher positionality and how that may affect the research. As a Black female, I may have been viewed as an insider. However, I come from a middle-class background and attended a four-year institution. Additionally, as an employee of the community college coordinating board and a native of South Carolina, I may have preconceived thoughts about the student experience. Because of my positionality, I understood the role of reflexivity and employed it throughout this study. A journal was kept as a log after the interviews. This log served as a self-assessment and a way to encourage self-consciousness of any researcher bias.

**Epistemology**

Grix (2002) underscored the importance of being transparent about the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin research. This is necessary to understand the interrelationship of the key components of research, to avoid confusion when discussing approaches to social phenomena, and to be able to recognize and defend positions. This research was approached from a social constructivist perspective.

Oftentimes, constructivism is combined with interpretivism. Both constructivists and interpretivists focus on the processes by which meanings are created, negotiated,
sustained, and modified within a specific context of human action. “The constructivist or interpretivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it” (Schwandt, 1998, p. 222). However, constructivists are deeply committed to the contrary view that what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective. Constructivists believe in the construction of knowledge, not discovery. Constructivists, like interpretivists, place emphasis on the world of experience as it is lived, felt, and undergone by social actors (Schwandt, 1998).

In social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2007). The participants’ views of the situation are relied upon in the research. Conducting research with a constructivist perspective asks broad and general questions so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation. Throughout the process, researchers focus on the context of the participants’ lives. “Researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation, and they “position themselves” in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). Within the constructivist perspective, the researcher must acknowledge their role and any influence.

The constructivist perspective was appropriate for this study because participants were asked to make meaning of their experiences in the community college. Furthermore, it was posited that the intersection of socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and gender all shape how the participants experience life and school. This study sought to understand how these roles are viewed in the context of college completion.
Research Approach: Phenomenology

Several qualitative methodologies or approaches were examined to determine which one would best answer the research question. Although there were several ways that this study could have been approached, phenomenology was chosen as the best approach for exploring the topic. This section details a review of each alternate methodology that was examined and a full review of phenomenology as the research methodology.

Alternate Methodologies and Approaches

This section provides an overview of alternative methodologies and approaches that could have been used to address this study’s research questions. While there were several approaches that could have been used, narrative inquiry and grounded theory were strongly considered. Both approaches are reviewed, along with justification for why they were not chosen for this study.

Narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) described narrative as the study of the ways humans experience the world. By nature, people lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives. Narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experiences. Narrative inquiry is used to understand a phenomenon or an experience rather than formulate a logical or scientific explanation (Kramp, 2014). A narrative approach to qualitative inquiry focuses on stories with a clear beginning, middle, and end. “A narrative connects events, actions, and experiences and moves them through time” (Kramp, 2014, p. 110). Stories are told after the experience has happened, which makes narrative inquiry a viable option for this study on college completion.
However, Patton (2015) argued that story and narrative are not the same thing. The story should be treated as data and the narrative as analysis. The analysis involves “interpreting the story, placing it in context, and comparing it with other stories” (Patton, 2015, p. 128). Additionally, point of view is an element of narrative (Kramp, 2014). From their point of view, the storyteller or narrator constructs a story by structuring and framing relationships. In this study, the use of narrative inquiry would have made an assumption that the participants of this study were affected in their journey to college completion by the criteria that are being used for participation (i.e., low-income, gender, and race/ethnicity). Instead, the phenomenon of interest in this study asked whether the intersection of the specified criteria did have an impact on their college completion. Therefore, it would have been problematic to conduct this study using narrative inquiry.

Additionally, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) posited that the purpose of narrative inquiry is alteration of the phenomena under study. This purpose can be seen as a methodological problem for other qualitative approaches. The goal of this study was not to alter any existing narrative about low-income Black females in the community college but to understand what experiences these students have faced as they progressed to college completion. Because the focus of this study was on the phenomenon and not the story of the experience, narrative inquiry would not have been appropriate. Finally, narrative inquiry often involves a smaller sample size with more in-depth methods and time to conduct the study (Creswell, 2007; Kramp, 2014).

**Grounded theory.** Grounded theory is moving beyond description and involves generation or discovery of a theory (Creswell, 2018). Specifically, grounded theory focuses on a process or an action with distinct steps or phases that occur over time.
Researchers sought to use grounded theory to develop a theory of the process or action. Interviews are commonly used in grounded theory research. Data and analysis procedures are undertaken simultaneously and iteratively with constant back and forth between the participants.

For this study, grounded theory would not have been appropriate because there are theoretical frameworks that can be used to help explain or better understand the phenomenon of low-income Black female completion at the community college. Furthermore, the frameworks put forth have been utilized on various populations and could be applicable to the population and sample for this study. Because the purpose of grounded theory is to generate a general explanation of a process, action, or interaction, a large number of participants is required. For the purposes of this study, a larger sample size would have been needed to conduct the study using grounded theory.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a study of how individuals describe things and experience phenomena. It aims at description and interpretation, not explanations or analyses (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2014). Van Manen (2014) described phenomenology as “a method of questioning than answering, realizing that insights come to us in that mode of musing, reflective questioning, and being obsessed with sources and meanings of lived meaning” (p.27). Phenomenological questions can be the result of a certain experience or a sense of wonder. Furthermore, phenomenology involves an investigation of the life-world, that is, “the way a person lives, creates, and relates in the world” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 48).
Phenomenology asks the core question of the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience for this person or group of people (Patton, 2015). In phenomenological research, an assumption of an essence or essences to a shared experience and “these essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced” (Patton, 2015, p. 116). Phenomenology was appropriate for this study because this study sought to understand the wholeness of low-income Black females’ experience in the community college and their journey to completion of a credential. Moustakas (1994) described wholeness as the ability to examine entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved.

Husserl (1931/2013) is known as the originator of phenomenology. Since its origination, several variations of phenomenology have emerged. Creswell (2007) cited two commonalities between several different perspectives: the study of the lived experiences of persons and the view that these experiences are conscious ones and the development of descriptions of the essences of these experiences, not explanations or analyses (p. 58). In the seminal work, Ideas, Husserl (1931/2013) put forth the foundations of transcendental phenomenology. For the purposes of this study, transcendental phenomenology as outlined by Moustakas (1994) was followed. Moustakas’ work is grounded in the philosophical work of Husserl.

Intentionality is the cornerstone of Husserl’s orientation of phenomenology. Challenges of intentionality involve explicating the sense in which our experiences are directed; discerning the features of consciousness that are essential for the individuation of objects that are before us in consciousness; explicating how beliefs about such objects
may be acquired; how it is that we are experiencing what we are experiencing; and integrating the noematic and noetic correlates of intentionality into meanings and essences of experience. The steps in phenomenology help meet these challenges of intentionality.

Consciousness exists in two forms, noema and noesis (Husserl, 1931/2013). Noema is the perception of the phenomenon and not the actual object. In simpler terms, noema may be considered a “hallucination” since there is not an object or tangible existence of it in the real world. Although this perception is not physically in the world, the meaning behind its essence cannot be taken away. Conversely, noesis is the presence of the object or phenomenon in time and space. The relationship between noema and noesis constitutes the intentionality of consciousness. “The ‘perceived as such’ is the noema; the ‘perfect self-evidence’ is the noesis” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 30). Both noema and noesis are experienced at the same time.

**Steps in Phenomenology**

The first step in phenomenological research is epoche. Moustakas (1994) described epoche as setting aside the everyday understandings, judgements, and knowings and revisiting phenomena freshly, naively, and in a wide-open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego. Epoche requires that things are looked at in a new way and that way requires that we learn to see what stands. When researchers take on the perspective of epoche, it requires reflection to become aware of personal bias. Additionally, it involves the elimination of personal involvement with the subject material.
Also accomplished through epoche is a phenomenological attitude shift. The phenomenological attitude shift consists of a different way of looking at the investigated experience (Patton, 2015). This shift moves beyond the natural or common attitude of viewing phenomena and leads to a description of its unique qualities and components. Epoche is an ongoing analytical process. The process of epoche is critical to the data-based, evidential, and empirical research orientation of phenomenology (Patton, 2015). Epoche enables the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a fresh and open perspective.

Next, phenomenological reduction must be conducted to achieve the essence of the phenomenon. Phenomenological reduction is the process that the researcher takes to bracket out the world and presuppositions to identify data in pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions (Patton, 2015). Giorgi (2006) posited that:

Phenomenological reduction means two things: 1) the researcher has to bracket personal past knowledge and all other theoretical knowledge, not based on direct intuition, regardless of its source, so that full attention can be given to the instance of the phenomenon that is currently appearing to his or her consciousness, and 2) the researcher withholds the positing of the existence or reality of the object or state of affairs that he or she is beholding (p. 355).

The bracketing process of phenomenological reduction is an effort to derive the inner structure or meaning of the essence of the phenomenon.

Bracketing is a term that originated from the work of Husserl (1931/2013). Denzin (1989) offered five steps to bracketing: 1) locate within the personal experience, or self-story, key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in
question, 2) interpret the meanings of these phrases, as an informed reader, 3) obtain the subject’s interpretations of these phrases, if possible, 4) inspect these meanings for what they reveal about the essential, recurring features of the phenomenon being studied, and 5) offer a tentative statement, or definition, of the phenomenon in terms of the essential recurring features identified in step four.

After bracketing and phenomenological reduction has been completed, then the data are horizontalized or spread out for examination with all elements and perspectives having equal weight (Patton, 2015). Next, the data are organized into meaningful clusters and a delimitation process to eliminate irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping data occurs. The invariant themes are then identified so that an imaginative variation can be completed on each theme. Imaginative variation involves viewing the data from various perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes are developed. An analogy to describe imaginative variation would be viewing a sculpture or statue from different angles.

Finally, the last step in phenomenology is the synthesis of texture and structure. This process involves integration of the composite textual and composite structural descriptions, providing a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). This synthesis process ultimately leads to the essence of the phenomenon. Specifically, these descriptions get the underlying structure of the common experience. Creswell (2013) suggested that readers should come away with the feeling that they better understand what it is like for someone to experience the phenomenon.

For the purposes of this study, the phenomenon sought was the persistence of low-income Black females in the community college. Persistence in the community
college is a shared experience among the participants. Therefore, this study sought to understand these experiences.

**Conceptual Framework**

To best address the research questions, a combination of two frameworks was used. The use of two frameworks underscored the importance of accounting for the intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Integration of the two frameworks brought a breadth of strengths to the study. Specifically, these frameworks were academic momentum and self-authorship.

**Academic Momentum**

Adelman (1999, 2006) is credited with the concept of academic momentum to describe how a student’s academic course load is predictive of their likelihood to complete college. Although there is not a standard definition of academic momentum, Adelman (1999, 2006) emphasized the importance of the first semester academic course load. Specifically, the concept of academic momentum was birthed out of a study of degree completion for a national cohort of students that began in the tenth grade through their enrollment in postsecondary education. Results from the analysis indicated that institutional graduation rates are not meaningful due to the pattern of students attending multiple institutions (Adelman, 1999). More recent studies have advanced the concept of academic momentum by providing more specific definitions (Goldrick-Rab, 2007; Doyle, 2011; Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2012; Wang, Chan, Phelps, & Washbon, 2015; Attewell & Monaghan, 2016; Davidson & Blankenship, 2017).

For example, Attewell, Heil, and Reisel (2012) attempted to account for the conceptual and methodological concerns surrounding academic momentum by narrowing
the approach to their study to reduce selection bias and causal circularity. Specifically, the authors focused on three key areas: 1) delays between high school and college, 2) the course load attempted during the first semester of college, and 3) the effects of a student taking courses in the summer at the end of the first year of college. Student transcript data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) was used to examine the phenomena across two- and four-year institutions. The total sample size was 6,870 students.

Results from the statistical growth-curve model confirmed that the academic momentum during the first semester of college does predict trajectories in later years. Enrollment in summer sessions were also a positive indicator in moving students towards degree completion. Delays in college enrollment were found to have a negative effect on progression to a degree for both two- and four-year students. Part-time course loads were also associated with low outcomes for degree completion. Additionally, part-time course loads were primarily taken by students with weaker academic backgrounds and lower SES. Although students who completed full-time course loads were more likely to complete a degree, the results did not indicate that heavy credit loads (i.e., 18 credit hours), created an additional advantage in progression to completion.

Many institutions have begun to implement initiatives aimed at promoting the narrative that enrolling in 15 credit hours per semester will aid in reaching completion goals. This is a form of academic momentum. Davidson and Blankenship (2017) examined initial academic momentum through the number of earned college-level credits. Developmental or remedial courses were excluded from this definition. The study sought to determine what percent of students earned 30 credit hours at the end of
the first academic year based on the number of attempted credit hours in the first semester, how these students persist from year one to year two, if they earn a credential within normal time or 150% of normal time to completion, and if Pell Grant recipients attempt more credit hours in the first semester. Students at both four- and two-year institutions in Kentucky were included in the study.

Results indicated that students who enrolled in 17 or 18 credit hours in the first semester are more likely to earn 30 credit hours in the first academic year. Furthermore, students who earned more credit hours in the first academic year were more likely to earn a degree at both four- and two-year institutions. They were also more likely to earn the degree in less time. Additionally, for both institution types, students who earned 30 credit hours or more persisted to the next year at a higher percentage. This study only provided descriptive statistics so inferences or causality cannot be determined.

The number of credits that an undergraduate should take in their first semester has been a long-debated topic. Academic advisors of new students often caution students to enroll in a manageable course load. The federal government defines a full-time course load as 12 credit hours. Students must maintain this course load to be eligible for financial aid. However, consistently enrolling in a 12 credit hours course load will not allow a student to graduate in a normal time. For example, the standard associate degree curriculum consists of at least 60 credit hours and two years of study for a full-time student. A 12 credit hours course load for four semesters equates to 48 credit hours, a difference of 12 credit hours from the associate degree. Students would need to utilize summer sessions to make up the difference or complete an additional full-term semester.
Attewell and Monaghan (2016) examined the topic of how many credits an undergraduate should take using the academic momentum perspective. In this quantitative study utilizing propensity score matching, Attewell and Monaghan sought to determine whether increasing credit loads from 12 to 15 credit hours was beneficial for students, particularly different groups of students. The study utilized the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) national dataset with an initial sample of 8,230 students. Degree-seeking students at community colleges and public and private 4-year institutions were included in the sample.

Descriptive statistics for community colleges indicated that students from households with higher income and parental education and students with better academic preparation (e.g., students with higher test scores, higher GPAs and more advanced high school math) were more likely to attempt higher credit loads. Older students, students with dependents, and students who worked more hours were more likely to attempt less credits. Similar patterns emerged for students at four-year institutions who attempted more credits.

The multivariate analysis of the full sample indicated that students who enrolled in 12 credit hours versus 15 credit hours were 5.5 percentage points less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree in 6 years. For community college students, the lower credit load led to a 9.1 percentage points decrease in completing an associate or bachelor’s degree. On the other hand, there was little impact on the one-year retention and transfer to a four-year institution.

From these studies, it is evident that academic momentum has commonly been referred to in a quantitative sense. Since this study was approached from a qualitative
perspective, the definition of academic momentum was altered. Leinbach and Jenkins (2008) examined longitudinal data in a community college system and identified momentum points and milestones for different groups of students. Milestones were defined as “measurable educational achievements that include both conventional terminal completions, such as earning a credential or transferring to a baccalaureate program, and intermediate outcomes, such as completing developmental education or adult basic skills requirements” (p. 2). Momentum points were “measurable educational attainments that are empirically correlated with the completion of a milestone” (p. 2). An example of a momentum point is successful completion of a college-level English or math gatekeeper course or attainment of a certain number of credit hours.

Instead of viewing academic momentum as an accumulation of credit hours or another quantitative metric, academic momentum was modeled after Leinbach and Jenkins’ (2008) definitions of milestone and momentum points. For the purposes of this study, academic momentum was defined as a significant event(s), outcome(s), or process(es) that served as a catalyst in the participant’s journey to completion of a community college credential. The use of this definition gave the participants the opportunity to define their own academic success by articulating milestones and momentum points that propelled them to completion. Additionally, the use of this definition can account for the academic components that may hinder or promote completion.

Self-Authorship

Achieving a goal or overcoming obstacles in spite of one’s circumstances often implies that the individual possessed some intrinsic characteristic, belief, or trait. Baxter
Magolda (1998) described self-authorship as “the ability to collect, interpret and analyze information and reflect on one’s own beliefs in order to form judgments” (p. 143). Self-authorship involves the integration of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions of development. Grounded in the work of Kegan (1982, 1994), Baxter Magolda (1998) conducted a longitudinal study on adults from their college careers through their post-college lives. Results from this study emerged into the theory of self-authorship.

In *Making their Own Way*, Baxter Magolda (2001) outlined four phases of the journey toward self-authorship: 1) following formulas, 2) crossroads, 3) becoming the author of one’s life, and 4) internal foundation. Following formulas is a belief in authority’s plans. Crossroads is when individuals begin to question those plans and see a need for their own vision. Becoming the author of one’s life is when individuals choose their own beliefs. Internal foundation is grounded in an internal belief system. Baxter Magolda (2008) outlined three elements of self-authorship: trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments.

Trusting the internal voice is an ability to take ownership of how meaning is made of external events. Reality, or things that happened in the world, are beyond individual control. However, reactions to reality are within control. Building an internal foundation is about creating a philosophy or framework to guide reactions to reality. Securing internal commitments served as a “crossing over” from understanding their internal commitments to living them (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 281).

Baxter Magolda (1998) had a particular interest in the role of gender in epistemological development. Yet, most of the research on self-authorship is focused on
White college students. In the years since its inception, may scholars have sought to
determine whether the theory applies to other populations of students. Pizzolato (2003)
sought to understand self-development in high-risk college students. High-risk college
students were defined as individuals whose academic background or preparation, prior
performance, or personal characteristics (e.g., first generation or low socioeconomic
status) may contribute to academic failure or early withdrawal from college. Specifically,
the exploratory, qualitative study sought to understand the extent that high-risk students
possessed self-authoring ways of knowing and the types of pre-collegiate experiences
associated with the students’ development of self-authorship. Data from 35 high-risk
college students enrolled at a university were collected via a demographic questionnaire
and semi-structured interviews.

Two themes emerged from the study: disequilibrium in the provocation of self-
authorship and privilege. Specifically, the participants all had experiences that
challenged their current ways of knowing and conceptions of self. This finding aligned
with the crossroads phase of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Oftentimes, these
experiences took place prior to the students’ enrollment in college. Participants also
experienced levels of either high privilege or low privilege in their college admissions
process (Pizzolato, 2003).

