The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore how Black alumnae, women who have attained undergraduate degree completion, perceived their cultural and social capital and its influence on post-graduate career outcomes. For a Black woman seeking to make the transition from college to career, there are many institutional structures and combative forces that impede her career progression. Through individual semi-structured interviews with eight Black alumnae who attended the same minority serving institution, participants shared their experiences in the campus setting and their perceptions of how access to certain knowledge, information, and relationships during college helped them attain post-graduate career outcomes. Findings indicated that meaningful relationships and resources, which provided social capital and navigational capital, made the women's time in college a richer developmental experience and aided in their transition from campus to career. Participants also discussed and modeled ways they individually contributed to their own college experiences. The findings aligned with the extant literature which captured the depth of parental emotional support and encouragement, and the support of peers. This study builds on the influence of institutional agents and extends understanding by illuminating the forms of capital transmitted by agents to support career aspirations. However, the study reached a different conclusion from the literature regarding the nature of the relationships between the Black alumnae and faculty – they lacked depth of mentorship. Higher education can better support Black undergraduate women by creating international networks within the university and integrating the career center into the academic experience to help students become aware of the assets, forms of capital, they possess which they can leverage to transition from campus to career.

CULTURAL WEALTH, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND CAREER OUTCOMES:

BLACK ALUMNAE IN A MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTION

IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

by

Nicole R. Hall

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Approved by

_____
Dr. Katherine Cumings Mansfield
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

This has been a transformational experience and I have so many people to thank for their encouragement and support along the way. Faith is foremost, and I am grateful to God for His favor throughout this process. I could sense His blessings on every aspect of the study. I cannot adequately express my deep appreciation to my family – my loving husband Winston, and my incredible sons, Ethan and Ryan – for their sacrifice and encouragement. I also want to thank my Dad and my sister, Rhonda, for cheering me on and always being available to talk, listen, and edit (thank you Rhonda!). I am blessed to have in-laws, who feel like blood family, who have prayed and encouraged every step of the way – thank you Michelle, Jimmy, Wayne, Elise, Cheryl, and Michael for your support.

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achieve their goal of attaining a college degree. Thank you Alicia, Antoinette, Amanda, Bella, Bria, Melissa, Tasha, and Renee for trusting me with your stories. You inspired me and I am so proud of what you have already done, and what you will accomplish as you move forward in life. It has been an absolute honor to learn from you!

This dissertation written by Nicole R. Hall has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This study explores how Black alumnae, women who have attained undergraduate degree completion, perceive their cultural and social capital and its influence on post-graduate career outcomes. The concept of "career outcomes" refers to how new college graduates fare in their careers within six months of graduation. Through my vocational focus I have developed subject matter expertise on career outcomes which motivates my interest in this topic. I have 20 years of experience leading career services on three university campuses. Throughout my professional career, I have witnessed how possession of certain knowledge, skills, capabilities, and networks advantage some graduates over others when competing for employment opportunities. Along these lines, I have observed the unique challenges Students of Color face when making the transition from college to career. These challenges include limited access to contacts in influential career positions, navigating employer expectations that they look or speak a certain way to conform with dominant perspectives, and inadequate access to family members who have attained a degree and made the college to career transition.

As a Black woman, I grew up in the middle class with access to well-resourced schools, as well as a network of family and friends who could guide and assist me in my career goals and transition to the workforce. While many of my students do not have these same privileges, I theorize that their access to cultural and social capital can be a difference-maker in achieving successful career outcomes. I want to uncover the aspects of cultural and social capital that have contributed to students' transition to the workforce and pursuit of advanced degrees, so these skills, abilities, and sources of knowledge can be recognized and harnessed to combat inequitable outcomes for Students of Color in higher education and the workforce. To accomplish this goal, I want to specifically focus my research on Black women who hold undergraduate degrees as they

face unique challenges when pursuing career pathways. While the literature touts the rich forms of cultural wealth Black women obtain from their families and communities, these women must also navigate systems that promote inequities. Despite possessing forms of capital, Black women often remain disadvantaged and more needs to be understood.

Framing the Problem

Recent studies have shown Black women are the most educated group in the U.S., graduating from college in the highest percentages across racial and gender lines (Katz, 2020). Despite their degreed status, Black women continue to make far less money than their white counterparts and are more likely to work in the lowest-paying occupations (Reeves & Guyot, 2017). When they arrive on the job, they often face hostile work environments and discriminatory practices (Curtis, 2020). Obstacles associated with equity, access, power, and privilege create these career disparities for Black women. These obstacles are aptly elucidated through Critical Race Theory (CRT), the foundational framework upon which Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, a key conception for this study, is based. "CRT is a framework that can be used to theorize, examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on social structures, practices and discourses" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70).

CRT underscores the economic disparities in the Black community, which are historical and systemic, and CRT has helped me deepen my understanding of three key factors that influence career trajectories for Black women. First, Black women must grapple with the intersectionality of their identities in terms of gender and race which compounds the issues they navigate related to equity, access, and power dynamics. In fact, a study by Dickens and Chavez (2018) identified the need for Black women in the early career stage to shift their identities,

including changing how they speak and their behavioral patterns, to combat stereotypes. Likewise, Dickens and Womack (2020) acknowledged the unique challenges faced by early career Black women seeking to foster a positive professional identity in the workplace. Second, racism is embedded in the social structures of the United States. "Recent research indicates that racial inequality in income persists and is likely to continue to be a dominant factor in the twenty-first century; and in the employment arena, high-paid jobs tend to be reserved for whites" (Savas, 2014, p. 507). Racial inequality is evident when considering employment and salary data, however the broader sociocultural context, according to Buehler et al. (2018), "is particularly important when examining stress and resiliency among African Americans and their families given their continued experiences of individual and institutional racism" (p.434). Third, the work environment is often wrought with microaggressions that Black women must navigate to advance in their careers. For example, Corbin et al. (2018) made the case that "Black women find themselves on the defensive when encountering everyday racial microaggressions in predominantly and historically White spaces such as higher education institutions" (p.627). Microaggressions occur during cross-race interactions in which minorities are subtly put down through covert racial appeals (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). So, for a Black woman seeking to make the transition from college to career, there are many institutional structures and combative forces that impede her career progression.

As Holland (2017) summarized, "At the intersections of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, citizenship, and families' college-going histories, there seem to be numerous roadblocks in terms of academic opportunity, access, and achievement for students from traditionally disenfranchised populations" (p. 796). Many researchers have sought to explain these roadblocks for Students of Color by applying Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital and social

capital theories. Bourdieu (1986) sees cultural capital as "a form of capital which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications" (p.82), i.e., at the point when I obtain a PhD, my degree status will become a form of cultural capital through which I gain privilege. Bourdieu (1986) also asserts that cultural capital is transferable into social capital, which is comprised of social connections, and can likewise be converted into economic capital. I also find it useful to see what other scholars say about Bourdieu's cultural and social capital. McDonough and Nunez (2007) explained that Bourdieu (1977) conceptualized cultural and social capital to try to address why students from higher socioeconomic classes consistently attain higher educational outcomes. McDonough and Nunez (2007) explained that cultural capital and social capital are passed to children by their socioeconomically privileged parents to maintain or advance their economic status. Thus, these forms of capital enable the wealthy to maintain their class status by providing access to privileged information, resources, and social networks.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) indicated that both cultural and social capital are considered valuable to society; and coupled with the perception that only those in the higher strata of society possess valuable capital, points to a deficit view of social mobility for People of Color. However, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model offers a compelling counterpoint by promoting the assets, the forms of capital, that People of Color possess. For Black people, in particular, the possession and utilization of cultural capital is centuries old. As Banks (2009) recounted, "Historically, Black people have utilized their cultural capital to navigate race and class oppression, and among other things, to get educated" (p. 143). In their reflections on the funding of Black schools, Franklin and Savage (2004) depicted how "African Americans mobilized their collective resources to establish social and cultural institutions that

would benefit not just individuals, but the entire group" (p. xiv). That is, members of the Black community contributed varying forms of capital to help the schools flourish. Franklin and Savage (2004) also shared the importance of the cultural capital Black teachers provided in the form of their personal and professional commitment to their students.