For the high privilege participants, college was not a consideration until they were
either recruited or spoke to someone about opportunities. Low privilege participants
often developed internal foundations prior to college. These participants often lacked
models and procedural support as they embarked on the college application and decision
process. Additionally, these students often had to create their own formulas for success
through self-authorship. On the other hand, high privilege students received excessive support, which likely hindered the development of their self-authoring ways of knowing.

Pizzolato (2003) suggested that the process of self-authorship can be shut down temporarily by privilege. Additionally, provocative experiences and the ability to engage cognitively in the self-authoring process is necessary. Another important finding was the requirement of both external influence and internal processing in the self-authorship process. Limitations of the study were that it focused on students at a four-year institution and only during the first year of study.

Carpenter and Peña (2017) investigated self-authorship theory through the perceptions and experiences of first-generation undergraduate students. The qualitative study interviewed 14 first-generation undergraduates at a public, four-year institution. First-generation was defined as students whose parents earned a high school diploma or less. Participants were either in their third or fourth year of undergraduate school and between the ages of 20 and 30. The purpose of the study was to examine how first-generation undergraduate students experience self-authorship and what collegiate experiences and conditions foster self-authorship development among these students.

Results indicated that eight out of the 14 participants were in the final phase of self-authorship. Three themes or catalysts promoted self-authorship development among the participants: 1) overcoming difficult experiences, 2) epistemological dissonance and reconstruction of meaning, and 3) role modeling. Role modeling tended to take shape in college with key postsecondary relationships and other supports. Difficult experiences and epistemological dissonance and reconstruction of meaning typically occurred pre-collegiately.
Self-authorship alone cannot account for the experiences of women of color due to its development based on White students’ experiences. Torres and Hernandez (2007) examined the influence of ethnic identity on the journey towards self-authorship of Latino/a college students. In this portion of a longitudinal, mixed methods study on Latino/a college students, self-authorship emerged as a framework during the coding process. However, self-authorship did not account for the distinct issues that resulted from their Latino/a identity. The sample consisted of 19 women and 10 men college students from four universities. The authors posited that ethnic identity be included as a part of a holistic development model.

Baxter Magolda’s (2001) work has often been criticized for its narrowness of focus. While her longitudinal study is notable and commended for its utility, the application for underrepresented populations and students at diverse institutions is needed. Over the years, tweaks were made to the theory. However, this study on low-income Black females utilized the phases as outlined in Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Making their Own Way. The use of this theory served as a complement to account for some of the personal characteristics and traits that these students possessed and aided them in their college completion. Additionally, the use of self-authorship on this population sought to add to the literature about whether the theory is applicable or not to students of color.

**Integration of Frameworks**

Due to the intersectional nature of this study’s sample, the use of two frameworks was necessary. In a study based on low-income Black females and their journey to college completion, several complexities needed to be addressed. First, in any discussion
about college completion, academics must be considered. Academic momentum can help account for the academic component related to college completion. The progression towards a college credential requires academic success. This study sought to understand how academic success was defined for low-income Black females who were able to earn a college credential.

Secondly, this study sought to draw on the framework of self-authorship. Self-authorship is not meant to be a linear trajectory or path (Baxter Magolda, 2008). The use of self-authorship provided another lens to view the journey to college completion based on external interactions and how those interactions are internally interpreted. Self-authorship can also serve as a framework for understanding how students facing poverty can overcome these challenges and still be successful academically. The use of these two frameworks was the attempt to account for the holistic picture of how these students achieved the success of earning a college credential despite any obstacles or circumstances associated with their social identities.

Sample

This section gives an overview of the site and participant selection process. Criteria and the justification for sites and participants are described in detail, along with how participants were recruited for the study. Additionally, the sample size is discussed.

Site Selection

Study sites consisted of technical/community colleges in South Carolina. The 16 technical/community colleges in South Carolina are strategically located across the state to ensure that every resident is within 30 miles of a two-year institution. South Carolina’s technical/community colleges date back to 1961 and serve as low-cost
educational opportunity centers for citizens and workforce drivers for the state. Research studies on community colleges often focus on larger states, such as California, Texas, Virginia or North Carolina. The focus on South Carolina provides a unique opportunity to study race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status in a state with a deep history of slavery and racial segregation. As outlined by the data in Chapter Two, Black females represent the third largest enrollment in South Carolina technical/community colleges. There are also several South Carolina counties where Black females living in poverty are above the state average. Additionally, since this was a qualitative study, South Carolina was convenient for travel and researcher access to students.

A targeted number of colleges were selected for the study. These sites were selected based on Fall 2014 Black female enrollment, number of Black female graduates as of June 30, 2017, percentage of the college’s service area population who are Black females, and whether the college’s service area consists of high poverty counties. Additionally, the targeted colleges consisted of a diversity in overall college size, based on total enrollment, and degree of urbanization.

Three target colleges were selected based on the criteria. Enrollment classifications are based on the criteria used by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2017) using the institution’s 2013-2014 attributes. One college is classified as very small or a Fall semester full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment of fewer than 500 students. One college is classified as medium or a Fall semester FTE enrollment between 2,000 and 4,999 students. One college is classified as large or a Fall semester FTE enrollment between 5,000 and 9,999 students.
The target colleges also represent a range in degrees of urbanization. Degree of urbanization is based on definitions from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates Program (Geverdt, 2015). Colleges represent the following degrees of urbanization: one town college, one small city, and one large suburban college. Table 3.1 represents the target colleges and various characteristics. Target colleges were also selected based on the average percentage of the Black females who were living in poverty within the college’s service area. One poverty indicator represents the average percentage of Black females who are in poverty out of the total population. The other poverty indicator represents the average percentage of Black females who are in poverty out of the total poverty population. Finally, the average percentage of the college’s service area population who are Black females was used as an indicator for selection. All indicators used for selection are above the state averages for all the target colleges.

Table 3.1

Target Colleges and Selected Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Urbanization(^a)</th>
<th>Size (^b)</th>
<th>% Black Female Population (^c)</th>
<th>% Black Female Completers (^d)</th>
<th>% Black Female Poverty - All Poverty (^e)</th>
<th>% Black Female Poverty - Total Population (^f)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College 1</td>
<td>Suburb: Large</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College 2</td>
<td>City: Small</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College 3</td>
<td>Town: Distant</td>
<td>Very Small</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Suburb: Large - Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more. Suburb: Small - Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000. Town: Distant - Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area. City: Small - Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000. Rural: Fringe - Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
The Fall enrollment size of the college based on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2017)

The average percentage of the county populations who are Black females

The percentage of completers is based on the number of Fall 2014 Black females from the college’s service area counties who completed before June 30, 2017

The average percentage of Black females who are in poverty in the college’s service area counties based on the total county population in poverty

The average percentage of Black females who are in poverty in the college’s service area counties based on the total county population

**Participant Selection and Recruitment**

Qualitative inquiry often focuses in depth on small cases selected for a specific purpose (Patton, 2015). For this reason, the approach to sampling or case selection is foundational in qualitative inquiry. This study focused on three key identities (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status) in addition to a central phenomenon (i.e., community college completion). The use of phenomenology as the method for this study required a certain level of emphasis on depth and intentionality (Patton, 2015). As a result, the use of random sampling techniques was inappropriate. A random sample of cases would not ensure enough commonality to address the question of interest. Therefore, purposeful sampling was used to identify potential participants in the study.

Creswell (2007) defined purposeful sampling as the selection of individuals and sites for study that can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p.125). Since this study spoke to certain criteria (i.e., Black, female, and low-income who completed at a community college), purposeful sampling was employed. “Purposeful sampling is based on 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 & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96).
Additionally, purposeful sampling emphasizes that the cases for study are selected because they are “information rich” and can provide insight into the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experiences of the participants. Therefore, it is important that all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). For this reason, the use of criterion sampling, a type of purposeful sampling strategy, was used to identify study participants. To participate in the study, individuals must have met the following criteria:

- Enrolled in a South Carolina technical/community college in 2014 or after
- Identify as African American or Black AND female
- Come from a low-income background, identified through being a recipient of a Federal Pell Grant
- Completed a two-year college credential (i.e., certificate, diploma, or associate degree) OR is within 12 credit hours or less of completing a credential

Potential participants were identified with the help gatekeepers, that is, staff members at the identified community/technical colleges who provided access to the potential participants (Creswell, 2014). The gatekeepers provided lists of students who met the study criteria. I contacted students via email and mail with an invitation to participate in the study. A copy of the invitation letter is found in Appendix A.

Patton (2015) emphasized that sample sizes in qualitative research depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what is at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with the available resources and time. In this study, special consideration was given to both breadth and depth. Since there were specific criteria that participants must have met, a larger sample size was sought. A
larger sample size ensured that a specific set of experiences was explored. Therefore, the sample size for this study was 13 participants based on recommendations for phenomenological studies by Creswell (2014) and Creswell and Poth (2018).

In the attempt to determine a final sample size, emphasis was placed on reaching a point of saturation. Creswell (2014) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended sampling until the point of saturation or redundancy. Therefore, the final sample size was complete when no new themes or insights were revealed. Participants were allowed to select pseudonyms to maintain anonymity in the study.

**Procedure/Data Collection**

This section outlines the procedure and data collection for this study. Specifically, the development of the interview protocol and demographic questionnaire are discussed. The procedure for conducting the study are addressed in detail.

**Interview Protocol and Interview**

Development of the interview protocol was completed using information gathered from the literature review, gaps in the literature, and guided by the research questions. Additionally, the interview protocol was developed with thoughtful consideration of open-ended questions that would allow the participants to elaborate on their experiences. A copy of the interview protocol is included in Appendix D. The interview focused on understanding the experiences of the participants and how participants defined academic success. Participants were asked to share milestones or events that were significant in their matriculation to completion.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 Black females who completed or will complete a credential at one of the target community/technical
colleges. Participants were interviewed twice. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 240 minutes and were recorded using a recording device. Interviews took place in a mutually agreed upon place by the researcher and the participant. The interviews were transcribed and coded to determine group and individual themes. Following each interview, participants were compensated with a gift card worth $25.

**Demographic Questionnaire**

A demographic questionnaire was distributed to the participants. The purpose of this questionnaire was to gather additional information about the background experiences of the participants. Development of the questionnaire was based on literature that supports best practices and evidence of why students complete college and the resources available to them. The questionnaire was designed to gather additional background and demographic information from the participants without taking away from the interview time. Appendix C contains a copy of the demographic questionnaire.

**Procedure**

The appropriate permissions were obtained through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before conducting the study. Appendix B contains a copy of the IRB approval. Additionally, target sites were contacted through the identification of a gatekeeper. Additional approvals with the target sites were also obtained. After all appropriate permissions and approvals were obtained, participants were solicited and contacted for interviews. When contacted, participants opted in to participating and we mutually agreed upon a location, date, and time. At the beginning of the first interview, the purpose of the study was explained and participants were allowed to opt out if desired. When the first interview concluded, participants were asked to complete the
demographic questionnaire. Participants were given a $25 gift card and the process for follow-up was explained. Second interviews were scheduled after the first interviews were transcribed and after at least one other participant interview had occurred. This process allowed for follow-up questions to be informed by information that was initially shared and insights gleaned from other interviews.

**Data Analysis**

Upon completion of each interview, the recordings were sent to a third-party provider for transcription. Transcripts were reviewed while listening to recordings to make notes and add additional details. Data were coded according to themes and patterns. Saldaña (2016) defined code in qualitative inquiry as a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.

A two-cycle coding method was employed. The first cycle method occurred during the initial coding of the data and focused on elemental coding methods (Saldaña, 2016). For this study, an emphasis on in vivo coding and descriptive coding were employed during the first cycle. In vivo coding uses words or short phrases from the participants’ own language in the data record (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The use of in vivo coding was used to emphasize the participants’ voices and point to patterns in the data. Descriptive coding assigns basic labels to the data to provide an inventory of topics (Saldaña, 2016). The combination of the two coding methods were used to remain open about the data and the insights that may have emerged.

Second cycle coding methods employ analytical skills, such as classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing, and theory building.
The second cycle coding explored patterns in the data. Saldaña (2016) defined pattern as a repetitive, regular, or consistent occurrences of action/data that appear more than twice. The material from the first cycle coding was pulled together using pattern coding. Pattern coding offers four important functions: it condenses large amounts of data into a smaller number of analytic units, gets the researcher into analysis during data collection so that later fieldwork can be more focused, helps the researcher elaborate a cognitive map, and lays the groundwork for cross-case analysis for multicase studies (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Analysis was concurrent with data collection. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) recommended concurrent analysis and data collection so that strategies for collecting new and better data can be generated and there is a healthy corrective for built-in blind spots. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended simultaneous analysis and data collection because data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating.

Data were managed using qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. Privacy of the participants was maintained through the use of pseudonyms. These pseudonyms were chosen by participants when they completed the demographic questionnaire. An inventory of the entire data set was kept per university guidelines (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Reliability and Validity

This section addresses how reliability and validity were maintained throughout the study. Specifically, trustworthiness, validity, and reliability are outlined and
discussed in detail. These topics are important to address because they ensure rigor and credibility within the research study.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is commonly associated as the amount of rigor in the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Careful attention to trustworthiness brings credibility to the study’s findings and interpretations. Ethical practices are another important area of trustworthiness. Credibility of the researcher is a cornerstone in the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. Trustworthiness is often measured through validity and reliability.

To address any researcher biases, a bracketing interview was conducted prior to the interviews. Kramp (2014) recommended the use of bracketing interviews to recognize the researcher biases and to avoid overlooking the value of my own perspectives. As the data were coded and analyzed, the use of the participants’ own words were emphasized.

Additionally, as an employee of a state agency that is the coordinating body for the 16 technical/community colleges in the state where this study took place, it was important for me to consider any ethical dilemmas or biases that may have emerged through the completion of this study. The analysis of the data also presented challenges in how they were presented. Participants were given the opportunity to review transcripts of the interviews for accuracy or misinterpretations. Additionally, participants were given a copy of the final document with themes for review. Furthermore, the use of a researcher journal to reflect on any bias was used to help ensure trustworthiness.
Validity

Validity in qualitative studies is used to increase credibility and counter concerns about a study’s findings being a single source, artifact, or the results of a researcher’s perspective or bias. Two types of validity are often associated with qualitative studies: internal validity or credibility and external validity or transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined internal validity as how congruent the research findings are with reality or, in other words, how credible are the findings. There are several strategies that can be employed to increase internal validity or credibility of a qualitative study: triangulation, member checks, adequate engagement in data collection, reflexivity, and/or peer review.

Triangulation involves using multiple sources of data, methods, or investigators to compare and cross-check the data that are collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Patton (2015) posited four types of triangulation that can contribute to the verification and validation of qualitative analysis: triangulation of qualitative sources, mixed qualitative-quantitative methods triangulation, analyst triangulation, and theory/perspective triangulation. Triangulation of qualitative sources involves comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means from interviews, observations, and documents. Specific examples include comparing observations with interviews, checking for consistency of what people say about the same thing over time, or checking interviews against program documents and other written evidence.

Mixed qualitative-quantitative triangulation involves comparing and integrating data collected through qualitative methods with data collected through some kind of
quantitative method. Triangulation with multiple analysts involves using multiple investigators or analysts to help reduce bias. Multiple investigators are used in either data collection or multiple analysts are used to independently analyze the same qualitative data. Theory triangulation involves using different theoretical perspectives to look at the same data. The purpose of theory triangulation is to understand how differing assumptions and premises affect findings and interpretations.

For this study, internal validity was ensured through member checking. Participants were given copies of the interview transcripts and analyzed data for review and feedback. Additionally, opportunities for follow up interviews were used to ensure triangulation and that adequate time was spent collecting data. Finally, triangulation was conducted via the use of the two conceptual frameworks. These frameworks were selected as starting points for possibly explaining the phenomenon in question. After data were collected, these frameworks helped make sense of the data and explain patterns.

External validity, or transferability, is defined as the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This does not imply that qualitative research is generalizable to all people and all situations. Patton (2015) suggested the use of extrapolations instead of generalizability. Extrapolation is “going beyond the narrow confines of the data to think about other applications of the findings” (Patton, 2015, p. 713). To assist in ensuring external validity or transferability, the use of rich, thick descriptions is often employed in qualitative research. Rich, thick descriptions refer to a description of the setting and participants of the study and detailed
description of the findings along with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interview, field notes, or documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The type of sampling used can also increase transferability. Maximum variation sampling involves purposefully selecting a wide range of cases to get variation on the dimensions of interest. The use of maximum variation sampling can help increase the possibility of readers applying findings to their situation. However, maximum variation sampling is not the only sampling method that can increase transferability. For the intent of this study, purposeful sampling was used with an emphasis on criteria. The value in the uniqueness of the target participants was needed. However, an effort to create variation or diversity in the sample selection was in the use of target colleges versus one sample site.

An important consideration throughout this research study was researcher reflexivity. As a researcher, I must account for my role in the research process and not only be accountable but be aware of the role of power. “Being reflexive in our research practice means paying attention to how power influences our attitudes and behaviors, and our own role in shaping the research experience” (Leavy, 2017, p. 48). Furthermore, discovery in the research process is not only being aware of what has been discovered but how it was discovered. Leavy (2017) stated that reflexivity is an area where values and praxis intersect. To account for reflexivity, memos were kept throughout the research process and incorporated into the data analysis.

**Reliability**

Reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, replication in qualitative research can be
problematic considering human behavior is dynamic and numerous interpretations of the same data are possible and likely. Therefore, a better term for reliability in qualitative research is dependability or consistency. Qualitative researchers should be more concerned with whether the results of the study are consistent with the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Strategies used to support validity can also be used to ensure reliability. The use of triangulation, peer review, and reflexivity supported reliability in this study. To further increase reliability, a detailed account of how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the process was kept. A journal was kept to record the process, reflections, issues, and ideas as they emerged during the research study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described this process as keeping an audit trail. An audit trail helps authenticate the research process, allows the researcher to show how the study was conducted, and builds confidence that the results are the best account possible.

**Limitations**

As with any qualitative research, there are limitations of generalizability. This study focused on one state, specific sites, a specific sample, and limited sample size. The goal of this study was not to generalize but to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of low-income Black women who complete a credential at a community college. Additionally, this research was focused on a specific subset of a larger population. This study sought to gain insight on their experiences and is not intended to be applicable to all individuals in the larger population or samples with similar characteristics.
The emphasis placed on how Black females define their own academic success will help further conversations about resources or initiatives needed at the institutional level, in addition to future research on the topic. However, this study was not intended to answer all questions surrounding Black females and their journey to college completion. Furthermore, this study focuses on the intersection of three different identities (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status). However, other identities may have an impact on the participants’ journey to completion. Therefore, another limitation of this study is that it focuses on these three identities and not others.