While this historical reflection powerfully depicts how Black people galvanized various forms of capital to educate their communities' children, in Bourdieuian fashion this was not capital considered valuable by the privileged in society: "One of the dangers of Bourdieu's focus on high culture as most socially valuable is that the cultural capital that groups other than the privileged elite possess, share, and utilize goes unnoticed and unrecognized" (Banks, 2009, pp. 15-16). Banks (2009) asserted, "For Black undergraduate women, the dominant view of cultural capital as a combination of educational resources, skills, intellect, and practice often highlights what Black women are *lacking* in these areas" (p. 15, emphasis added). Furthermore, as an educator, I have observed that this deficit view can affect Black girls in their K-12 schooling, chances for attending college, and future career prospects. This is important because "deficit ideology is a perspective that blames an individual student (or her family or culture) for lacking the appropriate skills and behaviors necessary for academic success rather than examining institutional norms and values" (Castro, 2013, p. 302).

In contrast, asset-based perspectives acknowledge the rich capital that Black women already possess. McDonough and Nunez (2007) recounted, "In an educational environment, cultural capital includes attitudes, self-presentation, and behaviors that are used to succeed in school, attain a degree, and pursue an occupation" (p. 145). This statement underscores the critical importance of understanding the cultural wealth that Black women not only bring from their communities to campus, but also the new forms of capital they acquire during their degree

pursuits which can foster equitable degree and career outcomes. Deficit narratives can be combatted if higher education administrators not only have an awareness of the capital Black women possess but also commit to providing resources to help them further galvanize this wealth.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to understand what the Minority Serving Institution (MSI) is currently doing to meet the needs of minority students, to understand the experience of Black alumnae at the MSI, and to explore how the perceptions held by Black alumnae regarding access to certain knowledge, information, and relationships during college may have helped them attain post-graduate career outcomes. Across community cultural wealth (CCW) studies, researchers have adopted an asset-based perspective, employing the CCW framework to illuminate the many forms of cultural wealth that students possess. Yosso (2005) emphasized that forms of capital are nurtured by Communities of Color in social and familial contexts, yet researchers indicate that more needs to be understood about the influence of parents and families. Roksa and Silver (2019, as cited in Hamilton & Nielsen, 2018) indicated that "knowledge of parenting near the end of college, during the transition to the labor force, is the least developed, despite the fact that employment is one measure of college success" (p. 112). Additionally, Pearson and Bieschke (2001), in their examination of familial influences on the career development of professional African American women, made several recommendations for future research to

- "further investigate how early influences, such as family, affect the development and strength of self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations for African American women,

- examine how African American women in varying stages of career development make meaning of the influence of family experiences, and

- better understand how family socioeconomic status plays into career development" (p.308).

My study and corresponding research question will explore the perceptions Black alumnae have of various forms of cultural wealth and social capital, the relationships influencing the acquisition of forms of capital, and the role social and cultural capital played during college and as they pursued career outcomes. By leveraging outcomes, socioeconomic family data, and the collective stories of these women, my study will purposively expand our consideration of the variety of social and cultural capital available to Black women and discern how higher education professionals might harness this knowledge to facilitate student development and optimal career outcomes.

While some studies validated the forms of CCW students acquired through family and communities and brought to campus (Holland, 2017; Denton et al., 2020), others reflected the ways in which individuals within the institutional setting enable both strengthening of existing and acquisition of new forms of capital (Jayakumar et al., 2013; Murillo et al., 2017). For example, institutional agents, as defined by Stanton-Salazar (1997), are those who "transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities . . . [so that] a segment of society gains the resources, privileges, and support necessary to advance and maintain their economic and political position in society" (p. 6). Exploring the role of faculty, administrators, and others on campus as institutional agents for Black alumnae during their undergraduate experience is an essential part of my study; thus, applying Stanton-Salazar's (1997) institutional agents social capital framework will be useful.

The relationships and resources within the institution will be important, but I also want to gain an understanding of the institution's context as an MSI. According to the Office of Civil Rights, housed within the U.S. Department of the Interior, MSIs are "institutions of higher education that serve minority populations" (U.S. Department of the Interior, n.d.). The Office of Civil Rights promotes the ways their federal funding supports the efforts of MSIs to foster social and educational skill development of students, to help them overcome racial and socioeconomic disparities. In addition to MSIs, the U.S. Department of Education provides funding and resources directed to support ethnic minorities enrolled in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AAPISIs).

Recognition by the Department of Education of the inequities faced by minority students reflects an expectation that institutions who receive funding would demonstrate progress toward achieving more equitable outcomes for their students. I was intentional in my selection of an MSI for the site of the study as I would expect this type of institution to be more keenly focused on supporting minorities in comparison to a Predominantly White Institution. By engaging in document analysis, reviewing relevant institutional data, and discussing the experiences of the study participants, more can be understood about the support provided by the MSI.

In addition to understanding the role of the MSI as well as familial and institutional relationships, the focus of my study on career outcomes will yield insights into the campus to career transition, a time period rarely explored in cultural and social capital literature. For example, Smith and Gayles (2017) explored undergraduate women engineering students' post baccalaureate career decisions and indicated that "we don't know much about women's career decisions immediately after college and the influencing experiences that contribute to those

choices" (p. 1214). Smith and Gayles (2017) also indicated a need to focus on the intersectionality of race and gender to better understand these experiences. It is my hope that my study will reveal the knowledge and experiences influencing career decision making and career outcomes for Black undergraduates, along with the unique challenges presented by intersectional identities, so that as a practitioner I can help other higher education administrators understand what they can do as institutional agents to magnify the capital Black women possess.

Definition of Terms

The participants in the study will be referred to as *Black*, rather than *African American*, to embrace historical representations of race and the long-standing challenges faced by Black women across the centuries. *Black* is capitalized throughout the study along with *Students of Color* and *Communities of Color* to underscore that while race deeply impacts the lived experience, there is a richness of culture and knowledge that is uniquely possessed by these individuals and communities. As all research participants will be Black women undergraduate degree holders within the 2-3 years preceding the study, they will be referred to as *Black alumnae* or in the cases of individual accounts, as a *Black alumna*. The study seeks to understand perceptions of community cultural wealth and social capital and of their influence on post-graduate career outcomes. "Community cultural wealth" or "CCW" will be used interchangeably with cultural wealth and forms of capital. "Institutional Agents Social Capital" or "IASC" will be used interchangeably with social capital and forms of institutional support. "Career outcomes" refers to how new college graduates fare in their careers within six months of graduation. Throughout the study, career outcomes will be used interchangeably with first-destination and post-graduate outcomes.

Research Questions

This case study seeks to explore how Black undergraduate alumnae from a Minority Serving Institution (MSI), Woodington University (UW), in the Southeastern United States perceive their cultural and social capital and the ways in which they have leveraged their capital to support their transition from campus to career. I endeavor to understand the role, socioeconomic factors, and influence of familial and community relationships, as well as the role of institutional agents, in acquisition of cultural and social capital and career outcomes. Through the exclusive focus of this study on Black women, I also seek to understand how the women reflect on their intersectional identities and the challenges this unique positionality presents in the transition to career, as well as their reflections on how cultural and social capital contributes to their identity development. The study will address the following research question (RQ):

What are Black alumnae perceptions of their experiences at Woodington University?