Summary

Chapter Three provided a detailed overview of the research design and methodology. Specifically, selection of the methodology, including the consideration of other methodologies, sample size selection, data collection and analysis, reliability and validity were discussed. Chapter Four provides an account of the findings and an analytical discussion.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION

Chapter One identified the purpose of this study: to examine the experiences of low-income Black females in their journey to completion at the community college. Chapter Two discussed the literature on community college completion, Black females, and socioeconomic status with emphasis on illustrating the gaps within the literature. Chapter Three outlined the methodological components of this study including methodological design, researcher perspective, data collection, trustworthiness, reliability, and limitations. Additionally, Chapter Three discussed the two conceptual frameworks, academic momentum and self-authorship, that helped frame the development of this study. Using these foundations, Chapter Four describes the findings and results of this research study. Specifically, this chapter includes the following sections: 1) participant profiles, 2) findings, 3) explanation of the four themes, 4) an interpretation of the findings, and 5) a summary.

Participant Profiles

Chapter Three provided a detailed overview of the study location, South Carolina community colleges. Three community colleges were identified as target sites due to their Black female enrollment and completion rates. For the study, participants were selected using criterion sampling (Patton, 2015). Gatekeepers at the target colleges were used to identify a sample of individuals who met the study criteria. The potential participants were sent an invitation to participate and were allowed to opt-in. Interviews
took place in mutually agreed upon, quiet locations. Twelve participants met with me at their local community college. One participant met with me at her home. Interviews took place during weekdays, at various times during the day, and was dependent on the participant’s schedule.

The following section describes the profiles of the 13 participants in this study. There were eight participants from College 2, three participants from College 1, and two participants from College 3. Descriptions were developed based on the interviews, field notes, and other communication. Information that was reported on the demographic questionnaire and personal observations were also used to develop the descriptions. Table 4.1 provides descriptive data on the participants that was provided through the demographic questionnaire.

Table 4.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age of Enrollment</th>
<th>Semester and Year of Enrollment</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexandria</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Spring 2014</td>
<td>Administrative Office Technology</td>
<td>College 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Fall 2016</td>
<td>Associate in Arts</td>
<td>College 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Summer 2016</td>
<td>Paralegal</td>
<td>College 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Spring 2015</td>
<td>Medical Assistant</td>
<td>College 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilia</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Fall 2015</td>
<td>Pharmacy Technician, Surgical Technology</td>
<td>College 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Fall 2016</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>College 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joslyn</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Fall 2015</td>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>College 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Ann</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Spring 2016</td>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>College 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nena</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Fall 2015</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>College 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Pseudonym</td>
<td>Age of Enrollment</td>
<td>Semester and Year of Enrollment</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ree</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Fall 2016</td>
<td>Early Childhood</td>
<td>College 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, Nursing (RN)</td>
<td>College 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Fall 2014</td>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>College 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tia</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>Early Childhood</td>
<td>College 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Alexandria**

Alexandria is a 40-year old graduate of the community college and a single mom. During our first meeting, I immediately noticed Alexandria’s short stature, but her positive energy filled the room. She began her college career at a four-year institution immediately after high school. However, after spending several years at two different institutions, she withdrew due to finances and pregnancy. After becoming a mother, Alexandria worked for eight years before deciding that she was ready to finish her degree. She decided to pursue an associate degree in Administrative Office Technology because she enjoyed her job and wanted to learn ways to do it better. Alexandria continued on to earn her bachelor’s degree and will begin a master’s degree program this fall.

Throughout our conversations, Alexandria frequently mentioned her daughter and wanting to set a positive example for her. She emphasized the importance of having a support system as she completed her credentials. Alexandria’s responses to the questions flowed so smoothly and confidently that it was clear completing her degree was always on the horizon. Her positive energy left me energized each time that we met.
Anne

Anne is a 21-year old recent community college graduate. When Anne first entered the room, I immediately noticed her height and her beautiful natural hair. She was very polite and excited to participate in the interview. Anne’s journey into higher education was challenging but provided insight into her persistence and dedication to achieving her goals. After high school, Anne had plans to attend an out-of-state four-year institution. However, her SAT and ACT math scores were not high enough for entry. When a summer math preparation program at the four-year institution did not pan out, Anne enrolled at her local community college. She completed a year at the community college and then transferred to a four-year institution. After one semester at the four-year institution, she returned home and decided to finish her associate degree at the community college. She earned an Associate in Arts.

Anne aspires to work in film production and has begun the process of starting her own production company. She spoke extensively about her interest in film, which she credits her grandfather and brother for helping her to develop when she was a child. Her goals include teaching film to children and making an impact on her local community through film. Throughout our conversations, it was clear that Anne may have previously struggled with self-confidence. In talking about her past, she would sometimes make comments about her looks or appearance. This was interesting because my initial perception of Anne was her confidence and she looked like a model. She was tall, slender, well-dressed, and pretty.

As Anne and I talked more about her experiences, there were insights into how she gained confidence personally and academically. In a follow up conversation and a
review of her interview transcripts, Anne stated, “I have a rough relationship with academia but reading the transcript made me realize that I'm full of hope and inspiration to better that relationship.” Anne plans to transfer to a four-year institution this fall.

**Diana**

Diana is a 49-year old recent graduate of the community college and earned an associate degree in paralegal. In my initial meeting with Diana, I recognized her from a work event where she was spotlighted as a successful alumna. I wanted Diana to share her story without any distractions, so I did not mention the memory. Diana is married and has one son. Her son was a major factor in her deciding to pursue a college degree. Discussions with her son about college while he was in high school led her to the realization that she needed to lead by example. Diana did not have interest in attending college after high school and always excelled in her jobs. However, pay differentials, feelings of inferiority, and seeing successful individuals in her field also played into her decision to pursue a college degree.

Diana’s decision to enroll in college was met with some reservations about how well she would do so she enrolled as full-time student so that she could give it her all. She said, “[I] have to do it and do it right.” Her tenure at the community college led to many accomplishments, including student body president and being chosen as the student graduation speaker at her commencement ceremony. Completion of her associate degree has allowed Diana to make more money than she has ever made. This is something that she was not expecting but makes her even prouder of what she has accomplished.

It was evident that the community college helped Diana gain the confidence that she needed to succeed. In each of our conversations, I recall the positivity and inspiration
that Diana exuded. These were the same qualities that were displayed at the event that I remembered her from. Diana’s story is an example of the impact that community colleges can have on individuals.

**Elizabeth**

Elizabeth is a 34-year old community college graduate. In our first meeting, I immediately noticed how laid back and open she was with her responses. I also found her to be very humorous but I am not sure if it was intentional or not. She would make sly remarks but with a straight face. Although she was born in South Carolina, Elizabeth moved around a lot as a child. When asked about her hometown, Elizabeth referenced her mother’s constant moving by saying, “She's not military. She just move[d] a lot.”

Elizabeth is married and a mother of four children. She decided to enroll in the community college two years after her last child was born. She always wanted to be a doctor; however, her goals were postponed when she started a family. When her dad became ill, Elizabeth moved closer and took care of him. She emphasized that she was the only sibling who was willing to move to be the caretaker for their dad. Taking care of her dad renewed Elizabeth’s interest in pursuing a career in the medical field. She earned a diploma in medical assisting and currently works for an urgent care facility. Elizabeth has goals of becoming a physician assistant.

**Emilia**

Emilia is a 22-year old community college graduate. Within the first few minutes of our initial meeting, Emilia made it clear that she gets very nervous and it becomes evident if she starts to stutter. We spent some time discussing her background and family
to ease her nerves. Emilia was adopted as a baby but has four older brothers who were biological children of her parents. Her half-sister was also adopted by her parents.

Emilia attended a private high school and enrolled at the community college after graduation due to finances. Her parents had passed away and her brother and sister-in-law were not able to support her financially in college. The free tuition offered at the community college allowed her to complete the pharmacy technician program. Emilia is currently employed in the field and is also pursuing a diploma in surgical technology at the community college. Although Emilia was somewhat reserved in each of our interviews, her excitement about her career goals was evident each time that she discussed them.

**Erica**

When I first met Erica, I immediately noticed her bubbly personality. We met at the community college’s manufacturing training center and connected immediately on how beautiful the building was and how we were both first-time visitors. As we sat down to talk, she joked about how she thought this was going to be an on-camera interview. Erica is clearly an extrovert and mentioned several times that she talks a lot. We had several laughs throughout our conversations.

Erica is a 22-year old nursing student at the community college, but she started her college career at a four-year institution. After spending a year at the four-year institution, Erica moved back home due to family issues. She enrolled at the local community college with mixed feelings. However, her classes, an on-campus job, and involvement in student life activities changed her perspective.
Erica shared that she is close to finishing her program but experienced some academic difficulties this past semester. These difficulties have put her in jeopardy of not finishing her nursing degree. As a result, she has begun to explore alternative career opportunities. In an update after our meetings, Erica shared that she will not continue in the nursing program. However, she will complete her associate degree in general studies this fall with an intent to transfer to a four-year institution.

Joslyn

Joslyn is a 41-year old recent community college graduate. She contacted me via phone to participate in the study after seeing a social media post. When we discussed meeting for the interview, I proposed meeting on campus or at another location that she felt comfortable with and was convenient. Joslyn invited me to her home. After arriving at her home, I was greeted by her youngest son. Joslyn is a mother of three sons. As I sat in the living room waiting to meet Joslyn, I noticed a coffee table filled with graduation cards and other congratulatory mementos. There were also several religious decorations that filled the wall and fireplace mantel. About 15 minutes later, Joslyn appeared in a business casual outfit and apologized for keeping me waiting.

Joslyn has faced several obstacles in her journey to college completion, including the recent loss of her grandfather. Until about the age of nine, Joslyn was raised by her grandparents. Shortly after moving in with her mother and her mother’s husband, Joslyn began to experience physical and sexual abuse. Despite the traumatic childhood experience and other personal obstacles, Joslyn found strength and support through her grandparents to pursue a college degree. Her previous experiences and enjoyment of helping others led her to pursue human services as a major.
It was evident that Joslyn was still grieving the loss of her grandfather and she talked extensively about her relationship with him. At the conclusion of our first meeting, Joslyn thanked me for coming to her home and admitted that she had to “fix myself up a little bit” and it was “time to put on that face again.” She admitted to feeling encouraged but recognizes that she is still grieving. Joslyn is currently completing the final course for her associate degree in human services. In the future, she plans to pursue an associate degree in criminal justice and a bachelor’s degree.

**Lisa Ann**

Lisa Ann is a 22-year old recent community college graduate. I immediately noticed her upbeat spirit and an accent that was not quite Southern. Originally from Chicago, Lisa Ann moved to South Carolina when she was a child because her grandmother lived here. She lives with her mother and her dad lives in Chicago. Lisa Ann is the youngest of her dad’s children and the middle of her mom’s children. Although she is close with all of her siblings, Lisa Ann is not as close with her father. Lisa Ann is a self-proclaimed music lover and likes to meditate. Meditation helped Lisa Ann control her anxiety, which was often brought on by school.

After high school, Lisa Ann took a year off to figure out whether she wanted to pursue college. She decided to enroll at the community college because it was cheaper to remain at home and the tuition was free. Lisa Ann initially pursued nursing but after completing a few classes, she realized nursing was not for her. After taking a course in human services, she fell in love with it and pursued it as a major. Lisa Ann completed an associate degree in human services and plans to pursue her bachelor’s degree next year. She is currently working in the field to gain more experience.
Nena

Nena is a 35-year old community college graduate and mother of four. I had the opportunity to meet her four children during our first meeting. They were on campus waiting on her to complete a test in her math course. When her two-year-old and one-year-old saw her, they immediately ran to her shouting, “mommy.” Nena hugged them and told them to go to their father while she met with me. For the first few minutes of our meeting, I could see her younger children peeking around the corner at their mom and me.

Nena enrolled at the community college after completing high school. She planned to pursue nursing and began her prerequisite courses. However, her heart was not in it and it was not her top priority, so she withdrew from her classes. Nena decided to start a family and postpone her education. As time progressed, she no longer had intentions to pursue a college degree. However, encouragement from family members gave her the push she needed to enroll again. Nena earned a certificate and is now pursuing an associate degree in accounting as a full-time student.

In our meetings, Nena spoke about her role as a mom and how she believes the first few years of a child’s life are important, which is why she chose to stay at home with her children. Additionally, it was clear in our conversations that family was important to Nena. I had the opportunity to meet her mom and was invited to attend church service with them. Attending church with Nena and her family gave better context for her discussions about her family and role as a mother. Nena and her family were very welcoming and made sure I was comfortable in a somewhat nontraditional church format.
We had the opportunity to share a meal together while the pastor delivered the sermon. I left with hugs from her family members and invitation to return in the future.

**Ree**

Ree is a 21-year old recent community college graduate. She is from a military family and has a one-year old daughter. In our conversations, it was clear that Ree was mature and had a very wise perspective and outlook on life. Originally born in Arizona, Ree moved to South Carolina when she was nine years old. Both of her parents attended college. In fact, Ree and her mother graduated at the same time from the community college. She has a younger brother who is currently enrolled in college.

After graduating from high school, Ree knew that she wanted to attend a community college. Ree knew that she could save money and earn a credential in a shorter time. Additionally, Ree knew that she would feel more comfortable at the community college versus a four-year institution. She completed her high school coursework a semester early and worked while awaiting graduation. While a student at the community college, Ree worked on campus in a student services office and found support through her coworkers as she progressed towards completion. Her credentials are in early care education and she is currently working in the field.

**Ruth**

Ruth is a 19-year old recent graduate of the community college. She was very soft-spoken and kind. Ruth has a close relationship with her family, including her parents and younger sister. She also lives on the same road as her aunts and cousins. It was clear in our conversations that Ruth was a high achiever. As we talked, I saw glimpses of
myself in her. Ruth’s determination and drive to do well in school reminded me of my story.

After earning her Associate in Arts and Associate in Science, Ruth will begin the nursing program this upcoming fall. Ruth is a former dual enrollment student at the community college and was able to use the credit hours earned in high school to complete two associate degrees in one year. Although Ruth wanted to attend a four-year institution, she chose the community college for financial reasons. A few in-state institutions offered her full-ride scholarships. However, these institutions did not have her major. Ruth works at a local manufacturing plant and looks forward to quitting her job due to the demands of the nursing program. Ruth’s father is a minister and she relies heavily on her belief in God to get through each day. She contributes her spirituality to her successes as a student. Ruth has goals of becoming a neonatal nurse practitioner.

Sarah

Sarah is a 28-year old community college graduate and military veteran. She was very candid about her experiences and easy to talk to. Sarah began her college career at a four-year institution with plans to become a pediatric nurse. During her first semester, Sarah realized that college was not her passion and she wanted to pursue her goal of joining the military. Shortly after her second semester, she enlisted in the military and left home for basic training. After returning home from her military service, Sarah enrolled at the community college to pursue a credential in early care education.

Throughout our meetings, Sarah’s passion for helping her community was evident. She frequently tied previous situations to an idea for helping her community which demonstrated her creativity. While at the community college, Sarah also earned a
credential in business with goals to become an entrepreneur. Her ideas include helping the elderly, veterans, and children in her hometown. In our first meeting, Sarah shared that she had recently been fired from her job due to a misunderstanding with a coworker. She is considering legal action but the event has inspired her to pursue her entrepreneur goals sooner. Sarah is in the process of pursuing a bachelor’s degree in business.

**Tia**

Tia is a 28-year old community college student pursuing an associate degree in early care education. She aspires to open a 24-hour daycare. Tia was born in a coastal South Carolina city and grew up in a two-parent household with two older siblings and four younger siblings. She has been confined to a wheelchair since she was seven years old. In our first conversation, it took a while for Tia to open up. However, when I asked about her siblings, she became more open.

After high school, Tia moved in with her grandmother. Her grandmother pushed her to pursue higher education, so she began at a community college. However, Tia realized that she was not ready for college and moved back in with her mom who was experiencing health issues. After the passing of her mother, Tia knew that she needed to set the example for her four younger siblings, so she enrolled in college again. She continues to use her siblings as inspiration as she nears completion of her degree. Tia is in the fourth semester of her program.

**Findings**

In the preceding section, a description of the participants was detailed with information gathered from interviews and the demographic questionnaire. This section describes the major themes that arose from the participant interviews. Chapter Three
provided a description of the coding process and thematic analysis used to develop categories. These categories were then analyzed into themes which are described in detail in the proceeding section.

There were four major themes that emerged: 1) Ambition, which includes significant moments and obstacles experienced by the participants while enrolled as a student. 2) Support, which includes internal campus support and external personal support that was experienced by the participants. 3) Balance, which includes working while attending school and being a parent. 4) Campus Experience, which includes the student experience on campus and significant interactions. Table 4.2 represents each of these themes and their corresponding subsidiary themes.

Table 4.2.

Themes and Subsidiary Themes

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While four major themes that emerged out of this study, the themes complement each other. No single theme that accounted for the participant experiences at the community college. For each of the participants, multiple events or circumstances contributed to their journey to completion. Often, elements of the themes emerged simultaneously in the participants’ journey to completion. Figure 4.1 is a visual...
representation of each theme, its subsidiary themes, and their connectedness. Each theme is outlined in the following sections. Detailed descriptions from the participants are included.

Figure 4.1. Themes: Answering the Research Questions. This figure shows the major and subsidiary themes that emerged from the study’s findings.

**Ambition**

The first theme that emerged from the participant interviews describes the ambition, determination, strength, and resilience that was showcased in the journey to completion. In their journey to completion, all 13 participants described moments, events, and situations that were significant in their experiences as a student. Some of these moments were positive and others were challenging. However, these events served as a memory of triumph and an overall ambitious mindset. Furthermore, the participants often referenced these events when discussing other aspects of their journey to
completion. Three subsidiary themes are presented below and validate the development of this theme: proud moments, difficulty and obstacles, and graduation.

**Proud Moments.**

Proud moments was the first subsidiary theme and represents positive moments, events or situations. This subsidiary theme emerged because of the commonality in the participant responses and the frequent reference to the proud moments throughout our interviews. Additionally, the discussion about proud moments elicited certain reactions and responses from the participants. When asked about proud moments, the questions posed often resulted in a positive change of demeanor or posture with the participants. It was not uncommon for the participants to smile or exhibit excitement as they reflected back to those moments.

Naturally, positive experiences in courses provided participants with the motivation to continue on their path to completion. Five participants detailed course grades or high marks on a specific assignment as one of their proud moments. However, these were not the only proud moments experienced by the participants. Elizabeth spoke about not only passing her courses but making the Dean’s List.