The purpose of the RQ is to explore participants' lived experiences at UW. That is, I intend to explore their experiences on campus, as well as their perceptions of cultural and social capital, how they acquired and leveraged capital, and in what ways the capital may have helped them attain their personal and professional goals. The primary focus of the study is to understand the lived experiences of the women, however Chapter Four, true to case study design, will capture a rich description of each participant/case before transitioning to the major findings in Chapter Five.

Research Setting

Not far from a quaint downtown interspersed with historic and modern buildings is the campus of Woodington University. The beauty of the campus is accented by tall, majestic trees that line the avenues and surround buildings throughout the campus. Everywhere you look there

are different variations of flowers, shrubs, trees, and plants to take in, each uniquely beautiful

and different from the next. The cobblestone and brick pathways provide a charming frame for

the impeccable landscapes throughout the campus. Beyond the beauty of UW, the campus is

known for its focus on green spaces and sustainability. Some students make their way to classes,

backpacks in tow, via skateboarding, biking, or walking, while drivers wait patiently as groups of

students meander across the street to their destinations. Other students take time to enjoy the lush

green spaces on campus, by joining friends for a spontaneous game of frisbee or lounging on a

blanket and enjoying the rays of the sun. Simply by walking the campus, one can observe that

the rich ethnic diversity of students is striking and showcases the wealth of identities found on

campus. On some of the most beautiful weather days at UW, it is not uncommon to exit the

student union only to be greeted by a sea of students lounging on blankets across the grassy

lawn. The lawn not only provides a place for respite and recreation, but it also keeps students

informed about events and activities taking place on campus. On any given day, students will

pass lawn signs that promote career fairs and blood drives, and also that rally their attention to

critical campus concerns like violence prevention as well as moments of reflection and

appreciation garnered by observing a multitude of flags on the lawn symbolizing the

commitments of their fellow students to military service.

UW also features an environment where students can go to restaurants surrounding the

campus to eat or to meet friends for happy hour. Whether engaging in the long-standing campus

tradition of enjoying hot dogs made just the way you like them or grabbing a meal at one of the

modern eateries interspersed with the campus dorms, UW provides many spaces and places for

students to gather. The campus also is a haven for those who enjoy recreational activities. From

the winding walking paths to the golf practice greens, to the tennis, volleyball, basketball courts,

and recreation field, students have numerous opportunities to play and exercise. This MSI also features a state-of-the-art recreation center with over 200,000 square feet of space. Visitors are greeted by students lined up on treadmills overlooking views of the campus and downtown, and they will hear the squeak of sneakers from pick-up games happening on multiple courts. The eye of the observer is in the next moment drawn up to the expansive climbing wall as students are belayed while trying to reach the summit. Within this community-oriented space, visitors will likely hear the laughter of local children as they head to or from a swim class or may witness a throng of students in business suits who are entering one of the multipurpose gyms to meet a room of employers eagerly seeking to fill open positions at the career fair. Students can be part of the recreation center action by participating in intramurals and club sports, or they can go into fan mode as they cheer on 17 Division I athletic men's and women's teams in the many stadiums, fields, and courts throughout campus.

The environment and culture of the campus offers many engagement opportunities for UW students including curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular resources. The beginning of the academic year is always marked by a sea of tables lining the halls of the student union and the college avenues as bubbly representatives from more than 300 student organizations on campus seek the attention of passersby with candy and other giveaways that might woo them to join. Student organizations reflect a myriad of interests of the study body; from groups that align based on shared identities, to organizations that create cultural experiences for their members and the campus. There are also specialty groups focused on the arts, club sports, academic interests, community service, professional aspirations, and political and religious values. Like most campuses, UW has an active social fraternity/sorority life. In January every year, the signage of different groups is seen throughout campus as the recruitment process begins for new pledges.

Within a short period of time, an active observer will notice the pledges on campus, most notably the women who are often attired in dresses that never seem warm enough for the cold of the winter as they move between pledging activities.

While the bustle of students and signage reflects the prominence of student activities at UW, there are also significant academic spaces that capture the attention of students. Housed within the traditional architecture of centuries old and distinctively modern buildings are a number of resources to support student learning. In the basement of one of these old structures students find a digital recording studio. In this out of the way space, students can reserve one of several rooms with acoustical barriers featuring the latest technologies for recording and executing creative projects. This R2 university, encompassing high research activity, also provides other practical resources to support academic learning, such as the speaking and writing center. Upon arrival in the center, pairings of students and peer consultants can be seen huddled around tables, reviewing projects and processing timely feedback. Whether by advance appointment or walk in, students find welcoming center staff who make it easy to access the support they need. Observations of the spaces on campus also reflect the focus UW has on meeting needs of specific student populations. The McNair Scholars program, a mentorship program oriented to first-generation students of color, as well as the Intercultural Office, Accessibility Services, and Veterans Services are all offices designated to meet specialized student needs.

Additionally, the Division of Student Affairs, which houses some of these specialized services, also focuses on addressing broader student needs through drug, alcohol, and violence prevention, professional development (including student employee development), community development, and ensuring student needs for food and housing are addressed while also

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integrating the voices of parents. Whether choosing among various living learning communities, visiting the food pantry to address food insecurities, gaining new skills through professional development, or enlisting advice to navigate difficult situations, students engage in the culture of care fostered by Student Affairs staff to create a holistic learning environment for all students. Housed within the division is the Career Services Center. The recently renovated suite reflects a bright, engaging space with vivid tones of yellow, blue, and gray horizontal painted stripes on the walls and thickly cushioned chairs beckoning students to stay a while. Students are greeted by screens reminding them to apply for on-campus job opportunities and prompting them to conveniently scan a QR code with their phones to learn about upcoming events and resources. Students who need career readiness support can drop in to meet with a peer advisor or schedule an appointment with a career coach. When students stop by, they are escorted to the center's computer lab where a cheerful student attendant stands ready to help them with their internship or job searches. Students can also access support virtually by logging on to Handshake, the center's career management site, to connect with over 550,000 employers promoting job and internship opportunities.

Preparing students for career success is a commitment of UW, and they tout the work of their CSC on the listing of university commitments on the website, through prominent billboard advertisements on major thoroughfares, and by showcasing stories in campus newsletters and the university magazine. The university's focus on success also reflects additional commitments to student development through academic support, experiential learning, and integration of global experiences. Additionally, UW intentionally promotes an inclusive and collaborative learning environment. Detailed commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging are displayed in vibrant charts and tables on the website, along with dashboard metrics to showcase progress

toward key initiatives including increasing the percentage of underrepresented racial/ethnic faculty as well as the percentage of faculty and staff who have completed anti-racism and anti-bias training. UW's commitments are far-ranging, yet their results across these focus areas are not comprehensively reflected on the website. Rankings in publications including *U.S. News & World Report*, *Princeton Review*, *Washington Monthly*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Forbes* recognize UW for diversity, social mobility, return on investment, and public service. This study will explore the experiences of Black alumnae at this MSI, thus recounting any transformational impacts emerging from these areas receiving external validation, as well as other resources provided by the university. While the campus culture appears to be vibrant with a robust blend of curricular and co-curricular experiences in which students can engage, this study will provide insights into how UW commitments translate into actually meeting student needs during their degree pursuits and as they pursue post-graduate career outcomes.

Description of Methods

Beyond this understanding of the context of the campus setting, utilizing case study design to address the research question – *What are Black alumnae perceptions of their experiences at Woodington University?* – will help me create a more detailed description of the case, as expected of case study methodology (Yin, 2006), and defining the case is an essential first step. Yin (2009) aptly summarized, "If an individual is the case being studied then the individual is the primary unit of analysis, and information about the relevant individual would be collected, and several such individuals or 'cases' might be included in a multiple case study" (p.29). The study incorporates a multiple case approach, with the stories and experiences of each study participant as the primary unit of analysis. This approach corresponds with the purpose of the study to explore the perceptions of graduates. Utilizing a multiple case study methodology

will enable the exploration of differences within and between the Black alumnae. Yin (2003) advised that the researcher should choose cases carefully, so it is possible to predict similar or contrasting results across cases based on a theory. The shared setting of UW and the time-bound graduation dates, which fall within the 2019-2020 academic year, will create proper context for drawing comparisons. Additionally, the previously stated research question will help identify the relevant information to be collected about the Black alumnae.

The university's survey results of "first-destination career outcomes", including all undergraduates who reported outcomes data and corresponding job sources during the 2019-2020 academic year, will offer context for what UW already understands about its grads and will also be utilized for participant selection. These data reports will be secured through the campus career center. Participants for the study will be invited to participate in virtual interviews to share their experiences. It is this engagement with in-depth interviews that will enable me to address the purpose of this study, by uncovering the unique stories and lived experiences of participants. I will provide a detailed description of my study design in Chapter 3 to further explain the qualitative case study approach.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

While the methodological design is a critical aspect, I also consider how I am situated as a researcher within the study. I am passionate about specifically engaging in a study with Black alumnae, but I understand that can also present complications. Marshall and Rossman (2011) stated, "When the researcher shares an aspect of social identity with participants, [they] should be cautious about assuming that [they] understand the interview partner's experience just because [they are] a man [sic] too" (p. 159). I am Black and female, and I have the shared experience of holding an undergraduate degree, yet I must be careful not to conflate the

participants' experiences with my own. However, my shared race/ethnicity is also an advantage as it can yield a level of credibility and natural connection with participants and inform my line of inquiry. As Anderson (2000) advised, "Where the perceived gender and race of the researcher are variables influencing the phenomena being observed or influencing access to the phenomena, sound research design must pay attention to the gender and racial makeup of the researchers" (p. 61). My study focuses exclusively on Black women and the phenomena of cultural wealth and social capital, so my shared identity with participants as Black and female is not only an important aspect of the research, but I am also centered within the research. Malhotra Bentz and Shapiro (1998) referred to this centering as "mindful inquiry" in which my awareness of, and reflection on, my world is embodied in my research. My world perspective as a Black woman, as a higher education administrator, and as someone with specialist knowledge of career outcomes will contribute to the mindfulness of my approach to this inquiry. I currently lead a campus career center and have done so at three universities across 20 years, including holding this leadership role at a minority serving institution. I acknowledge that how I am currently situated along with my career experience can influence my execution of the study because of the contextual similarities with the university in this study. My background and knowledge are both a strength and a complication.

Ardovini-Brooker (2002) advocated that knowledge is context specific, so I need to be mindful that while my knowledge is not independent from me, I cannot assume the generalizability of my knowledge or experiences within the context of the study. Additionally, Cousin (2010) asserted that "researchers have to consider whether they are inviting accounts that are overdetermined by a single identity position" (p. 14). Because the identities of Black and female are paramount to the phenomena under study and central to my identity as researcher, I

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am mindful that I need to weigh all facets of the lived experiences and stories of my study participants to ensure that both race and gender are properly situated within my analysis and recommendations. Embracing my lived experience as integral to the research also requires that I consider the ways in which I relate to the women in my study. Olesen (2000) advised "gazing back" and taking the view of the participants rather than seeking unilateral control over relations in the study (p. 356). To me, this means that the voices of the participants will guide our conversations, and in instances where I may not fully understand their views, I will inquire further to obtain clarity and ensure that I am capturing their viewpoints accurately. Approaching this study with openness of inquiry, engaging open-ended questions, being open to what turns up, trying to identify patterns, and observing with an open mind (Patton, 2015) will help me to guard against my own false assumptions. By embracing a naturalistic, qualitative approach, I can lift up the women's stories that emerge from the data. Behar (1996) acknowledged that for scholars studying their home communities, the lines between participant and observer are no longer so easily drawn.

While coming from the same community gives me a uniquely "valid" perspective, it also requires careful consideration of my stance and keen awareness of my positionality. Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2010) defined stance as "the way that researchers position themselves in relation to their subjects, participants and their own belief systems" (p. 4). I seek to keep at the fore an awareness of my position of power as I engage with the women in my study and seek to reflect their voices. I aspire to the tenets outlined by Stanley and Wise (1993, as cited in Ardovini-Brooker, 2002) to ensure the researcher/study participant relationship is not hierarchical in nature, to reflect the different realities held by the researcher and researched, and to seek to dispel any unequal distributions of power. Trust will also be essential for legitimately

managing power dynamics. van Niekerk and Savin-Baden (2010) promoted the importance of relocating truths in three key ways: 1) engaging in negotiated honesties to ensure alignment with what counts as trustworthiness in research, 2) inviting participants to revisit their shared experiences to validate truth, and 3) helping participants gain an understanding of their reality, including transparency about where power is located. These commitments to truth align with my transformative worldview focused on addressing power dynamics.

My position as a university administrator, my advanced degree status and my access to social, cultural, and financial capital are all factors that can influence the power differential between me and the women in my study. These factors along with my preconceptions about my own community, the Black community, can create bias as I engage with the stories of study participants. Malhotra Bentz and Shapiro (1998) acknowledged, "All research involves both accepting bias – the bias of one's situation and context – and trying to transcend it" (p. 6). I seek to combat bias by embracing my shared social identity with participants while maintaining an awareness of self and reality, engaging in mindful inquiry, and maintaining a continual awareness of the ways in which I am centered in the research. The ways I will enact this include engaging in reflexive journaling, speaking regularly with my advisor and others, and attending to questions as they arise. By addressing power dynamics and seeking to take the participant's view, I can create authentic relations with the women in the study through embracing vulnerability. Behar (1996) stated, "Not only is the observer vulnerable, but so too, yet more profoundly, are those whom we observe" (p. 14). It is a significant responsibility to be entrusted to capture the stories of consenting participants, but I believe maintaining an awareness of my positionality will enable me to approach my research with vulnerability, authenticity, and mindfulness.

<center>**Conceptual Frameworks**</center>

My stance will certainly influence my research, but the most important aspect of my study is the phenomena of community cultural wealth and institutional agents social capital which are also the frameworks that I will use for analysis in this study. However, there is one additional conceptual framework, Black Feminist Theory, which will provide context.

Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso (2005) defined community cultural wealth as "the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (p.69). Grounded in Critical Race Theory, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth challenges traditional interpretations of Bourdieuian (1986) cultural capital by providing an asset-based framework that acknowledges the rich capital People of Color possess, thus combatting deficit narratives. Yosso (2005) identified six forms of capital which she described as a dynamic process that built on one another to comprise community cultural wealth – aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. Yosso (2005) asserted, "The main goals of identifying and documenting cultural wealth are to transform education and empower People of Color to utilize assets already abundant in their communities" (p.82). I want to understand the sources of cultural and social capital for Black alumnae, and I will apply the community cultural wealth model to my findings to understand the role that families and communities play in the transition from campus to career.