> Every time I passed a semester, or when I got one of those Dean things in the mail, is like, yeah, yeah, I got happy. Proud of myself, because I actually accomplished. So, yeah, that was a couple of times. I think [I] was on the Dean’s List four times. Then, each time I pass[ed] a semester, it was golden. I could actually breathe, and I was happy.

Additionally, Ruth acknowledged the struggle that came along with the success in her classes each semester.
I feel like the end of every semester, I always feel proud and accomplished, like this was a lot of hard work, it took me a while, I had some rough patches. But when I see that A or that B or that C, you know, sometimes that happens, to show that even though I struggled, I made it through, and it just makes me want to work harder and not give up.

Elizabeth and Ruth’s experiences demonstrated the importance of milestones during the educational journey. Leinbach and Jenkins (2008) described that milestones can be measureable intermediate outcomes, such as specific course completions. For these two participants, their classroom achievement provided them with a boost to persist and ultimately complete.

Two of the participants not only spoke about proud moments in the classroom but also overall pride in being a student. Specifically, they emphasized the investment in themselves. Nena said:

I was actually very, very proud to come back to school because I started seeing the time and energy that I put in so many different places and everyone else.

When I put it in myself, I felt good.

The recognition of the sacrifice she made for others paved the way for Nena to take the next step in finishing her credential. Also, Nena realized that the investment in herself meant that she needed to have something to show for it at the end, which made her push forward to achieving her goal of earning a college credential.

Diana emphasized that she felt proud every day that she was on campus. The drive to school each day reiterated that sense of pride. When asked to elaborate, she explained:
I never thought that I was capable of college or capable of higher education for that matter. I guess I had really low self-confidence, self-esteem. I guess, just really didn't know what I was capable of. There were days when I was thankful and grateful when I got in my car and went to work. I was thankful, I was grateful I had a job to go to. I had a social life. I had people around me, but it was a totally different feeling when I got in my car to go to school. I think that feeling came from, I never felt that way before about school. When I was in high school, I think I struggled with a lot of emotional issues during that time as a teenager, and school was not a happy place for me. I don't think any place was a happy place for me during those years. That's why I think I got as involved as I did through my tenure here, because there was a lot of things I didn't do during those times. I think that's where that feeling came from, because it was almost like I was given a second chance.

The idea of a “second chance” gave some participants the opportunity to forget their past experiences with education and start fresh. In return, these proud moments overrode negative experiences and stimulated ambition to succeed.

Nena and Diana’s proud moments and the emphasis on the self-investment speaks to the sacrifices that women, particularly Black women, make for the sake of others. Both participants are also parents and spoke about their responsibilities as parents and the roles that they play for their children and spouse/partner. The decision to go back to school, experience academic success, and still balance other responsibilities was a proud moment for them because they realized they could do it all.
Proud moments also extended beyond the classroom. Two participants spoke of their involvement in campus activities, which helped them develop and display their leadership skills. Ruth discussed her involvement in student government.

So we have the student ambassadors in the SGA, like the student government. I ran for office for student government, and I didn't win, but they, because I guess the votes were so close, they let, I forgot his name, be like the president of the SGA, and then I became president of the student ambassadors. …It made me feel like I had some sort of authority, not in a bad way, but like in a good way. Like hey, I have this position that I can use to help somebody else to make a difference.

Ruth did not have any interest in participating in student organizations since academics were her main focus. However, a nomination and encouragement from her advisor led her to the student ambassadors and a leadership role on campus.

Erica also had the opportunity to demonstrate her leadership skills through her involvement in the Federal TRIO Programs. Participation in a state conference allowed Erica to represent her school and the program.

And I was proud of being a part of TRIO and representing TRIO here at the Wanda Hendricks Bellamy Leadership Conference where we did workshops on leadership and leadership skills and all those types of things and I was able to be a speaker at the program and it made me proud to be able to represent TRIO in that way and show that just because we're a small town with a small college with a small amount of people doesn't mean there aren't good things or good people there.
Erica also described how participation in TRIO helped her connect to the campus and feel better about going to college in her hometown. Like Ruth, Erica received encouragement from a college staff member to become involved and that involvement resulted in a proud moment that contributed to her matriculation towards a credential.

Another example of proud moments beyond the classroom was given by Alexandria. Although Alexandria did not meet her goal of making the honor roll, she was invited to become a member the National Society of Leadership and Success (NSLS). This invitation instilled a sense of pride and accomplishment.

When I was invited to become a member of NSLS here, the leadership society, that was great for me. I was like, "Wow." Because I was kind of kicking myself and down in the dumps a little bit, because I had never made the honor roll here at [community college]. I know partly it was due to the hours that I was taking, you have to be enrolled in a certain number of hours. But that was something I was kind of aiming for, to make the honor roll. I didn't do that, but just being able to develop relationships with your instructors, and going out, hey, I was proud of myself because I actually would speak in class sometimes, because I guess when you're the older person, I know what it was like when I was in college my first go round, and when you had that non-traditional student.

Alexandria utilized the invitation to participate in a student organization as an indication that she was doing well. Her proud moments often served as catalysts to continue on the path to completion.

Proud moments came in various shapes and forms for the participants. However, they all gave participants an additional push to keep going. These proud moments
became bragging rights for the participants as they spoke to other aspects of their journey to completion. Ultimately, these proud moments served as an undertone of their overall ambition to succeed and become a college graduate. On the other hand, proud moments did not solely account for milestones or boosts in ambition. Difficult moments and obstacles also played a role in their journey to completion.

**Difficulty and Obstacles.**

Difficulty and obstacles was the second subsidiary theme. This theme represents challenging times during the participants’ tenure as a student. These events or situations could have easily given the participants a justification for discontinuing their program. In the interviews, reflecting back to these situations was difficult for several of the participants. Yet, their realization that they triumphed was evident. The participants did not let these events get the best of them and these events now serve as reminders of their ambition and will to succeed. All 13 participants experienced a difficult moment or obstacle during their tenure. Like proud moments, the participants’ experiences varied and constituted a range of events.

For example, participants experienced personal tragedies unrelated to their academics. Shortly after enrolling in school, Nena and her family were affected by a natural disaster that had long-term effects.

Well, in 2015, we had a really bad storm come through and we had some flooding in our house, and we were homeless for a while. I myself have experienced hardship, some things that I could not foresee, I couldn't imagine myself going through. I've had hardships where I've made bad choices, and it's just the consequences of your decisions. But I've dealt with things in my own way, but I
was devastated having children living in a hotel. We went from not having a place
to living in a hotel for about a year. I kind of was like, you know, you just keep
going. Sometimes you have your moment to sit down and cry it out, and then
once you dry your face and you get past the emotional toughness, life goes on.
You will make it. I remember being so overwhelmed because I was working,
didn't really have a great emergency fund, and I think FEMA wasn't really
moving as fast as we really needed. At the time, I just sat down and said, "I am
homeless, and I'm a full-time student in school, and I'm a deli clerk. I'm working,
I'm pregnant, and I have two middle school age kids living in a hotel. This is
tough."

The natural disaster that Nena experienced caused physical damage to her home but also
an emotional toll on her and her family. She further described:

I went through a point where I didn't even want to talk about it to family and
friends. I had help, and had people that would give me a ride to the store and do
things, but I was so bogged down about, you know, when you go through things,
you just have to make the best. I kind of got lost in myself, where I was just
going along and doing what needed to be done, but I didn't see a way out, I didn't
see it getting better, I just kept shuffling along. And little by little things began to
progress. One or two things worked out, and then this sticking together helped
build onto that. I think it was rough on me then as far as what we were physically
going through, but I worried about the emotional and psychological effect it had
on the kids when they wanted to do things with their friends, and you can't
necessarily invite your friends over to your hotel room house. So I had like a very
depressive moment. And coming from that, and still being able to keep pace in school, my grades did drop a little bit, but I sat out one semester just to try to focus on what needed to be done. It was like a chain of events of things that happened after that, but I still was able to, kind of by the grace of God really, pull it together and continue in school. Because I was to a point where I was like, "I'm doing way too much. Maybe this is not for me. Maybe I need to go another direction."

Nena decided to take a semester off to resolve additional obstacles related to the natural disaster. She was the only participant who experienced an instance which led to her taking a semester off. However, she returned to school, was able to complete a certificate, and is finishing the final coursework for her associate degree. Her return to school speaks to a larger demonstration of ambition considering many students who leave school or take time off do not return, particularly in the community college and during their first year (Collett, 2013).

Nena’s experience with the natural disaster referenced her lack of an emergency fund. For individuals from low-income backgrounds, situations are often amplified due to the lack of finances. For Nena, the emotional toll proved to be far greater. Additionally, Nena discussed the support that she received from her family and friends during this time which could have helped minimize the financial lack. Support emerged as an additional theme for this study. However, as mentioned, the major themes of this study are connected and should be considered together for the purposes of this study and understanding the participant experiences.
The balance between life and school proved to be difficult for other participants also. Elizabeth explained how work, being a mother and a student began to affect her health.

I just get so tired that I just want to give up because it's like I'm not sleeping enough. My health, to starting to down spiral, because I'm not sleeping enough. I'm working myself in the ground. Like I'm not taking care of the kids because I'm like so tired all the time. It was like finish school or take care of kids. But I chose to keep going with school, because it was better for them if I finished.

The decision to finish school was difficult but the result would be for the betterment of herself and her family. Elizabeth did not allow exhaustion to deter her from her goals. She used her exhaustion as fuel to continue towards earning her credential. Two other participants cited working and school as an obstacle that led them to make tough decisions about school. However, they all chose school and found a way to balance their school and work lives. Balance also emerged as a separate theme for this study and is detailed later in this chapter.

Additional obstacles experienced by the participants include academic difficulties, such as course failures and navigating campus services. Seven participants explained how their academic failure provided insight into how to do things differently or was the spark that caused them to seek additional help. Alexandria reflected on a course failure.

I failed a class. It was a class on Access. A little bit of pride, and not wanting to give up, and I stayed in a class, worked hard. My grandmother died that semester, and I didn't withdraw from the class, and I had a couple other little things that went on personal life-wise. Whereas when I look back at it, I think it would have
been better if I had withdrawn from the course. But I didn't, I wanted to stay in there like, "You can do it, just keep studying, you'll be okay, you'll catch up." And it wasn't a wise decision, at all.

After failing a course, Alexandria came to the realization that it was okay to seek additional help or resources in order to succeed. Similar to other participants, Alexandria had to experience a setback to recognize that obstacles were going to occur but they could not hinder achievement of the ultimate goal.

   Diana also discussed a course failure and how it led to an investigation of a possible bigger issue.

   One of my biggest struggles while I was here, being basically a straight A student, was failing math. Doing everything as far as tutoring. From tutoring to [sic] here at the college…paying that amount to private tutors, to anybody that will help me or to tutor me to where [sic] then I realized I had enough intelligence to realize okay, this is a little beyond me. This not just being my favorite subject. I did not have the ability to learn, or to learn it the way I needed to during that time.

When Diana realized that failure of the math course, even after seeking additional help, felt different, she decided to get tested for a learning disability.

   I did ultimately get tested. Based on the DSM-5, I think it is. Based on my results, I am considered to have a math disability. With that said, I was able to get the services through the college that will help me do the math and do it in a way in testing to get through it. But that was probably one of the biggest challenges that I did have while being a student here.
Diagnosis of the learning disability allowed Diana to get the support that she needed to succeed in math. Diana did not allow the learning disability to impede her goals of becoming a college graduate.

Difficult situations and obstacles experienced by the participants consisted of common occurrences among college students. For example, course failures or difficult faculty were frequent examples among the participants. However, difficult situations beyond the classroom also affected the participants. No matter the circumstance, the participants found ways to overcome the difficulties and obstacles to continue towards their goals.

The triumph over these difficulties and obstacles deserves mention of a perception that is often placed on and internalized by Black women. Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema is commonly described as standing up for oneself, exhibiting self-reliance, and taking care of others (Watson & Hunter, 2015). Romero (2000) offered a comprehensive definition of the SBW through the classification of two themes: African American women are strong, self-reliant, and self-contained and their role is to nurture and preserve family. “Strong refers less to its physical strength than to emotional resilience” (Romero, 200, p. 227). The participants in this study demonstrated emotional resilience as they faced an array of difficulties and obstacles during their academic tenure. This resilience fueled their ambition, which ultimately led to completion of their goals. Additionally, the traits that led to victory over these obstacles gave participants the ownership to chart their own paths as they progressed towards completion.
Graduation.

Graduation was a subsidiary theme because this particular event was a culmination of the ambition shown as a student and served as a spark for future endeavors. Although there were milestones and momentum points along the journey, graduation represented a different type of ambition and determination. The mention of graduation was often coupled within discussions about proud moments with the participants. However, eight out of the 13 participants explained how participating in the event signified meaning that was different than events or situations experienced during their tenure as a student.

Lisa Ann described how graduation was the most accomplished she felt. “It would have to be when I walked across the stage. That would have to be the most accomplished I felt, was that.” Anne also described graduation as one of her proudest moments.

I think maybe honestly the most proud that I've ever felt was probably at graduation, so I think that's when everything hit me, like, “Wow, I actually finished something.” I got to graduate, I got to wear a cap and a gown. Anne’s attainment of an associate degree was particularly special for her because enrollment at the community college was the last option academically due to her challenges with math. After completing her math requirements, the decision to stay and finish the associate degree led to a change of perspective on the community college experience.

And I'm happy I did, I really am, because I know it may not be the biggest degree, but it is a degree, and I have one more degree than some of my other friends will
get, so they can have their bachelor's, but one day I'll have my bachelor's, my associates, and maybe my master's, as well, so it's definitely a step up.

Anne’s change of heart on the community college also speaks to the campus experience, which also emerged as a theme of this study and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Several participants discussed how they had no plans to attend graduation but after encouragement from others, they decided to attend. Joslyn described how she had to find the strength to attend the ceremony. When asked about a proud moment, she said:

When I had walk across that stage May 10th. Because my grandfather had just died three weeks prior to that. And it was really hard. …I did not want to go and walk across that stage May 10th. But I went. And the reason why I went because I knew that was something that I worked so hard for. And I wanted to make my boys proud. And I wanted my boys to see.

The excitement from graduation was still evident in Joslyn’s home over a month after the ceremony. Graduation cards, pictures, and gift bags still filled her living room. She was excited to share the mementos with me after we concluded our conversation.

Anne also had no intentions of walking in the graduation ceremony. However, a conversation with a friend, who was preparing for her own graduation from a four-year university in another state, changed her mind.

And I honestly wasn't going to walk in the ceremony until me and her were talking one day, and she was asking me questions about her cap. She was doing the cap decoration, and I was like, “You kind of make me want to walk now,” and she's like, “I don't see why you're not walking,” and I was like, “Well, it just feels weird, because you know, it's just community college, and doesn't really mean
anything.” She's like, “No, like, it means something. If you're able to walk in a graduation ceremony, then you should do it.” So like, okay, so I did that, and our graduations were actually a day apart.

What Anne thought was an insignificant event turned out to be a steppingstone towards her future goals and added determination to reach those goals. Anne plans to attend a four-year institution this upcoming fall.

Similarly, Alexandria started her pursuit of credential with the intent to not participate in the graduation ceremony. However, her daughter changed her mind.

When I began my classes, I had no intention of walking. It's like, "I'm going to just go complete this, and that's it. They'll mail it to me, I'm not going to participate in the commencement ceremony." And my daughter said, she said, "Mommy, I've never been to any of your graduations." So she was so excited about graduation, so when the time came and I said, "Oh, I'm having my graduation," and she wanted to go out and buy a new dress for graduation, she wanted to buy a new dress for my [emphasis added] graduation, so we did. And she was so excited, and then I heard her telling her friends, "I'm going to my mom's graduation, my mom's graduating." She was so excited, she was so proud of me, here I am, proud that she's sitting here talking about me you know?

Graduation day proved to be more sentimental to Alexandria and her family, specifically her parents. She described the day:

When I made it to graduation and I could look around, and see that there were other students like me, so I didn't feel weird like the old lady that's going to walk across stage, there were other people that are older than me, that was a nice
feeling. …So that was a big thing, and then I saw my dad, my mom and my dad were crying. But yeah, first generation college student, graduating, seeing my daughter there, and she's clapping and she's so happy, that was great.

Alexandria emphasized that returning to school took several years because she had to make sure she was ready. Witnessing the excitement from her daughter and the pride of her parents made the request for more education clear. Alexandria has since earned her bachelor’s degree and will pursue a master’s degree this fall.

The emergence of graduation as a subsidiary theme is significant because several of the participants are the first in their family to graduate from college. The pure symbolism that a commencement ceremony conveys to a first-generation, low-income college graduate is powerful. Furthermore, the ritual of commencement and its significance are often overlooked by college administrators and staff as just an annual event capping the end of the academic year. The commencement event is intentional and conveys meaning. As chronicled by Magolda (2003), a commencement ceremony symbolizes the achievement of educational milestones (i.e., transition from college to the world). For the participants in this study, graduation symbolically meant the closure of one chapter with a positive outcome (i.e., a credential) and the beginning of a new chapter (i.e., a better career and/or the pursuit of additional credentials).

As mentioned earlier, education is often seen as the “great equalizer” for society. College graduates have lower levels of unemployment, lower incarceration rates, and higher levels of civic participation, including voting and volunteer work (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). For individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who could also face barriers due to their other social or personal identities, college completion opens the
door to new opportunities. Alexandria described being a college graduate as “owning a piece of the American pie.” Seven other participants mentioned that being a college graduate made them feel accomplished and gave them self-esteem and confidence. Being a college graduate offered participants a new perspective and outlook, no matter their background.

**Support**

The second major theme of this study was support. Twelve participants emphasized varying levels of support that helped them succeed while in school. Support manifested itself in the form of outside influences that aided participants in their journey to completion. Family, friends, administrators, faculty, and staff provided support to the participants in various ways. As briefly mentioned under the Ambition theme, support was revealed in proud moments and during difficulties or obstacles. Again, it is important to note the interconnectedness of the themes and how they should not be taken independently when describing the participant experiences. Specifically, internal and external support validated the development of the Support theme and are discussed in the following sections.

**Internal Support.**

Faculty, staff, administration, and fellow students encompassed internal support. This type of support was internal to the institution and the participants’ experiences there. Seven participants discussed in detail the faculty, staff, or classmates who played a role in their success as a student. The emergence of internal support as a subsidiary theme is important because a few of the participants enrolled in the community college with preconceived thoughts and saw the community college as their last choice. Finding
individuals on campus who were able to provide support for them as they persisted through courses helped change their perspective on the community college. For other participants, the courage to enroll in college was a challenge. Being able to find an internal support system made the transition to college easy and more welcoming.