Institutional Agents Social Capital Framework

While Yosso's (2005) model will illuminate the role of families/communities in the provision of cultural wealth, applying the institutional agents social capital framework to my

<center>20</center>

study will clarify the role of these individuals not only in Black women's acquisition of social capital, but also their successful career launch. Institutional agents hold a variety of roles within the institution including faculty, advisors, and peers, and the relationships can be formed inside or outside the classroom. Stanton-Salazar's (1997) institutional agents social capital framework identified six key forms of institutional support to aid social integration and success within mainstream institutional spheres: 1) the provision of various funds of knowledge, 2) bridging, 3) advocacy, 4) role modeling, 5) emotional and moral support, and 6) evaluative feedback, advice, and guidance.

For my study, I will exclusively focus on the first tenet of this framework to more deeply understand the funds of knowledge Black alumnae identify as provided by institutional agents. These funds of knowledge include *institutional discourse, academic, organizational/bureaucratic, network development, technical knowledge, labor and educational markets,* and *problem-solving*. Analyzing the acquisition of these funds of knowledge as reflected in my findings will provide insight into how these forms of institutional support align with social capital Black women perceive they have acquired. "Black feminist researchers rarely describe Black women's behavior without attention to the opportunity structures shaping their subjects' lives" (Collins, 1986, p.24). These oppressive structures can limit Black women's perceptions of their choices, so utilizing Black Feminist Theory will make clear the ways in which institutional and familial resources impact transmission of cultural wealth and social capital, and will illuminate intersections of race, class, and gender.

Black Feminist Theory

The aim of Black Feminist Theory is to incorporate the racialized and gendered experiences of all Black women. As Davis (1982) asserted, "It is important to recognize that

sexism can never be seen in isolation. It has to be placed in the context of its interconnections with racism, and especially with class exploitation" (p.5). Her assertion is elucidated when considering several themes Collins (1986) captured from the work of Black feminists:

- Black Feminist Theory underscores the critical importance of Black women validating their power by defining themselves,

- Black feminist researchers focus on the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression to understand the links and connections among them, and

- Black feminist thought redefines and explains the importance of Black women's culture to bring visibility to the factors that shape race, class, and gender oppression.

These themes correspond directly to my study. I am interested in learning how participants may reflect on the cultural wealth they possess as a potential means of defining themselves.

Additionally, the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class, considerations for my study, reflect Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality. Embracing intersectionality in my study will enable me to capture the individualized experiences of each woman based on her unique identities. And finally, my application of community cultural wealth underscores the importance and influence of Black women's culture, particularly to uncover the rich cultural assets that Black women possess and to illuminate how they can be leveraged for success during and after college. Porter (2017) validated, "Black Feminist Theory is a framework through which the experiences of Black undergraduate women can be individually and collectively placed at the core of empirical research studies" (p.89). Applying Black Feminist Theory as a lens will properly situate my study's findings related to perceptions of cultural and social capital, influencing relationships, and identity development.

Significance of the Study

The impact of community cultural wealth and institutional agents social capital on persistence, academic success, and graduation has been explored in the literature, and this study will address a different facet, career outcomes, to further expand understanding. Existing studies have demonstrated that cultural wealth and social capital positively affect student success in college, so understanding their specific impact on the transition to the labor force requires an understanding of the factors that generate it. This study will contribute to better understanding the assets Black female students receive from their families and will also explicate the influence of institutional resources and networks on their pursuit of career outcomes. Those who work in Student Affairs and Student Success will find this study useful because it provides insights about the forms of cultural wealth and institutional support that aid Black undergraduate women in the campus to career transition. Anzaldúa (1990, as cited in Yosso, 2005) discussed the importance of using theory to connect the community to the academy and understanding the community cultural assets students possess will aid all institutional agents, including faculty, in their support of Black women on campus.

Conclusion

This chapter summarized some of the gendered and racialized experiences Black women navigate and the career disparities they often face. I explained the deficit view of Black people as correlated to possession of cultural and social capital and, particularly for Black women, how this creates challenges pursuing higher education, achieving success in college, and making the transition from college to career. Then I explained the purpose of the study to understand Black alumnae's perceptions of the community cultural wealth and social capital they can leverage for career success and summarized the research question that I seek to answer. I also provided a

brief description of my qualitative case study methodology which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3. Lastly, I reflected on my positionality as a researcher, introduced the frameworks that will lend clarity to my findings, and presented the significance of my study to understanding the effects of community cultural wealth and institutional agents social capital on career outcomes.

In the next chapter, I conduct a review of the literature that addresses areas of knowledge relevant to my study. I discuss the themes that emerge, make connections with my phenomena of study, and elucidate gaps where my study can contribute to the extant literature. In Chapter 3, I discuss my epistemological views and philosophical stance which provide a frame for my research and clarify my approach to discovering knowledge. I also provide an in-depth summary of the methodology and the corresponding methods and tools I will employ for the study. Finally, I address my step-by-step approach to data collection, analysis, interpretation, and validation, and illuminate the limitations of the study.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explores how Black alumnae perceive their sources of cultural and social capital and the ways in which they have leveraged these forms of capital to support their transition from campus to career. The concepts of cultural capital and social capital were conceived by Bourdieu (1986) who asserted, "It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory" (p.81). Through these immaterial forms of capital, Bourdieu extends beyond the societal value placed on economic capital to make visible other means by which power and status are attained.

Cultural capital came to Bourdieu (1986) as a "theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success" (p.82). Bourdieu (1986) attributed these unequal educational outcomes to cultural capital and social capital previously invested by the family which privileges some children over others. "Bourdieu exposes the means by which dominant groups within society maintain power – by limiting access to acquire and utilize very specific forms of cultural, social and economic power" (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016, p.2). By controlling the means of production and passing these forms of capital onto their children, the privileged maintain their status and power. In contrast, the historic and systemic poverty which beleaguers many Black communities fosters a deficit view of Black families and a belief that they transmit no capital of value to their children. Yet, as Yosso and Burciaga (2016) explained, deficit interpretations of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory assert that Students of Color must acquire this capital to achieve academically.

To frame the need for this study, I conducted a preliminary review of literature to understand the ways that researchers have discussed cultural and social capital, the phenomena at the heart of my study. While many studies in the review are based on, or influenced by, Bourdieuian notions of cultural and social capital, I explicitly sought literature that incorporated Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) framework and Stanton-Salazar's institutional agents social capital (IASC) framework. As Banks (2009) asserted, "Traditional measures of cultural capital are not the only measurements of college success, even for students who possess them" (p.142). Unlike Bourdieu's theories, the CCW and IASC frameworks explicitly focus on sources and forms of capital accessed by minoritized communities. Application of these frameworks will make visible the unique experiences of the Black alumnae in my study. According to Banks (2009), "The raced, classed, and gendered schooling lives of black women undergraduates meant that they were rarely represented as having the types of cultural capital associated with college success" (p.146). By reviewing literature that incorporates CCW and IASC, I extend beyond this deficit discourse to understand the capital Black women possess, the ways in which they have acquired it, and the ways they use it. Across the landscape of cultural and social capital-focused research, some studies in the review center on Black undergraduate women while others focus more broadly on People of Color.

To inform my study, I begin by examining the literature, first reviewing research on cultural and social capital, and then evaluating studies on Black undergraduate women, career outcomes, institutional agents, and protective agents. Within this examination I critically assess themes emerging from each domain of literature before closing with a synthesis of the entire body of literature and implications for my future research.