For example, Joslyn spoke about her initial experience at the community college and deciding on a major. She received assistance from an advisor.

He gave me his book to look through. I think it was a course study book. He said, I want you to take this book and I want you to, he said, take all the time you need and I want you to take your time and look through and see which program fits you. He's not there anymore. But I was so thankful for him because I knew that he's seeing where I have potential. When I doubted myself, he never did doubt me. He was [an] amazing freshman advisor.

Additionally, Joslyn spoke about her experiences in classes and other interactions with campus offices.

And the people who believe in me at [community college] because I had some good instructors, they was really good. And they was good. They was really good.

I had some great instructors.

The individuals who comprised Joslyn’s internal support also encouraged her to participate in the graduation ceremony and helped her as she grieved the loss of her grandfather.

Counselors and advisors also served as internal support for other participants. Specifically, Ruth recalled her experience with her counselors and how they served as support for academic and non-academic issues.
When I go to my counselors, I talk to them about it and they tell me, "You know, it’s okay, you know, you can do it. Don't let anything stop you. If you need help, just make sure you do your part. Go to the tutoring sessions." And then beyond that, of course, they always talk to me, like whenever I have a situation, so sometimes it doesn't exactly relate to me feeling that way because of the nursing program, it could just be how I feel in general from society, and they always help me with it.

For Ruth, it was important to know that she could speak with someone on campus when she was experiencing issues. Most importantly, they were there to support and encourage her.

The internal support found on the community college campus is important to highlight because it is often overlooked in the literature on campus environments and campus climate. Community colleges serve a diverse body of students and often have to be all things to all students. However, this can become difficult when there is so much diversity in the student body. It can become easy to overlook a certain group of students. For the participants in this study, who are low-income Black females, it is important to highlight that many of them found internal support as they progressed towards completion of their credential.

Ree, who was also a student worker on campus, discussed the support from her coworkers.

I work down in the [campus office], and there we have called our [campus office] family, and they're very [much about] school, because they're much older and
stuff than me. I'm the youngest one in the group, so it's like, make sure you do this, we shoot for success in here.

Diana also found support from the staff and administration on campus. Specifically, Diana mentioned the importance of the Black females on staff at the college and how they served as “cheerleaders” in her success at the college.

But I felt like not only did the entire college want to see me succeed, I looked at these women as mentors, in that they all also wanted to see me succeed. They were, for me, my cheerleaders, if you will. Even though they wasn't sitting there doing that, but that's how I idolize African American women here at the college. I had other mentors too that were White males, not any White females, but two White males. All my experiences have been so positive with these women that that's what I believe that they were rooting for me. I know they was rooting for the next student too. But that was my experience.

Diana’s experience speaks to the importance of a campus environment that reflects diversity and students are able to see individuals who look like them on the staff.

Particularly for the participants in this study, the ability to see others on campus who looked like them was important. Being a Black female on campus also emerged as a subsidiary theme and is discussed later in this chapter.

Additionally, Sarah recalled a humbling experience with her program’s department chair and advisor.

I'm so fortunate to have met them, because I wouldn't have gone that far. I'd a been like, you know what, school, I don't got time for school. I'm a military Vet, I don't need no, I don't need to do this. Getting the arrogancy [sic] about having that
Vet stamp on me. They kind of dumbed me down to a reality level, like hey, that can go at any time, so what if you a Vet, you know Vet's around here walking, homeless, you need something, not just to say you're a Vet.

Sarah’s department chair and advisor helped her realize that she needed to push forward and complete her credential. Internal support experienced by the participants gave them venues within the college to seek guidance, insight, and find comfort in the reliability of others.

Internal support was also experienced by the participants through fellow students. Anne discussed reliance on her classmates.

I had a good support group, my friends are very helpful, so if there was any time that I needed an assignment turned in and I couldn't do it, I'd be like, “Hey, here's my information, can you turn this in for me?”

Diana also had a similar experience with her fellow students. She spoke about knowing the type of support that is needed and who to go to for support.

But, you know when you learn who to go to for support, and which type of support. Because trust me, the traditional students are the younger people. They helped me with this technology.

Internal support consisted of multiple groups within the college. The participants reiterated that these support systems were vital to their success at the college. These internal support systems were also available early in their enrollment at the community college.

As mentioned, the importance of having an internal support system emerged as a theme for the participants. Being low-income Black females, the odds were already
stacked against them. Yet, finding campus supports aided in their community college experience and ultimately helped them complete their goals. However, internal support systems were not the only type of support that the participants experienced.

**External Support.**

The second subsidiary theme was external support. Seven participants detailed the external support systems that helped them when they were a student. External support consisted of family, friends, and other individuals who are not affiliated with the college. Participants utilized external support when obstacles arose, when they needed reassurance, or just day-to-day assistance with balancing life. For example, participants who were parents relied on their external support to ensure their kids were minimally impacted by their commitments to obtaining a credential. Additionally, participants discussed encouragement and opportunities to de-stress that were provided by their external support.

Alexandria discussed her external support system and the ways they helped her through her tenure as a student.

*My sister, my oldest sister, my mom, my dad, and my former supervisor. They were my support system, and friends, my best friend. They encouraged me, some in more subtle ways than others. …Being able to vent, and just maybe just woot-sah or destress maybe about a class, or bounce an idea off for a discussion question, or seeking help, maybe an idea for a project, my best friend. My best friend was there for that. Just somebody else to talk to, because like you said, I didn't have friends in the classroom, and my former supervisor, she did.*
Encouragement from external support systems helped participants maintain their paths to completion. Alexandria’s experience echoes the findings of Palmer, Davis, and Maramba’s (2011) study on Black males and family support. Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2011) found that even if family members lacked formal education, they were still invested in seeing their family members succeed. Family members recognized the power of education and promoted success even though they were not able to offer formal knowledge or advice.

Emilia also spoke about her external support. Specifically, Emilia mentioned the nonchalance of her brother and sister-in-law when she thought about quitting school. Her grandmother was there to give her the additional encouragement that she needed to continue.

My grandma. She did not want to see me quit and my brother and sister-in-law, they didn't really care if I did because my sister-in-law did the same thing. She stopped and then she went back later, a few years later but my grandma didn't want me to see me do that because she said she struggled worse when she quit then she did while she kept going.

The encouragement from her grandmother was at a critical point during Emilia’s program when she was finishing her pre-requisites. Similar to Alexandria, Emilia found support through family members who lacked formal education but understood the importance of finishing school.

External support for the participants also consisted of more than just encouragement. Ree discussed the tangible things that individuals did to help her while attending school.
My daughter, her dad, his family. I lived with them for a while, and they were very supportive. Like when I didn't have my car or whatever, his dad would take me to school, his mom would take me to school, or anything like that. My friends, I have friends that I went to high school with, three of them actually I went to high school with, I'm in classes with now, and we all help each other and stuff like that.

Similarly, Lisa Ann spoke about words of encouragement and techniques used by her external support system to help her de-stress from school but there was also tangible actions.

Sometimes I would just break down in the car about an assignment or about graduating on time or something, and I would call one of them and my mom would be like, you know you're stressing yourself out you're only 22, 21, whatever, you only this age, you just adding more stress onto yourself, relax, do this, do that. Then I would just relax and do what she said or do what he said. Sometimes he'll just, my boyfriend would take me out of the environment of the element that we are in, we'll go somewhere, go to the beach or something for a weekend. Just to clear my mind and get myself together.

Oftentimes, external support received by the participants gave them the needed distraction, such as an out-of-town trip, or reflection that their goal was still attainable.

Tia recalled a friend who supported her through a personal tragedy and is still there for her.

I have a best friend. He's also in a wheelchair, and we go to the same meetings.

And when my mom passed, he got a little closer to me so he helped me, like if I'm
short on money for books or I don't have gas money, he kind of like a parent ... I don't know what to say, but he's something like a parent kind of. Because I go to him for everything. So I guess him being my rock.

External support provided participants the opportunity to recalibrate and be reminded of their goals. This led to more ambition and determination towards obtaining those goals.

The emergence of external support as a subsidiary theme primarily focused on the participants’ families and the role they played in their journey to completion. Familial support, particularly for minority students, has been shown to have an impact on educational persistence and outcomes (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, & Guida, 2018). The focus of this study centered on the socioeconomic, racial/ethnic and gender identities of the participants. Throughout this process, I observed that the participants did not emphasize their socioeconomic status, even when asked about it directly. Often, discussions about financial resources or socioeconomic status were downplayed or redirected to how they overcame barriers. With the emergence of external support as a theme, it begets a discussion about familial capital.

Yosso (2005) posited a community cultural wealth framework that promotes an anti-deficit view of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts that students of color bring to the educational environment. One component of the community cultural wealth framework is familial capital. Familial capital describes the cultural knowledges nurtured among family and promotes the importance of maintaining a healthy connection to their community and its resources. Several participants in this study relied on the support and resources that their families provided, both tangible and intangible, to help them succeed. For example, family provided help with childcare and supported the participants through
difficult situations by offering encouraging words and advice. While financial resources may have been lacking, the external resources given could have provided sufficiency.

**Balance**

Another major theme that arose from the participant interviews was Balance. Attending the community college provided flexibility that allowed participants to maintain other areas of their lives while obtaining their credential. Participants spoke at length about the other areas of their lives and how school fit into them. Trying to balance the other areas of their lives proved to be challenging for the participants but they found ways to maintain. All 13 participants found balance as a challenge during their tenure as a community college student. Although the areas that they tried to balance differed and varied throughout their tenure, the consistency among the participants was that they all found victory in balancing school and the other areas of their lives. Two subsidiary themes arose and validated the development of this theme: work and school, and being a parent.

**Work and School.**

In the community college, it is not uncommon for students to work and attend school. The flexibility of the community college often allows students to maintain full-time employment while completing courses. For the participants, who are also low-income, it was not uncommon for them to work and attend school. Nine out of the 13 participants were students and employees. Most of these positions were part-time. However, some participants held multiple jobs that sometimes equated to full-time work.

For example, Anne discussed a time during her tenure as a student when she was working two jobs.
I definitely think the work and school life balance was one of the toughest things, because last, let's see. Last October I got a job at American Eagle in the mall in Harbison, and that is far from here, so not only was I doing that job, I was also starting work back at Food Lion, so I was like, “Okay, I got two jobs, and I'm taking,” How many classes did I take? Last semester I took five classes, and I was like, “This is going to be the death of me.” Just trying to balance everything was just really hard, but I did better than I expected, so I'm not really that upset, but that was a challenge, just trying to balance work and school, it was a lot.

Anne’s experience speaks to the larger population of community college students, particularly low-income, who work and attend school. Although tuition and fees may be paid for through financial aid, such as the Pell Grant, these financial resources do not provide the additional support that students need. For example, students still need to purchase textbooks and other course materials and also need transportation to get to campus. Pierce (2016) suggested that community colleges find other ways to support low-income students beyond financial aid. This support includes transportation assistance, dependent assistance, and resources that show them how to access public benefits.

While Anne worked two jobs and attended school, the other participants primarily maintained one job and school. Two participants spoke about the flexibility of their employers, which aided them in balancing their coursework. Emilia described how managers allowed her to study during the slow times at work.
Well, the place I worked was really supportive of me doing this. So they let me study some while I was there. Whenever we weren't busy or had extra time. So that was really helpful.

Similarly, Lisa Ann would communicate with her managers when she needed a break to focus on school.

Sometimes I would take a break off of work, and I had managers who were letting me so that, so that was helpful too. If I was doing too much, I felt overwhelmed. I would take a break and then I would come back. I was a cashier. Yeah I had those breaks, but it was definitely stressful, working, getting off and coming to class, or going to class and then going straight to work. And then I had an internship so that was even more stressful.

The flexibility demonstrated by Emilia and Lisa Ann’s employers also highlights additional external support that the participants received while attending school. Balance was facilitated through external support, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of the study themes.

While some participants found flexibility in their jobs, some participants did not and had to find other ways to balance work and school. Anne, who worked two jobs, had to be assertive with both employers to ensure she got the time she needed to study and maintain other areas of her life.

I told both of my jobs that I would not work on Sunday, like Sundays aren't my work days, period, so I said, “Don't call me, don't ask me to come in, nothing like that, no. I can't do it, Sundays aren't my work days. Those are the days I only get a
break.” Because I would usually work about two or three days at American Eagle, and then I'd work about two or three days also at Food Lion.

Anne’s assertiveness underscored her commitment to completing her goal of earning a credential.

Alexandria, who worked full-time while attending school, had to find other ways to meet with instructors that did not interfere with her work schedule. She elaborated:

When you're working full-time, so much of your time, you're spending eight, nine hours in your office. So there's not a lot of time to go to the library to study.

There's not a lot of time to leave your office and, or there's no time, you know?

You're working, you can't leave your office and go speak to your instructor and sit down for tutoring, to go over a test. You have to kind of make it work.

Although Alexandria worked on campus, she found the balance of working and attending the institution as a student difficult. While the same resources were available to her, they were difficult to access since most were only available during the day when she was working. Specifically, Alexandria spoke about student events and transfer and career fairs. Additionally, she purposefully did not tell her instructors that she was employed by the college because she did not want any special treatment. She also felt that she had to set “a better example” when it came to her success as a student.

The balance between work and school was a challenge for the nine participants who did both. Although their tuition was covered through the Pell Grant and other financial aid, the participants still needed supplemental income to cover textbooks, transportation and other living expenses. Working gave the participants the financial resources to provide for these things so attending school full-time was not an option.
In contrast, the four participants who did not work while attending school had support through spouses/partners and other family members. However, this did not exempt them from financial difficulties. As an example, Diana, who attended school full-time, described seeking out additional scholarships to help cover textbooks or pay for gas. She explained:

I didn't have to put the extra stress on my husband and say, "I need this book, I need money. I need a new book bag, or I need a laptop." My husband, he's a blue-collar worker, and a lot of times he supplements his income by working a lot of overtime. I know if I needed something, if I said, I need this or I need that, that would mean he would have to work overtime to do it.

Diana’s situation also underscores the participants’ socioeconomic status. Regardless of whether they worked or not, there were still financial obstacles to overcome as they pursued their credentials. The participants found ways to navigate and balance work and school, which ultimately led to their completion of a credential. Support systems were also present as they attempted to balance work and school. The presence of support within this theme further emphasizes the interconnectedness of the themes and how there are multiple reasons that account for the success of the participants.

**Being a Parent.**

Another subsidiary theme that emerged from the major theme of Balance was being a parent. There were six out of the 13 participants who were parents. The participants spoke about balancing parenthood and setting the example for their children. For several of the participants, their children were the catalyst for them enrolling in school and persisting to completion. Most of the participants had a spouse or partner that
shared parenting duties. However, their roles as mothers carried most of the children’s dependency. For example, the participants discussed their involvement with their children, such as taking them to activities, being a stay-at-home mother, and helping them with homework. As Black women, their natural tendency to be nurturers was evident through the discussions about their interaction with their children. However, the decision to pursue a credential caused a modification in how they parented.

For example, Alexandria spoke about being a single mom and the adjustment to pursue a degree.

It was being a mom for me, I'm very involved with my daughter and wanting to do things with her, and keep her active. We don't just sit around and watch TV, or play on our phones, or tablets and stuff. So to know that she was with someone else and getting something from it, something constructive, that helped me, it put my [mind at ease]. I didn't feel guilty about going to school, and a lot of times as moms, and especially being a single mom, you feel that, and sometimes people tell you that. It's almost as if because you're bettering yourself and taking time out for yourself and trying to do something better, people can kind of turn those tables on it and make it look as if you're selfish, and you're neglecting your child, and you should be home with them, but you're out to 10:00 at night.

In the balance of parenthood and school, Alexandra emphasized the importance of her support system and knowing that her daughter was somewhere safe when she had class. For participants who were single parents, it was important to have a support system to rely on unless going back to school would not have been achievable.
Similarly, Joslyn discussed being a single mom to a son who has health challenges. She often relied on her belief in God to give her strength and help her balance school.

Being a single parent and raising three kids, and my son has the feeding tube. He's now up to 15 specialists. So I don't take credit. I give credit to God because without God, nothing that I have accomplished, it wouldn't be possible without him. I don't know how anybody else feel, but that's what I feel. I believe in God, and that's something that I have to hold on to, something that I look forward to is just by believing and trusting in him. And at times even knowing him, it still gets hard. It still gets hard. But I couldn't do it.

Joslyn has always been a single parent. She enrolled in school when her sons were younger. However, work, school, and parenthood were hard to balance. Now that her sons are teenagers, Joslyn finds the school and parenthood balance more manageable. For Joslyn, her teenage sons were her support system since she relied on them to be somewhat self-sufficient as she pursued school.

While the participants who were single parents relied on their support systems to help them balance school and parenthood, some participants found campus resources to assist in balancing parenthood. Specifically, on-campus resources and inclusiveness helped one participant. Ree spoke about her experience being pregnant and after having her daughter.

It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. I had a very smooth pregnancy so I would just plan my appointments according to my schedule and do what I had to do. We have this Title IX or something here at this school, where if you have a
situation, they can work around your time and stuff like that, so I have that. I actually didn't take a break from my classes, because my classes were only like two hours long, so I would get dropped off at class after I had her and just go back home and stuff like that, and I would leave her with her dad. So I didn't have a difficult time with it.

When Ree had to find another option for childcare, she was able to utilize the fact that she was majoring in early care education to her advantage. She gave an example:

This last semester my daughter's school was closing, so I was like okay, got to find a place. But I still had classes from 8:15 to 3:00, so she would have to be in class with me sometimes. But it worked out, so I wouldn't necessarily call it an obstacle, but it was a little bit of a challenge. …Because we work with kids, so okay, yeah. One day we was just, me and this [sic] other two girls that I'm in class, I had my daughter, the other girl had her daughter, and the other girl had her niece with her, and we were all doing work and they were playing in our classroom.

The option to bring her daughter to class while she found alternate childcare allowed Ree to balance her academic life and life as a parent. This example also highlights the various ways that community colleges can support students who are parents. On-campus childcare centers are common solutions. However, as Sallee and Cox (2019) found in their study of community college student-parents, removing organizational barriers is needed to increase support of student-parents. For example, community colleges could allow spaces where children are allowed on campus and revise policies and practices to recognize parenting responsibilities.
Additionally, in their attempt to find balance between parenthood and school, participants discussed how their role as a student allowed them to connect better with their children. The shared commonality of school allowed some participants to balance parenthood and school better since their children had a clearer understanding of what their mother was doing. Nena gave an example of a discussion with her kids about homework.

I remember them asking me to help them with their homework, and I helped them but more than just sitting down and talking back and forth across the table. I remember them asking me about my homework, and I pulled it up on the internet, and I showed them what I had to do as far as how I had to complete assignments with no teacher there. The responsibility of, "This is where I used to be but now this is where I'm at. And it's hard, but it's got to get done." So I thought that was a really good moment because we actually started bonding in other areas, and it started through homework.

Similarly, Alexandria discussed bonding with her daughter over homework.

My daughter got to see me, kind of in the same role that she's in, she's in school. So mom's a student, and I'm a student. So she saw me studying, she heard me speak of my homework, and my projects, and my assignments. There was a couple of conversations in the car as we were riding, maybe to school or from school, or to practice or something, where we would go back and forth about assignments, or she'd talk about her day at school. It was nice to come home at night and she said, "Mom, how was class?" I would see her sometimes kind of flipping through my textbook to see what it was that I was learning. There was a
moment where she had to do a project for school, and she did her project on me, and she said that she was proud of her mom. She said, "Because my mom takes care of me, she cooks for me, she keeps the house clean, and she works, and she goes to school."

Both Nena and Alexandria had children who were pre-teens and recognized the shift in their mother’s involvement due to school. To find balance, the participants utilized the commonality of homework to help their children better understand their pursuit of a credential.

The balance of school and parenthood was an adjustment for the participants who had children. However, there were various ways that the participants created the balance. The ways that they found balance was also dependent upon the age of their children. For participants like Diana, Joslyn, and Elizabeth who had older children, their balance was aided by the self-sufficiency of their children. Although the children still needed their mothers, the participants’ time away at school was not a major disruption. Ree, Nena, and Alexandria had younger children and relied upon their external support systems to step in and assist when needed. As females, the participants’ roles as mothers could have automatically put them in a position to feel guilty about a reduction in the time with their children. For some participants, there were some feelings of guilt. However, the participants knew that obtaining a credential was something that they not only needed to do for themselves but also for the betterment of their children’s lives. This thought process helped them find the balance that they needed between school and parenthood.
Campus Experience

The final theme was the Campus Experience. All 13 participants spoke about the positive and negative experiences that they had while attending the community college. The participants selected the community college for several reasons but finances was the most common reason mentioned. Since all 13 participants were from low-income backgrounds, the cheaper, and in some cases, free tuition allowed the participants to achieve their goals without any or very little student debt. However, attendance at the community college came with some challenges for the participants even though the overall outcomes were positive. There were three subsidiary themes that validated the development of this theme: community college stigma and perspectives, being a Black female on campus, and age.

Community College Stigma and Perspectives.

Historically, the community college has garnered different opinions on their role in higher education. In Chapter Two, the history and role of community colleges was discussed in detail. Participants in this study all shared their reason for choosing the community college. For all, finances played a role. However, even with the financial savings, some participants were not initially happy with their choice. Erica, who moved back home due to family issues, described her feelings about attending the local community college.

So it was a hard transition for me to go from a four-year school to a two-year school where a lot of my peers and the people that I was close to was off at their respective schools, quote unquote, "living their best life." While I was stuck here back at home where this is a place where a lot of us did not want to be to begin
with and had made it our goal to leave. Because of just a lack. I think that's a big thing here, there's a lack of a lot of things for young people. Or at least the appearance of.

Erica felt like she worked so hard to leave her hometown but was disappointed when she had to return to attend school, particularly the community college. The feelings that Erica detailed are still common perceptions about the community college. Many individuals feel that attending a community college is only for individuals who have no other options due to their academics or individuals who come from low-income backgrounds.

Similarly, Anne had aspirations to attend a four-year institution. When her plans were interrupted due to academic difficulties with math, she described her thoughts on attending the community college.

I was one of those people that was like, “Okay, no. I'm never going to [community college].” And it's not a bad school, it's really not, it's a really good school, great resources, great faculty, but that was just something that I was just not set on doing, so it just kind of crushed an ego for me, but then I just had to learn how to be realistic about stuff. And a lot of my high school graduated, and colleagues, and everybody also came to [community college], so it wasn't like I was the only person.

Like Erica, Anne had reservations about attending the community college due to the local stigma that if you attended the community college, you were “stuck” in the town. Ree, who wanted to attend the community college, also recognized the stigma behind the local community college. Ree stated: “When I first started coming here, there's nothing good
about a technical college, or nothing like that at community college. That's not true. I think it's well worth coming here.” Erica, Anne, and Ree all enrolled in college after high school and witnessed classmates make various decisions regarding their post-high school plans. All three participants comprised the younger age range of participants in the study. Age also emerged as a theme (discussed later in the chapter) and could explain their perspective on the community college.

Ruth also enrolled at the community college after high school and chose to attend due to finances. Her initial plan was to attend a four-year college, preferably out-of-state. However, a conversation with her parents led her to the community college, even after good financial packages were offered from in-state four-year institutions. Ruth described her feelings about attending the community college.

I was okay with the atmosphere. And at first, I was never upset about it, but I was never like, "I'm so excited, I'm going to [community college]," 'cause it just seems like I was home, I'm going back to where I've always been or I've been for a while. So I wasn't exactly sad, but I wasn't excited like I'm going to a new college.

Dual enrollment courses during her junior and senior year allowed Ruth to complete two associate degrees in one year. She will begin the nursing program this fall to progress towards her goal of becoming a neonatal nurse practitioner.

Other participants, similar to Ree, knew the community college was for them from the beginning. Participants again mentioned the financial benefits but also the opportunity for smaller class sizes. Tia emphasized the chance for better interaction with the instructor.
Because it wasn't that much students attending here. And I learn better with a smaller class size, and I felt like anywhere else I would have like 40 or 50 maybe students in a class, and I don't learn that well when it's so many kids and I can't get one on one time with my teacher.

Similarly, Nena knew that larger classes would not work for her and her transition back to school. She stated:

I was actually extremely nervous because I've been outgoing in a smaller setting of well-known people, but I used to be very claustrophobic and I didn't like being in an auditorium full of people or a stadium full of people. I just didn't like being in large numbers. Although I wanted to pursue going to college, I had high anxiety about getting the small steps like the registration and the transcript, and the actual steps that it took to get the process started were a little tough for me. …I was good at being a middle school student, I was good at being a high school student, but I'm afraid of what's on the other side as far as working towards something bigger.

For Nena, the community college provided a soft landing for overcoming her fears associated with higher education. Nena’s intentionality about attending the community college was also present for participants like Diana who also had reservations about higher education and her academic ability.

Some participants cited the perks of attending a community college. Sarah mentioned the quality of education with the benefits of smaller classes. She stated, “I mean, you get the same education, it's smaller, classes are smaller.” Elizabeth reflected on her experience by sharing:
All I know it's been a hell of a ride. But it's good, right. It's all good. Good experience, except that one little thing. But other than that, I actually like it. I'm pretty sure it's not like living on campus, which I don't think I can actually deal with that part anyway. I mean, so far [community college]’s been pretty good. I actually like it. Campus is easy to navigate. Wish some of the classes were a little bit more spaced out, but other than that, yeah. All in all, I think it was great. I met some people who are really nice students, and still kind of see them every once in a while. Yeah. It's been a nice experience, so far.

Even though there were a few minor issues that Elizabeth and Sarah both experienced as a student, the issues did not detract from their overall satisfaction with the community college experience.

Finally, the participants who were disappointed that they had to enroll at the community college found a shift in their perspective by the end of their tenure. Erica stated:

And I came to the community college, started taking my classes and things like that and I ended up getting a work study job on campus because I needed the money. And I think that could have been one of the best things that happened to me in that particular time, because it allowed me to meet people that I had never met before and to have opportunities that I never would have had had I not done, or been in that particular position. …But I can definitely say being here has forced me to mature in a lot of different ways, and just kind of see my talent in a different way. See it in a way that I didn't see it before. As far as opportunities and things of that nature. Because as a kid all I ever heard was, "You need to get out
Erica’s change of heart speaks to the importance of campus involvement and campus community. As commuter campuses, community colleges often are cited for their lack of campus community and campus activities. However, these things are present for students to take advantage of and thrive. Additionally, Erica offered advice to those who were considering a community college.

Overall, I think that, my mind had changed about community colleges and technical schools. Like I would tell someone if they wanted to go to a technical school, do so. Because while I hated being at home, I did like the fact that I was saving money. I don't have thousands of dollars in loans that I had to pay back like my peers. I had access to financial aid scholarships and working towards a degree. If you want to go to school and you want to get a degree and you want to get a good job, I would say community college is a good option. Or if you just want to get classes, take classes here at a community college before you transfer to a four-year, that's fine too. But, if you're looking for that whole college experience with the parties and the clubs and all that other stuff, then that's what you would be getting at a four-year. You'd be paying for the experience.

Coming from a family that faced financial challenges, similar to the other participants, Erica emphasized the importance of saving money while earning her credential.

Erica was not the only participant who had a change of heart about the community college. Anne gave insight into her perspective shift also.
It wasn't what I thought. I thought it was going to be terrible, I wasn't going to like [community college], but it wasn't bad. It was good. So definitely don't listen to anybody's expectations, or like influences on anything, really, unless you kind of experience it for yourself, because I had the wrong idea coming to [community college]. Just coming here, like the staff is really friendly, the campus is a good size, you know? They have good resources, and they have fun events, and everything, so they try and get the students involved. …because I know there are a lot of community colleges where it's just like, “Go to class and go home, that's it.” So yeah, I really just like the atmosphere here, it was good, better than I expected, I'll say that.

Both Erica and Anne provided evidence of growth and openness while attending the community college. Instead of dwelling on the situation or internalizing the stigma about community colleges, the participants developed their own perspective based on their own experiences.

As low-income Black females, the participants who were resistant to the community college could have allowed their perspective to contaminate their entire experience. However, they did not operate from the deficit approach and allowed themselves to be open and grow. Ultimately, their openness helped sustain their ambition which led to completion or near completion of their credential.

**Being a Black Female on Campus.**

The second subsidiary theme of the campus experience was Being a Black Female on Campus. All participants identified as Black females. However, the salience of their racial and gender identity in their experiences was more prominent for some than others.
This distinction was important because all participants demonstrated a strong level of
ambition and determination, which is often attributed to Black females. Yet, three
participants could not speak to any campus experience that was a reflection of their
identity as a Black female. This subsidiary theme explores both perspectives.

Participants spoke about the extra expectations that they felt were often placed on
them as Black females. These expectations were not explicit but often internalized
through lack of representation, as Ruth suggested:

'It's really been bothering me lately as far as the nursing program, because when
we had orientation, there were only four Black people, and of those four, it was
one male and three females. So in my head besides, yeah, I need to get through
this nursing program, I can't slip up, I can't fall out to get my degree. I feel like I
also can't be the Black female that dropped out of the program while all the White
people passed, without being racist, you know. So I feel like it's more on me
because I'm Black, and then because I'm a female, a Black female."

The experience at the nursing program orientation was significant for Ruth because
approximately one-fifth of her cohort are Black but the majority of the community
college’s student population are Black. Ruth’s experience also relates to the concept of
Black women being the new model minority (Kaba, 2008). Because of the successes of
Black females in higher education, they are often overlooked as a group. As a result,
Black female experiences in higher education are not studied or ignored. While Black
females do enroll in higher education at high rates and complete degrees in high numbers,
their successes are often in comparison to Black males. As outlined in Chapter Two,
Black females, particularly in the community college, have similar outcomes to Black
males. Yet, Black males receive the attention and priority as it relates to programming and scholarly research.

Similar to Ruth, Nena also discussed the lack of similar representation in her major. Her interest in connecting with classmates often resulted in feeling out of place. She explained:

I know I can't be the only Black person, or the only Black female that's going into accounting, but I haven't seen a lot of gathering together and support. You know, I like to reach out to people and talk to people, not overextend myself and be irritating, but as far as saying, "Hey, we could study together. If you're having a tough time on chapter six and seven, and I am too, you think we could." You know, trying to just do classmate type things. Sometimes it's a little awkward to navigate when people aren't as receptive.

Nena was clear that her feelings were not to categorize the school and the entire environment. She noted:

I remember having a few classes where it was, I had a few Spanish classmates, and it was mostly White people. I remember coming in with the happy kind of bubbly, you know, outgoing like, "Hey, did you see what the teacher..." You know, talking to people and it might have just been that class, it might have just been those particular people but I felt kind of awkward and shunned at times. Not to say that's the majority of the school or anything, but I felt out of place at times.

Additionally, Nena expressed that it felt good to talk about these experiences. It was important for her to discuss feeling out of place in certain situations, particularly when in school and trying to reach her larger goal of earning a degree. Nena’s experience speaks
to the importance of programming on the community college campus that addresses the needs of Black females.

Another instance of feeling out of place was expressed by Erica. When given the opportunity to reflect on her experience, Erica shared:

It's very hard to feel at home or comfortable in a place where there aren't very many people like you. I was in a particular program where I was one of a few African-American females. And I was actually one of the youngest people in that particular group. So to be in that position and really feel like you're one of the only ones, it's very isolating. And it forces you to find comfort in yourself. And support yourself because you don't really feel like there are other people there to support you. For the longest time I felt very unaccepted, very isolated and alone because I was struggling through these courses and I didn't feel like I had anyone I could relate to. Either I was too young and the people around me were older. Or I was too black and the people around me were not. And there were a lot of times even when trying to integrate myself with the group I still felt out of place because I could not find people I could relate to deep enough. I mean of course there are certain likes and dislikes that we all have or that we all may share because of regional and cultural similarities. Being Southern, being in South Carolina, things like that. …It was lonely, it was tiresome. And it made me feel like I had to change or at least put on airs in certain instances when communicating with people around me because I felt like if I was who I was around people that looked like me I wouldn't be accepted or be taken seriously. Whereas if I'm around other young Black women, or just other Black people I
speak differently than how I would speak to people that aren't of color. Or aren't Black. And it's quick. I realize quickly that either you're looked at, it appears to me that you're looked down upon if you're not speaking a particular way or acting a particular way. Or not necessarily fitting in. So I felt like I had to put on a certain face to belong for a little while.

Erica’s experience speaks to common techniques that are used by individuals from minority groups to acclimate to various environments. For example, Erica used codeswitching to try and fit in with her classmates. While these techniques are not inherently bad, they can present challenges to feeling welcomed, as demonstrated by Erica.

Additionally, Erica’s experience highlighted several identities and their intersection. First, age emerged as a factor in her assimilation into the campus environment. For all participants, age proved to be a factor in how they experienced campus and is discussed later in this section. Next, Erica referenced that there are not many Black females in her nursing program. This is a similar observation to that of Ruth, who was also in a nursing program at a different college. These observations highlight the importance of diversity within professions. For programs like nursing where there is a competitive admissions process, this begets the question of the candidate pool and whether minority students, particularly Black females, are adequately prepared academically for such programs. Finally, Erica referenced the lack of a deep connection with other students on campus. Community colleges serve a diverse group of students so it would be appropriate to posit that students could find a niche with students who are like them. However, Erica’s experience again reflects back to the diversity and representation
within individual programs. While the overall community college may be diverse, the makeup of certain programs may not reflect that same diversity.

Additional perspectives of feeling out of place or lack of representation were experienced by Alexandria. In describing her classroom experiences, she said:

There were numerous classes where I guess I was the only face, I was the only face. And there were classes, I will say when you speak there's almost an awkward silence in the room. A lot of times, I kind of felt as if everyone was thinking, "Oh wow, she can speak. Oh, she does know what she's talking about, Oh, she is smart." I just kind of got the impression, because of some of the things that were said, the looks that I would get and the attitudes of some of the students towards other things, that they felt I was not as worthy as they were to be in the classes, did not know as much as they did, and they probably, I think, probably kind of canceled me out, and didn't think that I would finish. But I mean, for me it was, I had a goal, I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it, I knew I could do it, and then I wanted to show my daughter I could do it.

Although Alexandria had experiences of being the only Black female in courses, she did not let that detract from her goal. Furthermore, Alexandria wanted it to be known that she had a voice and also a claim to the pursuit of an education.

As mentioned, the experience of being a Black female on campus was felt differently by the participants. Some participants noted feelings of isolation but others did not. For the participants who did not experience isolation, they did cite the faculty and staff makeup at their community colleges. Anne indicated the lack of Black
representation in faculty, staff and administration. However, she did not experience feelings of isolation.

And I guess just not seeing enough Black staff, or Black teachers, Black professors, kind of hindered me, as well. Again, because I just feel like I really can't connect with somebody like that, and it's like if I wanted to go to them for help about why I was feeling the way I was feeling in class, or why I didn't participate as much, you know, most of the times it was due to conflicts on the outside that had to do with me being a Black woman. I felt like I couldn't really do that, so I think it definitely might have hindered my performance here, but just feeling different or feeling like I didn't belong or anything like that, it was nothing like that.

Similarly, Lisa Ann never felt isolated but she was aware of frequently being the only Black female in her courses. She stated:

Isolated, no, I never felt isolated. Well, in some classes I would be the only Black girl, but the girls never made me feel, in school, they never made me feel isolated, never made me feel like I'm less than because of my skin color. I never had that problem.

Anne and Lisa Ann’s experiences demonstrated that comfort in the campus experience does not only come from interactions with classmates but also seeing reflections of themselves in the faculty and staff at the college.

Diana noticed that there were several Black women on staff at her college and she relied on those individuals for support. In recalling her experience, she stated:
There are a lot, I think, and I don't know the numbers, but I believe there are a lot of African American females that are employed at the college. I think more so than White females and probably any other gender or race. I could be totally wrong. I could be totally wrong on that. I don't. Those aren't facts. But there are a lot of women in administration. Maybe there are a lot in the classrooms. There are a lot of women here that look like me.

Seeing females on staff that were reflections of herself gave Diana additional confidence to complete her goals after seeing so many successful Black women. It also underscores the theme of Support.

The level of focus on the end goal was also shared by other participants. Ree and Emilia could not provide examples of issues that they faced related to their identity as a Black female. Ree stated:

Honestly, no. There were some situations where I was like "Okay, this is a little iffy," and stuff like that, but not really. I'm not really the type to pay attention to that type of stuff because I'm just so focused on, okay let me get what I need to do and get out, so I don't have to worry about that type of stuff.

Emilia shared that her previous interactions and exposure in school have been diverse. Personally, I didn't really feel much different because I was exposed to all kinds of different people around me, and genders going in between private school and public school. Through high school, and middle school, and elementary school it wasn't much of a big deal to be different or blend in I guess. So it wasn't really much of an impact for me to go to school here.
Emilia’s experience highlighted her upbringing that provided exposure to others from different backgrounds. Like Emilia, Ree was exposed to others from diverse backgrounds through her parent’s military ties.