Cultural and Social Capital

Since Bourdieu's (1986) introduction of cultural and social capital, many theorists and researchers have explored these conceptions. While Bourdieu's theories address differences of class, he does not consider identities of race and gender, and the ways in which those identities impact the forms and sources of cultural wealth one acquires. The orientations of the CCW model and the IASC framework specifically address the unique perspectives of Students of Color related to acquisition of cultural and social capital, offering relevant insights from the literature to inform my study on Black undergraduate women.

Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso's (2005) framework was conceived over 15 years ago and has been extensively explored and applied by other researchers as evidenced by over 14,000 Google Scholar citations. The vast majority of studies incorporate CCW solely as a theoretical lens through which to view the experiences of Students of Color with college readiness, admissions, and academic success. However, the articles included in this literature review focus deeply on CCW, illuminating examples of the six forms of capital possessed and/or acquired by Students of Color in high school and college settings (see Table 1). To better understand how CCW is applied in the literature, I examined eight articles, focused on CCW in relation to the topics of community programs, college knowledge, first-generation students' academic and career success, and STEM education and programs, which included a systematic review of 33 studies. Two themes emerged from the literature concerning 1) asset-based perspectives and 2) forms of capital which I will critically assess.

Table 1. Types of Capital in Community Cultural Wealth Theory

Type of Capital	Definition
Aspirational Capital	Ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of real and perceived barriers
Linguistic Capital	Intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style
Familial Capital	Cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community, history, memory, and cultural intuition
Social Capital	Networks of people and community resources
Navigational Capital	Skills of maneuvering through social institutions
Resistant Capital	Knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality

Note. Adapted from "Community cultural wealth in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education: A systematic review," by M. Denton, M. Borrego, and A. Boklage, 2020, *Journal of Engineering Education*, *109*, 556– 580. https://doi-org.libproxy.uncg.edu/10.1002/jee.20322.

Asset-Based Perspectives

While the literature addresses different elements within the system of education Students of Color must navigate, the researchers all approached their studies from an asset-based perspective. Authors asserted that Students of Color possess a richness of experiences, knowledge and information that they bring to their high school and college campuses. Researchers focused on uncovering these assets and incorporated the CCW framework to yield insights. The authors present a counternarrative to deficit-based viewpoints of Students of Color.

For Murillo et al. (2017), a positional shift away from the dominant view, in which Students and Communities of Color are criticized for inactivity related to college pursuits, is essential to create space to consider students' assets. Researchers advocate not only for a shift in viewpoint, but also seek to hold institutional agents to account. Holland (2017) aptly illustrated the deficit-thinking of some high school staff who are unsupportive of the college aspirations of Students of Color. Correspondingly, Garriott (2020) asserted that practitioners should leverage the strengths and assets of first-generation and economically marginalized students rather than focusing on what they lack. These authors signify the critical role institutions and agents should undertake to foster asset-based perspectives. "High schools and institutions of higher education can support more humanizing college pathways for students of color by placing greater emphasis on community cultural wealth as opposed to traditional measures of cultural capital" (Jayakumar et al., 2013, p.573).

While institutions play an important role in creating these pathways, some researchers also advocate for student self-awareness of cultural wealth. McWhirter et al. (2021) stressed that "Understanding these strengths as well as community cultural wealth [...] can help students recognize college and career readiness qualities […] that are already present within their communities, their families, and themselves" (p.531). The literature underscores that student consciousness of the CCW they possess, embraced and cultivated within learning environments, is the most effective way to promote asset-based perspectives.

Sources of Capital

Through their studies, researchers provide compelling accounts of the ways the six forms of CCW capital equipped Students of Color with assets they could leverage to pursue college aspirations. While the cultural wealth students attained from families and communities differed

from the capital typically valued in broader society, the researchers relay the richness of the information and experiences and how CCW aided students in achieving their objectives. Yosso (2005) indicated that "the forms of capital draw on the knowledges Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom" (p.69). Across the literature, all authors underscore that these assets originate from the students' families and communities; however, their findings differ related to forms of capital students already possess as compared to forms of capital they newly acquired. For example, Sims and Ferrare (2021) found that first-generation students used aspirational, resistant, and familial capital they already possessed to successfully navigate the transition from high school to college. Similarly, McWhirter et al. (2021) found that students utilized sources of cultural capital to resist messages of deficiency as evidenced by their exhibiting key college and career readiness attributes.

It is important to note that Yosso's (2005) application of CCW focused exclusively on the capital obtained through family and community, yet the application of her framework by researchers has demonstrated the ways CCW forms of capital are acquired in K-12, higher education, and work settings like internships. Beyond recognizing the forms of CCW students embodied, some studies also considered the role of programs which uniquely embraced existing CCW while also fostering new CCW. For instance, the internship program studied by Murillo (2017) provided a space where students' resistant capital was allowed to flourish. The program was also intentional about valuing students' aspirational capital, and correspondingly, students shared how the internship helped propel their hopes for the future. Additionally, Jayakumar et al. (2013) highlighted the ways in which the capital students possess is embraced and recognized by the community-led college prep program while also acknowledging how the program provided ways to access new capital. Similarly, Lane and Id-Deen (2020) found that engagement in STEM

programs by Black women and girls built upon existing forms of aspirational capital, enabling

them to increase social networks using capital accessed through family and program contacts.

These studies of formal programs demonstrate how they play a pivotal role in further

development and acquisition of CCW for Students of Color.

The importance of these programs is tangible when considering Holland's (2017) study

assessing the college knowledge of first-generation students in which she concluded that young

people need additional support to develop capital beyond what they acquire through families and

community members. Yet, Denton et al. (2020) cautioned researchers to not focus exclusively on

the role of institutional agents and to ensure that the individual actions of participants are also

made visible. I embrace this critique and believe my consideration of individual agency

influenced by family and community using Yosso's (2005) CCW framework along with

evaluation of the role of other agents in acquisition of cultural wealth using Stanton-Salazar's

(1997) IASC framework will yield a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and

experiences of Black alumnae as they transitioned from campus to career.

Institutional Agents Social Capital

As previously discussed, I will invoke the terminology throughout the study coined by

Stanton-Salazar (1997) of *protective agents* to include family or community members, and

institutional agents as individuals who have status, authority, and access to resources within

institutions. Across Denton et al.'s (2020) review of 33 studies, they noted "many of the primary

studies reviewed show that institutional agents such as faculty and staff can have a substantial

role in encouraging student success and recognizing student capital" (p.576). This was also

apparent throughout the other studies I reviewed, and for this reason, I want to not only

understand forms of CCW, but also better understand the roles that these agents played in the

acquisition of social capital by Black alumnae. Many studies of cultural and social capital do not account for the unique challenges faced by Students of Color. As an example, Andreas (2018) studied the importance of social capital throughout college yet the study does not focus on any sociodemographic factors. Based on her findings, Andreas (2018) asserted that colleges provide ample opportunities and "the individual student, not the college, has control over his or her willingness and ability to build social capital" (p.54). While this may be accurate for privileged students, the lived experience of Black women is very different and that is critical for institutions to acknowledge.

For this reason, I intentionally selected Stanton-Salazar's (1997) social capital framework as he recognized that "All children, regardless of background, bring to school the cultural knowledge, primary discourses, and accumulated information that exist in households and neighborhoods, and that are used by members of the community for successfully negotiating everyday life" (p.33). While he also embraces Bourdieu's argument that key structural advantages exist for affluent children, his viewpoint aligns with that of Yosso's (2005) - recognizing the valuable information and knowledge children from Communities of Color already possess. Stanton-Salazar (1997) asserted, "Successful socialization among minority children entails learning to "decode the system" and to "participate in power," understood as learning how to engage socially those agents and participants in mainstream worlds and social settings who control or manage critical resources" (p.33).

While his study focused on school-aged children, understanding how to navigate power dynamics and educational systems speaks directly to the challenges still faced by Black women in institutional settings. Application of Stanton-Salazar's (1997) IASC framework, set within the context of interlocking class, race, and gender hierarchies, will enable me to extend beyond

family and community influences, to identify the forms of social capital facilitated through institutional agents. Later in this review, I will more deeply explore the literature on institutional agents and protective agents to identify relevant themes and discuss how the findings will inform my study, but first I will assess what researchers discuss about the experiences of Black undergraduate women.

Black Undergraduate Women

The aforementioned literature reflects how CCW formidably impacts the academic success of Students of Color. To augment existing scholarship, I want to uncover the aspects of CCW that have contributed to students' transition to the workforce and pursuit of advanced degrees so these skills, abilities, and sources of knowledge can be recognized and harnessed to combat inequitable outcomes. To accomplish this goal, I want to specifically focus my research on Black women who hold undergraduate degrees as they face unique challenges when pursuing career pathways. Throughout the literature, the stories and experiences of Black women are most commonly embedded in research focused on People of Color or in studies of African American students. With this knowledge, I selected studies exclusively focused on the experiences of Black women in college, one of which was a systematic review of literature incorporating 119 studies on the college experiences of Black women. Three themes emerged from the literature concerning 1) intersectionality of identities, 2) the role of relationships in college success, and 3) the role of institutions in college success, which I will discuss.

Intersectionality of Identities

A prominent theme across the literature underscores the unique challenges Black women face as they negotiate race and gender, along with their other identities, as they move through spaces on college campuses. Porter (2017) asserted, "Black women's identities are discovered,

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challenged, and supported at the intersections. Identity intersections influence how Black women see themselves and therefore identify within the various processes of socialization" (p.96). For these reasons, it is imperative that individuals engaging with Black women embrace their intersecting identities and work to create campus spaces where their holistic needs can be met. Campus administrators, staff and faculty, friends, and family, all have responsibility for contributing to the college success of Black women. However, in Winkle-Wagner's (2015) systematic review of literature, she found most studies placed the responsibility for college success on the women themselves rather than these external relationships. Yet, the researchers in this review of literature underscore the accountability of others as they advocate for the recognition of the intersectional identities and unique positionality of Black women on college campuses. Winkle-Wagner (2015) asserted that the studies in her systematic review did not place enough emphasis on intersectional identities. Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019) stated that "failure to acknowledge and address Black women's intersecting identities reinforces the marginalization of both their race as well as their gender" (p.408). Porter and Dean (2015) further underscored this position with their statement that "African American women show up, exist, and survive through the lens of being both African American and female at the same time" (p.137). To address the unique positionality of these women, the authors advocate for more granular exploration of the differences among Black women. While the women in this study share race and gender, and completed their studies within the same institution, a key objective of this qualitative study is to capture the uniqueness of each woman's experiences and perceptions by conducting in-depth interviews.

As Banks (2009) espoused, "The multiplicative nature of the relationships across race, class, and gender explains how individual contexts can be different and can change" (p.13).

Thus, researchers must recognize that Black women are different and experience their intersectionalities differently. Lane and Id-Deen (2020) advised that researchers should disaggregate data by race and gender to distinguish between participant experiences. Winkle-Wagner (2015) advocated for analysis of within-group differences, and this approach is further underscored by Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019) that exploring within-group differences would yield understanding of the support resources, services, and relationships Black undergraduate women may need. While their terminology differs, Porter and Dean (2015) shared these sentiments, recommending that researchers "examine sub-groups within racial identities and across gender" (p.125). If most studies indicate that it is the individual and how they negotiate their identities that is the greatest determinant of college success, it is critical that more is known about the identity development of Black women. "The multiple identities of Black women in college, beyond their race and gender, affect students both inside and outside the classroom" (Commodore et al., 2018, 52). This is aptly illustrated by the women in Winkle-Wagner et al.'s (2019) study who "wrestled with identity conflicts and pressures that made them believe they had to choose one aspect of their identity over another" (p.436). It is essential to help Black women, particularly during college, to understand the complexities of their own individual identities and appreciation of the cultural and social capital they possess would aid in their identity development.

Role of Relationships in College Success

Yosso (2005) stated, "the main goals of identifying and documenting cultural wealth are to transform education and empower People of Color to utilize assets already abundant in their communities" (p.82). Her framework purports that cultural wealth is acquired through family and community relationships, yet among the thousands of studies incorporating CCW, researchers

have made visible the relationships and resources within institutions that have served as sources of cultural wealth, so this study aims to embrace each of these sources.

Familial Influences

While possession of CCW is empowering and affirming, the literature reflected the effect of the family, also known as "protective agents" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), on Black female college students ranged from problematic to deeply influential. Winkle-Wagner (2015) asserted that "many African American women struggle with family relationships throughout their time in college and beyond into their career development" (p.186). The studies in her systematic review are wide ranging, some noting the importance of parents to success, others noting the strained relationships Black women have with families, while others discuss the pressure these students feel to support their families. In a prior study, Winkle-Wagner (2009) found the pressure Black undergraduate women felt also related to a sense of responsibility to make the family proud. She recounts, "Because these students are representing their entire family, any failure would reflect poorly on their loved ones" (p.14). Many women indicated that this was a motivating pressure that caused them to focus more intensely on completing their degrees.

However, researchers also indicated some inherent conflicts and challenges that exist between the women and their home life. Commodore et al. (2018) indicated, "Some Black women report a dissonance between who they are expected to be at home and the person they have become or are becoming. Home can also pose a distraction, which requires maintaining distance when visiting" (p.80). Winkle-Wagner (2009) summarized this dynamic as the complicated tension that exists between home and campus - "While the women generally felt as if they did not belong on campus, they also described the sensation of no longer fitting at home. Some women described themselves as having had changed too much to still belong in their home

or community environment" (p.11). The inability of the family to relate to and understand the college experiences of the women stimulates these conflicts. This is brought to light in several studies which discuss the challenges Black women undergraduates face when their parents did not attend college themselves (Banks, 2009; Commodore et al., 2018; Griffin et al., 2017). While they lacked relevant information about the college going process, parents and family did play a critical role in providing encouragement and support. Porter and Dean (2015) found that for all of their study participants, the role of the family was viewed very positively, particularly the influence of their mothers on the formation of their identities. Banks (2009) found Black mothers were integral, specifically noting that single mothers challenged the stereotypes they faced through the various ways they helped their daughters succeed in college. Additionally, Leath et al. (2021) found that Black mothers passed on to Black daughters their perceptions of racial discrimination, revealing that dialogues on race and racism are a normal part of socialization processes for Black families. These collective studies show that the role of family varies for Black women during college and more needs to be understood.

Faculty

In addition to family networks, faculty were also noted as important relationships for Black women in college. However, their influence can be both beneficial and limiting. Winkle-Wagner (2015) indicated many Black women experience differential racial treatment by faculty, yet at the same time many studies illustrated how positive faculty relationships can be a predictor of academic success. Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019) shared an example of a participant who wanted relationships with Black faculty but found that the faculty in her major were predominantly White. Porter and Dean (2015) echoed this student's interest in engaging with faculty who look like her, underscoring the importance of African American administrators and

the vital nature of mentoring relationships for these women. Banks (2009) recounted the alliance the Black women in her study felt with Black professors who themselves faced issues in their place in higher education that are related to race. The shared cultural heritage and commonalities of lived experiences with faculty was consequential to their college education. Commodore et al. (2018) indicated a primary barrier to mentorship for Black college women is the lack of Black women represented in academia, thus the authors advocate for an increase in Black women in faculty and administrative roles to provide mentoring connections and support persistence of Black women to graduation.