Being a Black female on campus solicited mixed experiences from the participants. Unsurprisingly, most of the participants recognized when they were the only or one of few Black females in their programs or specific courses. However, only a few participants experienced feelings of isolation during their tenure as a community college student. With the presumption that community colleges should reflect the makeup of their local communities, it is important to note that the same presumption should be considered for specific programs also. Diversity within individual programs is important, whether it is racial/ethnic, gender, or socioeconomic status, students should feel welcome in their pursuit of a credential.

**Age.**

The final subsidiary theme of the campus experience was age. Although participant ages ranged from 19 to 49-years old, age was a clear factor in their experience on campus. Their experiences represent the diversity of the community college in serving a wide range of individuals. Participants who enrolled in school at a later age discussed being the nontraditional student and emphasized the importance of returning to college when they were ready. Although they were the older student on campus, they still felt like they belonged.

When asked about identities that helped her succeed at the community college, Alexandria definitively said age was a significant factor.
I think probably what helped me feel that way was age, it was just age, maturity level. Because when I was at [four-year institution] and at [four-year institution] before, I was a lot younger and I did not have that same confidence, I didn't have that same confidence in myself. I think when you're younger you worry a lot about what everyone else thinks and about what they're saying, and you let that get into your head, and then that derails you, and you may not perform as well.

…I think age was the biggest thing that was a big thing for me. I did, I was nervous that I wouldn't be able to retain information. I thought my mind wasn't quite as sharp. And that was one of the reasons why I came to [community college], to work on that associate's, to kind of ease my way back into school. But it wasn't easy, let me tell you, I worked.

She admitted that the decision to start school at an older age brought a sense of nervousness. Joslyn experienced similar feelings of uncertainty as it related to her age and returning to school. She expressed:

At times I feel a little embarrassed because when I went to school I said, "God, I'm so old. I can't keep up with these young kids, these kids are just coming out of high school." You know how long it been since I've been in school? And things change all the time. But I did it. You know, I did it.

Feelings of uncertainty or nervousness eventually dissipated. Alexandria and Joslyn both decided to focus on their goals and it aided in their success.

Similar to Alexandria, Diana emphasized the maturity and focus that came with enrolling in college at a later age.
But I would say that it was probably more life experience that really helped me defeat the challenges. I would think it was more that. I say that because, though I was a nontraditional student, I wasn't the only one, there was several others. We were just a different community of students to be honest with you. Not to take anything away from the younger students because they were great. But, I think the division if there was one, there was just a totally different type of drive. …This is my only chance. So, this is my last chance. Again, it's the difference when you're 18 and when you're almost 50.

Elizabeth spoke about the age diversity within the classroom. As someone who enrolled in college in her early thirties, she noticed differences about the younger students.

I was 32, 31. Yeah, I mean the only thing is, I know certain classrooms I'll be like older or there'll be me and maybe one or two older people, but everybody else was like really young. So there's like certain things like I guess they talk too much, or they're late for class, or stupid stuff that come out of people's mouth sometimes. That's like the only thing I've noticed, but mostly it's like me being older than most of the people who was in my group when I first started.

Even though Elizabeth was older than many of the students in her class, she explained that it did not bother her. However, she noticed things that demonstrated various levels of maturity.

For the younger participants, many who began immediately after high school or within one year post-graduation, they also mentioned age as a factor in their campus experience. These experiences did not hinder their journey to completion but often provided opportunities to connect with classmates and build meaningful relationships.
Lisa Ann spoke about how she appreciated the age diversity within her courses. Specifically, she mentioned the various perspectives and experiences.

Yeah, well, just because I was in classes with people who were older, I would get a lot of insight about how to do things with college, because of the stories that they told me. That's why I kind of like having classes with people who are a little older and different ages because you can just, you get different experiences, you get different advice. So it was pretty cool, yeah. Definitely my age had a lot to do with it.

Anne described a situation where she and an older classmate connected.

Yeah, it was a little weird at first. I just had this English class, which some of them were my peers from high school, and some of them were from other high schools that I've known, but there was this one lady I had in my English class, and she was like 40 or 50-something, and it was just weird because we kind of formed a friendship, and it was just, I don't know, it was really weird to me. I was like, “Yeah, this lady's in my class, and she's like, needed my help on something.” It was also kind of weird because she talks about her daughter, and me and her daughter are like the same age and everything, so that was a little weird, so it took time for me to like actually realize, “Okay, college in general doesn't mean that it's going to be a typical college age.” You know?

Both Lisa Ann and Anne mentioned the positive outcomes associated with the age diversity on campus. Whether it was developing a friendship or receiving advice, they acknowledged that community colleges are helpful in serving students from diverse backgrounds and various stages of life.
Similarly, Ree spoke to her experiences with age diversity in her program. She explained some of the challenges that younger and older students faced.

Yeah, because in our classes we do have a mixed group. There are some, I think the youngest girl in our class now, I believe she just turned 20, and there's 21, there's some 30-year-olds. Obviously we're mainly girls in there. We had a couple guys, and I think the oldest one we've had in there was, I want to say maybe about 50 or so, and you can tell the difference between the ages. Because one girl, she came in and she was just, just out of high school. I don't even think she was 20 yet, and you can tell she still had that high school mentality. Versus us, we were a little bit older, and the older ladies, they were struggling a little bit more.

Ree was a younger student in her program but she emphasized that she has often been categorized as “wise beyond her years.” She further elaborated that maturity levels were person specific and dependent on individual experiences.

Two participants spoke about their youth as a source of discomfort. Specifically, Emilia discussed being a recent high school graduate and transitioning into college.

Some because it was a little intimidating going into a classroom fresh out of high school. And I had this math class and it was some that were about the same age as me and then there were some middle age or older in there. So I didn't know if I should feel pressured because these older people are in here and probably know a whole lot more. Or if I should just relax because we're all here to learn the same thing.

Eventually Emilia overcame the intimidation by focusing on her overall goal. In another example, Erica discussed the composition of her academic program.
I think age definitely played a part too. Like I said I was one of the youngest people in my particular group and a lot of the people were older than me by a large amount. A large, big group, they were older than me. And so, it was hard to relate to a lot of them because of that. They were older than me, and a lot of them, if not all of them, had children. I'm only 22 and I don't have any children. I don't have a family, I don't have a husband or a spouse or whatever the case may be that I have depending on me while these people have these lives outside of school that I couldn't necessarily relate to.

The age disconnect was another example of Erica’s struggle to fit into the campus environment.

Age emerged as a significant part of the participants’ campus experience. Regardless of whether the participant was younger or older, the reflections about age were comprised of interactions with individuals from a range of ages. The emergence of age also challenges the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic as having an impact on the participants’ experiences in their journey to completion. While race/ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status each provide insight into the participants’ journeys, age gives an interesting addition to discussions about identity formation. For example, the older participants recognized when it was time to return to school and were committed to finishing their credential, no matter what. Younger participants were often surprised by the connections made with older students but welcomed the relationships that were developed. Again, opportunities like these would not be provided without the diversity of the community college student body.
Interpretation

The major themes that emerged from this study were ambition, support, balance, and campus experience. As mentioned throughout the discussion of the findings, one theme does not independently describe the journey to completion for low-income Black females in the community college. This study found four major themes that often overlapped in their role in the journey to completion for Black females. It is important to note that while these themes are described independently, the strength of this study lies in the combination of all four. This section is an interpretation of the study’s findings with consideration of viewing the themes as a whole and not independent of each other.

Ambition was found to be a major theme of this study and is connected to the other themes. Although there were three subsidiary themes that validated ambition, this theme serves as an underlying theme for support, balance, and campus experience. Regardless of whether the experience was positive or negative, the participants always reverted back to their goal and what they were trying to accomplish. Ambition proved to be integral in the journey to completion for all 13 participants. Additionally, the sense of ambition was often refueled by support systems, finding balance, and positive campus experiences.

Support and campus experience are also interconnected. A subsidiary theme of support was internal support that was generated through the campus. Internal support found on campus contributed to the campus experience and environment. Support was also critical when there were negative interactions with the campus, such as feelings of isolation or lack of representation. To overcome negative interactions, participants often
relied on their external support systems to provide guidance. However, ambition, again, served as an undertone for participants to stay committed to their final goal.

Balance consisted of ways that the participants found to manage multiple areas of their lives. Specifically, participants had to balance parenthood and/or working. To help find the balance that was needed, participants often relied on their support systems to ensure they were successfully managing their responsibilities. For example, parents relied on external support for childcare. The participants could have easily decided to choose their children or their jobs over school. However, their underlying motivation and ambition to finish school helped them find a way to manage all areas. Again, this speaks to the linkage between the four major themes found in this study.

The interesting part of the thematic analysis was the major themes were not all individual factors. Participants possessed individual characteristics, such as ambition, that aided in their success. While individual characteristics may have been the driving force behind much of their success, there were also external factors that contributed to attainment of their goal. The findings of this study highlighted important areas where additional research should be conducted and are detailed in Chapter Five.

Summary

Presented in this chapter were the detailed profiles of the 13 study participants and findings of this phenomenological study designed to explore the experiences of low-income Black females and their journey to completion in the community college. Four themes emerged through thematic analysis: ambition, support, balance, and campus experience. The chapter concluded with a personal interpretation of the findings. Chapter Five will discuss implications and future research.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Chapters One through Four have laid the groundwork for this final chapter. Chapter One consisted of an introduction to this study and its purpose. Chapter Two provided an overview of the relevant literature and areas where further research is needed. Chapter Three gave a detailed description of the methodology for this study, including site and participant selection. In Chapter Four, the findings were discussed. This chapter provides a discussion of the research questions, relevance to the literature, recommendations for practice and additional research, and final thoughts.

Discussion of the Research Questions

This section addresses each research question individually with connections to the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. Specifically, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do low-income Black females in the community college describe and make sense of their journey to college completion?

2. How does the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status affect completion for low-income Black females at the community college?

3. How do low-income Black females in the community college define academic success?
Research Question 1. How do low-income Black females in the community college describe and make sense of their journey to college completion?

A major theme of this study is ambition. Participants in this study relied on their ambition and determination to help them reach their goals. Additionally, participants believed that they could not give up, no matter what obstacles arose during their tenure as a student. Proud moments and obstacles emerged throughout their journey at the community college. However, these situations, positive or negative, helped them push forward and continue to progress towards their goals. These situations could be coined as a form of academic momentum.

Adelman (1999, 2006) is credited with the concept of academic momentum. However, his definition and others rely on a quantitative measurement. For the purpose of this study, academic momentum was defined as a significant event(s), outcome(s), or process(es) that served as a catalyst in the participant’s journey to completion of a community college credential. The situations and events described by the participants served as momentum points. For the participants, many of these events were academically related, such as passing courses or making the Dean’s List. However, participants also experienced life events that also served as academic momentum.

Participants also described their journey as an accomplishment. Graduation emerged as a subsidiary theme because this event symbolized the culmination of hard work, ambition, and success. Becoming a college graduate was something that no one could take away from the participants. It is also an achievement that served as a catalyst for other things, such as the pursuit of additional credentials or becoming an
entrepreneur. The participants’ journeys to completion also lend themselves to elements of self-authorship.

Baxter Magolda (1998) described self-authorship as “the ability to collect, interpret and analyze information and reflect on one’s own beliefs in order to form judgments” (p. 143). Participants in this study were able to build an internal foundation and secure internal commitments to reach their goals of becoming college graduates. Many of the participants emphasized that they started school when they were ready or made decisions about their major based on what they were interested in versus what others told them to do. External influences were limited as participants progressed towards completion.

Although participants limited external influences, they did rely on support as an integral part of their journey to completion. Support emerged as a major theme of the study and consisted of internal and external support. Internal support came from within the college and external support came from the participants’ non-school lives. Support systems served as venues for de-stressing and redirection of focus. Participants also relied on their support systems to help them balance school and personal lives, particularly the participants who were also parents.

Overall, participants described their journey to completion as a positive experience. Although the journey was filled with obstacles, there were also proud moments that combined to serve as momentum points along the way. Participants never allowed anything to deter them from their goal of earning a college credential. This achievement has propelled them to pursue other academic credentials and set other goals, both academic and non-academic.
Research Question 2. How does the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status affect completion for low-income Black females at the community college?

Participants in this study discussed their identity as a Black female and their status as a Pell Grant recipient. Finances emerged as a common reason for choosing the community college. However, participants did not feel their socioeconomic status had an impact on their journey to completion. Being the recipient of a Pell Grant helped offset the costs of attending community college. For many participants, the Pell Grant was only one source of aid received. Private scholarships and other federal aid, such as the GI Bill, were also sources of financial aid for participants. Although finances were a significant factor in their enrollment at the community college, the status as a lower income individual did not have a bearing on their progression to completion.

Socioeconomic status as an insignificant identity in the participants’ journey was a surprising finding. However, a reflection on the interviews and transcripts reveals a possible explanation. When asked directly and probed about socioeconomic status, the participants insisted it did not have an impact. Yet, the participants emphasized the importance of the affordability of the community college. It is posited that the participants’ may be viewing their socioeconomic status from an anti-deficit perspective. The affordability of the community college coupled with the participants’ support systems may have helped alleviate the financial challenges that the participants faced on their journey to completion.

On the other hand, being a Black female on campus emerged as a subsidiary theme in this study. A few participants could not describe situations where their identity
as a Black female had an impact on their journey to completion. However, several participants discussed instances where their status as a Black female brought on feelings of isolation, lack of representation in administration and academic programs, and questions about belonging. These instances were a part of their journey but they did not hinder them. Awareness of their Black female identity played a part in the campus experience for several participants. Yet, their ambition, a major theme, did not allow them to use their identity as a hindrance to accomplishing their goal of earning a credential.

Again, another important observation was that all participants discussed the support that was present in their lives. This support consisted of parents, spouses or partners, other relatives, and individuals on campus. For all participants, their support systems helped them overcome obstacles and difficulties that they faced while a student. It was important that participants had individuals that they could rely on.

In summary, the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status did not have a direct impact on this study’s participants’ journey to completion. The intersection of race/ethnicity and gender did create significant memories in the campus experience of several participants. However, their experiences did not hinder them from achieving their goal. Their experiences provide opportunities for community colleges to reflect on the campus environment. For example, participants cited faculty and staff who provided support them during their tenure at the community college. Additionally, some participants cited the lack of diversity in administration and faculty at their college. Community colleges should reflect on the diversity of their administration, faculty and staff to ensure it is representative of their local communities. Furthermore, the
participant experiences emphasize the uniqueness of community colleges in serving a range of students from different backgrounds. A campus environment that embraces this diversity should also be reflected upon.

**Research Question 3. How do low-income Black females in the community college define academic success?**

Academic success meant various things to the participants. The most common word mentioned by participants was completion. Specifically, participants emphasized completion of a goal. That goal may be completion of a credential or completion of a class with a certain grade. Some participants went a step further to say that completion with demonstrated learning and knowledge was true academic success. If you complete a course or credential and cannot apply the knowledge, then that is not academic success.

Participants emphasized that academic success is a personal journey and should consist of giving your all to reach the goals that you set. Balance was another major theme of this study. The participants managed to juggle their academics and other areas of their lives. Often, the struggle to find balance meant sacrifice to achieve the goals that were set. Participants knew that balance was necessary to meet their personal definition of academic success.

Finally, participants mentioned that academic success meant happiness. Being happy was a necessary part of academic success since the definition is person specific. Academic success should also serve as a catalyst to achieve other goals. Being realistic and having a personal timeline was also important to the participants. Academic success should provide fulfillment.
Summary

Research question one sought to understand how low-income Black females make sense and describe their journey to college completion. The four themes provide insight into this journey and gives an overview of the key findings from 13 participants across three different community colleges. In short, participants had overall positive experiences at the community college that led to positive outcomes.

The second research question aimed to understand the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. The intersection of all three identities did not prove to be significant for the 13 participants. The findings of this study do not imply that these identities do not significantly impact other college students. For this particular sample of students, the intersection was not significant. Several of the participants did discuss their identity as a Black female and how that impacted their journey.

Finally, the third research question sought to understand how the participants defined academic success. Each participant had their own definition of academic success. However, a few key words emerged as common among the participants. Participants emphasized that academic success was specific to the person and their goals.

Discussion

Chapter Four provided details on the four themes that emerged from the thematic analysis using coded data from the interviews of the 13 participants. In the preceding section, the connections to the research questions are synthesized. The final sections of this chapter provide the relevance to the literature, recommendations for practice and research, and concluding thoughts.
Figure 5.1 illustrates the major and subsidiary themes of this study. A circle was used to demonstrate the four themes to show their interconnectedness. Each theme independently cannot fully account for the full experience of the participants’ journey to completion. Taken together, the themes provide a fuller picture of the experiences for the Black females at the community college.

**Figure 5.1.** Themes: Answering the Research Questions. This figure shows the major and subsidiary themes that emerged from the study’s findings.

The first theme was ambition, which describes the ambition, determination, strength, and resilience that was showcased in the journey to completion. Three subsidiary themes validated the development of this theme and were related to significant milestones during the academic journey. These milestones or momentum points were both positive and negative but did not deter the participants from striving to reach their overall goal.
Support emerged as the second theme and describes the assistance that the participants received to help them to succeed in their journey to completion. Two subsidiary themes validated the development of this theme. Specifically, the subsidiary themes described the internal and external support that comprised the support systems. Participants found support systems internal to the institution and personally.

The third theme was balance and highlights the importance of managing multiple roles while being a student. Two subsidiary themes validated this theme and were based on two specific roles that were common among the participants: parent and employee. Interestingly, the juggling of multiple roles led to sacrifices but the participants were okay with making sacrifices to achieve their goals.

Finally, the fourth theme was campus experience and consists of the campus environment and interactions. Three subsidiary themes validated the development of this theme: 1) community college stigma, 2) being a Black female on campus, and 3) age. The subsidiary themes give perspectives about the campus environment and how it was navigated. Similar to the other themes, both positive and negative experiences occurred. However, they both did not hinder the outcome of college completion.

Each of these themes are interconnected and together present a clearer picture of the experiences of low-income Black females and their journey to completion. Although each theme was interpreted independently, each should not be considered as a sole contributor to college completion for the participants. As a researcher, it was interesting to see what themes emerged through the analysis. Ambition serves as the overarching theme because it is connected to every other theme. The undertone of ambition and determination was a constant driving force for the participants to succeed. Balance and
support are connected in that support was often needed to ensure balance was achieved. The campus experience provided insight into areas of support that were internal to the institution.

This study’s findings are not uncommon to find in the higher education literature. However, the applicability and context related to Black females have not been studied extensively. Findings from this study opens the door for additional opportunities to study Black females in the community college and how they achieve success. The next section covers the relevance of these findings to the literature.

**Relevance to the Literature**

Chapter Two outlined the relevant literature for this study’s topic and the associated gaps within the literature. Findings of this study have developed new information that parallels to existing literature. However, this study also highlights the need for additional research to examine the experiences of low-income Black females in the community college. This section provides a detailed review of the current literature and this study’s relevance. The following areas of research are discussed: 1) individual factors, 2) self-authorship, and 3) completion and non-completion.

**Individual Factors**

In Winkle-Wagner’s (2015) integrative review of the literature on Black college women, she indicated that the focus on individual factors, such as identity or self-esteem, could be problematic in understanding the experiences of Black female college students. While individual factors did emerge in the interviews, there were insights into the campus environment that were revealed. For example, participants cited support from individuals on campus and the demographic makeup of their programs. Furthermore, this study did
not only focus on racial/ethnic identity, it incorporated the intersection of gender and socioeconomic status. Winkle-Wagner (2015) posited that the lack of other demographic differences among Black women has also been a gap in the literature.

Instead of narrowing Black females into one monolithic group, this study provides insight into the within-group differences that are present in the Black community. For example, the effect of being a Black female on campus was described in different ways by the participants. Some participants could provide examples of instances where their identity as a Black female was significant. Other participants could not provide examples where their Black female identity had an effect. Additionally, this study targeted three different community colleges to further examine within-group differences by geographic location.

Strayhorn and Johnson (2014) found age to be the strongest predictor of Black women’s satisfaction at the community college. Their quantitative study only included Black women in a transferable program. This study helps validate the significance of age as a factor for Black females in the community college. A subsidiary theme of this study was age. Age was mentioned as a significant factor for both older and younger participants. Both older and younger participants appreciated the age diversity that was experienced at the community college even though they benefited in different ways.

In a study by Winkle-Wagner, Luedke, and McCallum (2017), self-confidence was found to be a common theme among Black female alumnae. Although self-confidence did not emerge as a theme in this study, ambition did emerge. Similar to the Black females in the Winkle-Wagner, Luedke, and McCallum (2017) study, participants in this study had to find ways to persist to attain their goals. The emergence of ambition
as a theme of this study and self-confidence as a theme in other studies posits that additional research is needed on intrinsic characteristics. Literature surrounding grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007) examines the noncognitive trait and how it accounts for the perseverance and passion towards long-term goals. This study did not specifically look at grit as a factor for Black females. However, grit and Black females in the community college provide an area for additional research.

**Self-Authorship**

Self-authorship served as one of the conceptual frameworks for this study (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Critiques of self-authorship often point to its development based on White college students. However, several researchers have examined its applicability to other student groups (Carpenter and Peña, 2017; Torres and Hernandez, 2007).

Baxter Magolda (2001) outlined four phases of the journey towards self-authorship: 1) following formulas, 2) crossroads, 3) becoming the author of one’s life, and 4) internal foundation. Participants in this study provided evidence that they were in the final two stages. Becoming the author of one’s life is when individuals choose their own beliefs. Internal foundation is grounded in an internal belief system. Baxter Magolda (2008) outlined three elements of self-authorship: trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments. In their accounts of the journey to completion, participants detailed the start of the college career, which for many was interrupted, and their path to returning to school. In many instances, the participants allowed outside influences to dictate whether they should go to school and what their major should be. After coming to a crossroads and recognizing the need for their own plan, participants were able to enroll in school and/or decide on a major that fit
their interests. Their journey to completion relied on an internal foundation that was grounded in the belief in themselves.

Similar to Carpenter and Peña’s (2017) study on first-generation undergraduate students, overcoming difficult experiences served as a momentum point for participants in this study. The difficult experiences did not hinder their progress to obtaining a college credential. Carpenter and Peña (2017) also found postsecondary supports to be a catalyst that promoted self-authorship. Participants in this study also found support through internal systems within the college.

Completion and Non-Completion

Literature focused on completion has highlighted student characteristics and institutional characteristics that foster college completion (Mayhew et al., 2016; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014). On the other hand, literature surrounding non-completion has given insights into various characteristics that hinder completion. Johnson and Rochkind (2009) found that the lack of balance between work and school was the top reason adults ages 22 to 30 did not complete college. The survey findings also noted that finances and lack of help from parents or other relatives contributed to non-completion for the surveyed individuals. In this study, balance of work and school was found to be a theme among the participants who worked while attending school. The participants emphasized that finding the balance between school and work was critical to success at the community college. Additionally, balance was also shown to be critical for the participants who were parents.

Tinto (1975, 1993) provided one of the most widely used theories in higher education and understanding student departure. Tinto (1993) referenced the role of
student intentions in departure from higher education. Specifically, there are two forms of individual commitment: goal and institutional. Goal commitment refers to an individual’s commitment to personal education and occupational goals. In this study, the participants demonstrated goal commitment by pushing forward even when difficulties and obstacles arose.

This section outlined the study’s findings to the relevant literature. Chapter Two provides a detailed outline of the literature that was used to design this study. The proceeding sections provide recommendations for practice and research based on the study’s findings.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the findings of this study, this section provides recommendations for practice at the community college. These recommendations are directed towards community college practitioners and are designed as opportunities to increase the completion rates of Black females. The following are ways that this study’s findings can be applied by community college practitioners.

1. *Community colleges should strive to better understand their student demographic through data-informed practices.* The target colleges for this study were selected based on their Black female enrollment and completion rates. Several participants mentioned the lack of representation at their colleges. Specifically, the lack of representation was evident in the administration, faculty, and sometimes students within their academic programs. The representation within the academic programs was mentioned by participants who were admitted to programs that have competitive admissions criteria. To better understand student needs,
community colleges should continue to employ methods of collecting information about student experiences and the campus climate. Specifically, community colleges should utilize focus groups and interviews that allow students to express their thoughts in an open format. Current surveys may not gather the information that gets to the root of the issues experienced by student populations. Therefore, an adjustment in data collection practices may be needed to better understand students and their needs. Better data collection allows for adjustments in policies, procedures, and practices to better serve student populations. Specifically, the collected data should be disaggregated by student demographics to better understand trends and gaps. Black females comprise the third largest student enrollment group in South Carolina community colleges. To better understand how to serve this population, community colleges should employ data-informed practices to justify the need for better resources to serve this group.

2. **Community colleges should ensure that administration and faculty are representative of the student populations they serve.** Findings from this study indicate that representation matters. The Black females in this study found comfort in seeing faculty and staff who looked like them. On the other hand, participants who did not see representation noted this was something missing from their college experience. Fincher, Katsinas, and Bush (2010) found ethnic diversity in executive management teams made a positive difference in student retention rates. It is important to note the authors also found other demographic aspects also matter, such as leadership experience, age, and gender. The authors also noted the impact of a diverse management team on specific groups should
also be further researched. Community colleges should strive for diversity in personnel and ensure that the makeup is representative of the student populations.

3. *Community colleges should ensure that services and resources are flexible and accessible to meet the needs of students.* A major theme of this study was balance. Participants in this study had to find ways to manage school and their lives, including being a parent and working. To meet the needs of the various student populations, community colleges should attempt to make campus resources and services available at times and via opportunities that are convenient to the student. Finding the appropriate times and venues relates to an earlier recommendation of knowing your student demographic and collecting data on their needs. Access to campus services at convenient times for the student provides opportunity for better retention and completion. It also allows students to better manage their lives outside of school. Specific examples include making services available online and on-demand to accommodate students who work and have children or providing areas that are children-friendly or on-campus childcare centers. These suggestions would give students the support needed to help balance their academic and personal lives.

4. *Community colleges should provide opportunities for students from similar backgrounds to connect.* Several participants in this study expressed the lack of opportunities to connect with other Black females either on campus or specifically in their majors. Sister circle groups or other student organizations could provide Black females in the community college opportunities to connect with other Black females on a regular basis. Additionally, connecting with other Black females
would help students share experiences including successes and challenges. Being in the same environment as others who look like you can provide intangible results that ultimately lead to tangible successes, such as college completion.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This section provides recommendations for future research that should be conducted to better understand the experiences of low-income Black females, or Black females broadly, and their experiences at the community college. As described in the literature review, coupled with the findings of this study, several areas of further exploration for Black females and the community college are warranted.

1. *Socioeconomic Status* - Studies that wish to focus on socioeconomic status, specifically Pell Grant recipients, should focus on students who receive full Pell Grant awards. While all participants in this study were Pell Grant recipients, there were also other sources of funding that contributed to their education (e.g., G.I. Bill and college scholarships). For this reason, the significance of socioeconomic status may not have fully emerged. A focus on full Pell Grant recipients would further delimit the level of income and provide opportunities for exploration of the intersection of socioeconomic status and other identities.

2. *Identity Development* – This study identified a subsidiary theme of being a Black female on campus for the larger theme of campus experience. Additionally, age emerged to be a subsidiary theme of campus experience. Participants identified examples of situations where either their age or status as a Black female played a role in their campus experiences. Future research should examine how Black females in the community college develop identities. As open access institutions,
community colleges serve a variety of populations. For this reason, unique opportunities for researchers to explore the identity development of Black females at the community college exist.

3. Age – While age could be a part of the suggested research on identity development, there are also opportunities to examine this area as a standalone topic. Age emerged as a subsidiary theme for this study and was mentioned by each participant as a factor in their experience at the community college. Future studies should examine the influence of age on the experience of Black female community college students. Community colleges provide access to a diverse student population, including traditionally aged and nontraditionally aged students. The uniqueness of this setup should be further explored.

4. Campus Climate – Community colleges must be all things to all people due to the populations that they serve. Participants in this study alluded to some instances of the campus climate where they either felt welcome or isolated. Future research should focus on the examination of community college campus climates and Black females. An examination of the campus climate can provide community colleges with resources and practices that foster student retention and completion.

5. Academic Major – This study did not focus on academic major. However, the sample of students shared similarities in their major. Several participants earned credentials in early care and education, human services, and health sciences. The similarity in major could be due to the target institutions and programs offered. Future research should focus on the types of majors that Black females pursue at the community college. As mentioned in Chapter Two, DuMontheir, Childers, &
Milli (2017) found that Black females were often overrepresented in low wage, female-dominated occupations. Many of these occupations are service and health professions, such as health aides, nursing assistants, and early childcare workers. Community colleges play an integral part in fulfilling the workforce demands. Future research should also focus on Black females, academic majors, and career and workforce pathways.

6. **Non-completion** – This study examined the journey to college completion for Black females at the community college. Findings provided insight into the ways that low-income Black females found success at the community college. On the other hand, there are still numerous Black females who do not complete college. Future research should focus on Black females who do not complete community college to gain better insight into ways that retention and completion can be improved.

7. **Different State** – This study was limited to Black females enrolled in three community colleges in one state. Although the findings were interesting considering this is a Southern state with a long and significant racial history, the findings are not generalizable to other states. Future studies with similarities to this one should be conducted in other states to determine if similar findings emerge. For example, studies could be conducted in Northern states, such as Virginia’s community college system or the City or State University of New York (CUNY or SUNY) systems. States with similar demographics to South Carolina could also be studied to compare and contrast findings.
The lack of literature on Black females in the community college provide opportunities for both qualitative and quantitative research. Researchers should consider both methodologies, in addition to mixed methods studies. The topics outlined in this section provide examples of areas for further research based on the findings of this phenomenological study.

**Summary and Final Thoughts**

This phenomenological study highlights the experiences of low-income Black females in the community college as they progressed towards college completion. In interviews with 13 participants, there were four themes that developed: 1) ambition, 2) support, 3) balance, and 4) campus experience. These themes emphasized the importance of personal and institutional characteristics in fostering progress towards completion.

Academic momentum (Adelman, 1996; 2001) and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1998) framed the significance of this study. Both frameworks were used as foundations for viewing this phenomenon. Academic momentum was demonstrated through positive and negative events and situations that did not hinder the participants in their journey to completion. Self-authorship was revealed through the culmination of the participant experiences and reflections on their journey. The findings of this study will be useful to community college practitioners and researchers as they seek to learn more about this student population.

The generalization of this study’s findings is limited to the three institutions that were targeted and individuals with similar backgrounds. Although the results from this study cannot be applied to other community colleges or students, it does illustrate the significance of understanding the various populations that community colleges serve.
Better understanding of these populations can lead to better policies, procedures, and practices to help them succeed.

In conducting this study and as described in my positionality statement, I bring certain perspectives and experiences in my identity as a Black female. Being a Black female has always been a factor in my academic and professional lives. I am and always have been the only or one of few Black women in classrooms and meetings. Therefore, the combination of my racial and gender identities guide how I view and navigate the world. As a South Carolina native and resident, I naturally thought being a Black female is significant for most of my sister counterparts, particularly those in this geographic area. However, this study showed me this is not always the case. The participants in this study are aware of their Black female identities. I do not think that anyone who is Black can ever ignore their blackness. But, for the participants, their identities as Black women did not have major effects on their progression to completion at the community college.

Additionally, community colleges are commuter campuses. Many students come to campus, go to class, and then go home or to work. Unlike a four-year, residential campus where students are around each other constantly, community college students have the opportunity to compartmentalize their academic and personal lives. Going to class is only a segment of their weekdays, which may be 3 or 4 hours a day, and the rest of their time is spent living their regular lives. For these reasons, this may also be a factor in why socioeconomic status did not emerge as a major effect on their persistence to completion either. The participants touted the affordability of the community college as a major factor but after the tuition was paid and no longer a factor, perhaps the participants just went back to living their regular lives.
As a researcher and practitioner, these findings also beget the question of what is next. I am interested in knowing whether similar results would be found at other community colleges in South Carolina or would the results differ. Scholars and practitioners often highlight race and socioeconomic status as factors in college student success. While these characteristics or identities may have some influence in whether a student succeeds or not, I wonder if we sometimes place too much emphasis on these characteristics. A personal insight from this study is the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Regardless of their race/ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status, the participants had a strong internal desire to complete their degree and there were outside influences or support that aided them in the process. On the other hand, if this study had been conducted on non-completers, I wonder how the results would differ on these factors being a hindrance or not. Based on this study’s findings, low-income Black females in the community college find ways to accomplish their goals through intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that are independent of their race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

An interesting and significant finding for me personally were the things that were not said but acknowledged. With the majority of the participants there was a mutual, yet unspoken, acknowledgement of success. I silently applauded them for accomplishing their goals of becoming a college graduate and they silently applauded me for being a doctoral student and conducting this study. Side conversations drifted into talking about our personal goals and sharing words of encouragement. As Black women, we saw each other and the unspoken acknowledgment of this cannot be described but is so meaningful.
Finally, this study reminds me that identity groups are never monolithic. People experience the world in different ways even if they share a racial/ethnic or gender background. Everyone does not view the world through the same lens and this must be considered when working with students. A barrier for one student may be a motivator for another student. Most importantly, research focused on students in the community college must continue to evolve to better understand the diverse group of students who choose to attend these institutions. I challenge myself and others to make this happen and to be unapologetic about it.
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Dear ____,

Congratulations on your success as a community college student! My name is Rosline Sumpter and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policies Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Educational Administration, and I would like to invite you to participate. This study is funded by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges.

I am studying the journey to college completion for low-income Black/African American females in the community college. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet with me twice for interviews about your experiences in the community college.

Because you have already completed your credential, or are very close to completing your credential, you have been identified as a model of success. For this study, you will be asked questions about your experience being Black/African American and female in the community college, your socioeconomic status, how you define academic success, and your journey to college completion. You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. The meetings will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place and should last about 45 minutes each. Each interview will be audiotaped so that I can accurately transcribe what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by me and destroyed upon completion of the study.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location at the University of South Carolina. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

You will receive a $25 gift card for each interview that you participate in for the study. Therefore, you can be awarded up to $50 for your time.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 803-XXX-XXXX or xxxxxxxx@mailbox.sc.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Douglas Smith, 803-XXX-XXXX, xxxxxxxx@mailbox.sc.edu.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please contact me at the number or email listed below to discuss participating.

With kind regards,
APPENDIX B – IRB APPROVAL

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH
APPROVAL LETTER for EXEMPT REVIEW

Rosline Sumpter Sumpter  
820 Main Street  
Columbia, SC 29208 USA

Re: Pro00083339

Dear Rosline Sumpter:

This is to certify that the research study *Getting to Graduation: The Journey of Low-Income Black Females in the Community College* was reviewed in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2), the study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on 11/2/2018. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the study remains the same. However, the Principal Investigator must inform the Office of Research Compliance of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research study could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this study was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

All research related records are to be retained for at least three (3) years after termination of the study.
The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). If you have questions, contact Lisa Johnson at lisaj@mailbox.sc.edu or (803) 777-6670.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson
ORC Assistant Director and IRB Manager
APPENDIX C – DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name
2. Pseudonym/Name for Research
3. Hometown
4. Do you identify as African American or Black?
5. Do you identify as female?
6. What was your first semester of enrollment at the community/technical college?
7. How old were you when you first enrolled at the community/technical college?
8. Were you the recipient of a Pell Grant award during your time at the community/technical college?
9. What is your current occupation and number of hours worked per week?
10. What is your current annual income?
11. Parent’s highest level of education
12. High school GPA
13. Major(s) at the community college
14. What degree did/will you earn?
15. List of co-curricular activities or campus programs
16. Did you continue your education beyond the community college?
17. What other institutions have you attended?
18. Why did you want to participate in this research study?
APPENDIX D – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Basic Information about the Interview

Pseudonym:

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Introduction

• Introduction of researcher

• Discuss the purpose of the study

• Provide structure of the interview

• Ask if participant has any questions

• Ask participant to complete the demographic questionnaire

Interview Content Questions

Where appropriate, the interviewees will be asked to expand upon their answers.

Biographical Questions

1. Tell me about yourself. (ice breaker)

   Probing questions: Where are you from originally? Tell me about your family.

2. Tell me about your decision to enroll in college. What did that process look like?

   How did you come to be a college student?
Probing questions: Are you the first in your family to attend college? Was there anyone who helped in your college process?

3. Why did you choose the community college for your college goals?

   Probing questions: Did you apply to attend any other institutions? Do you enjoy attending this college? Why or why not?

4. Describe a time during your college career that made you feel proud or accomplished.

5. Did you experience a time during your college career that made you think you would not complete your credential? If so, describe your experience. How did you overcome this obstacle?

6. What personal traits or characteristics helped you progress to completion of your credential?

7. When considering being Black, female, and from a lower income, what ways, if any, did these three identities impact your journey to college completion?

   a. Are there any other identities that impacted your journey to completion?

8. How do you define academic success?

9. What advice would you give other Black females who are trying to complete college?

10. Is there anything that you expected me to ask that I did not ask you? Or anything else you think might be helpful for me to know about our topic today?

Closing

- Thank participant for participating

- Assure the participant of confidentiality
• Discuss how participant will receive results and a follow up interview may be necessary