As many institutions of higher education have a long way to go to diversify their faculty, Commodore et al. (2018) also promoted the need to "educate all administrators and faculty to be more culturally relevant mentors. A better understanding of how anyone, regardless of their race or gender, could be more culturally competent would benefit Black women's success" (p.49). Luedke (2017, as cited in Winkle-Wagner, 2015) asserted "Institutions who hire, prepare, and reward faculty and staff for their intersectional and holistic support of students inside and outside of the classroom are needed" (p.438). As this quote illustrates, the influence of faculty can be significant for Black women, but often this does not happen unless institutional culture plays a role. Commonly, institutional systems are not structured to embrace the holistic cultural wealth that Black women possess, yet researchers advocate solutions institutional leaders can and should embrace.

Role of Institutions in College Success

The literature places critical importance on the role of the institution, asserting when resources are in place, Black women are more supported. In Winkle-Wagner's (2015) systematic review, only 25 of the 119 studies discussed the role of institutions in the college success of

Black women and the author found most of these institutions lack adequate support. Shaw (2017) asserted, "Black women's educational achievements at the postsecondary level seems to occur in spite of, and not because of, institutional support" (p.204). Researchers document the ways in which institutions fail Black women by not providing assistance in understanding the workings of a college campus (White et al., 2020), by promoting student involvement rather than social integration (Miller, 2017), and by providing ineffective institutional context causing students to rely on family and community to persevere (Williams et al., 2020). For institutions offering support to Black undergraduate women, the common resources are academic support, student organizations, Black cultural centers, and Black sororities. As Wolf-Wendel (2000, as cited in Winkle-Wagner, 2015) asserted "when campuses have high academic expectations, clear missions, and positive role models; create opportunities for leadership; and make connections with students' home communities, women are more likely to succeed" (p.187). The importance of robust institutional support directed to the success and well-being of Black undergraduate women cannot be overstated. Donovan and Guillory (2017) asserted:

> Although Black college women have agency in defining their college experience, clearly the bulk of the work needs to happen at the institutional level. If an institution is unwelcoming and hostile, then individual interventions will be less effective. As such, educational institutions committed to the success of their Black women students, which should be all institutions of learning, need to encourage interventions that allow these students to see themselves reflected in the campus community and curriculum. (p.195)

Beyond having structures in place, Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019) also encouraged administrators, faculty, and staff to assess support resources to evaluate their effectiveness with addressing Black women's intersecting identities. Porter and Dean (2015) also advocated for

spaces that support all dimensions of a Black woman's identity. The authors give the example of the campus Black Cultural Center which sits separate from the Women's Center. While both spaces are intended as resources for Black undergraduate women, neither space unto itself, is designed to holistically meet their needs. Shaw (2017) confirmed, "Although campus programs offering support for racially minoritized student populations are popular, programs of this nature that specifically target Black women are largely absent from many campuses" (p.201). "The onus is on the campus faculty, staff, and administrators to create integrated organizations and spaces on campus to cultivate students' holistic growth" (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019, p.437). It is the responsibility of institutions to create spaces where the intersectional identities of Black women are addressed, not just optimizing resources to cultivate one facet of an individual.

In addition to designated programs and spaces, Commodore et al. (2018) underscored the importance of external assets, the support systems and resources available to Black women in college that they can leverage to make up for shortages of non-college supports. The women could not marshal these resources on their own which emphasizes the critical importance of access to institutional external assets. Commodore et at. (2018) argued, "Institutions of higher education have a moral imperative to (re)structure themselves so they are better able to retain, support, and develop Black women students" (p.84). Intentionality of providing assets, including forms of cultural and social capital, will not only aid these students with persistence, and ultimately graduation, but also with successful attainment of their career outcomes.

Career Outcomes

Career outcomes capture the first-destination of graduates after completion of a degree. As illuminated by Makela and Hoff (2019), "Knowing where graduates work, what they earn, where they live, and what additional degrees they are pursuing are all considered valuable

information to demonstrate a return on investment in higher education" (p.220). Researchers

have conducted studies to better understand career outcomes and to examine implications for

recent graduates and alumni. All of the literature under review has a focus on undergraduate or

master's level studies and the subject of career outcomes is deeply explored by the researchers.

While there are a number of studies that consider career outcomes for experienced professionals,

they are not relevant to my focus on Black undergraduate alumnae. Based on my exploration of

the literature, I present four themes emerging from career outcomes-focused literature

concerning the 1) definitions, 2) influences, 3) challenges, and 4) recommendations related to

career outcomes. I will discuss each theme, commencing with my explication of how researchers

define career outcomes.

Definition of Career Outcomes

Understanding what is collected and how it is collected provides a relevant backdrop

against which to contemplate the studies. The study conducted by Makela and Hoff (2019)

reflected how career outcomes data are collected via social media. The authors applied the

guidelines for data collection and reporting established in 2014 by the National Association of

Colleges and Employers (NACE). Using NACE's definition of career outcomes, the researchers

aggregated employers, work locations, compensation data, and enrollments in graduate school.

Makela and Hoff (2019) also included demographic data for graduates, enabling them to

discover that African American graduates in their study were underrepresented in relation to the

population of the campus. Although the NACE (https://www.naceweb.org/about-us/) guidelines

and corresponding career outcome definitions were adopted by over 9,500 college career

services professionals on behalf of their universities and colleges, none of the remaining articles

directly applied NACE guidance. Upon closer examination, the majority of studies align across

two topical themes: 1) resources to support outcomes attainment and 2) collection of career outcomes based on degree program. I will discuss how the studies within each of these topical areas have defined career outcomes.

Resources to Support Outcomes Attainment

The first topical theme, the relationship between student access to particular resources and the resulting impacts on career outcomes is explored by several studies (Habig et al. 2018; Hu et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2017; Shauman, 2016; Tiessen et al., 2018), yet their definitions of career outcomes diverge with one group of authors focused on career preparation and skills development, and the other on measurable factors like job acceptances and compensation. Tiessen et al. (2018) defined career outcomes as successful preparation of students for careers in international development and related fields. They assess this measure of success by considering the impact of experiential learning programs. With a similar focus on the time period leading up to graduation, Miller et al. (2017) defined career outcomes as helping music students develop skills that will lead to success in the workplace. Habig et al. (2018) in their study of an informal science education program defined career outcomes as persistence in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) in college and beyond. All of these studies seek to show the positive impact on career outcomes resulting from specific initiatives and programs. In contrast, the two remaining studies conducted research that considered career outcomes in relation to the status of students. Hu et al.'s (2020) study on socioeconomic family status defined career outcomes as higher starting salary, job prestige, and job satisfaction. Relatedly, Shauman (2016) in her study of gender segregation of majors and gender employment differences identified two measurements of career outcomes - the rate of full-time employment and the rate of earnings.

Outcomes Collection by Degree Program

The second theme makes visible the focus researchers placed on collection and reporting of career outcomes by degree program, thus informing how they defined this data. In Feig et al.'s (2016) study, they extended the definition of career outcomes to reflect career trajectories across time as they examined the careers of PhD graduates from Wayne State University. While this approach extends the time frame beyond first-destination outcomes like those reported to NACE, the study remained focused on job acceptances data. Grabowski and Miller (2015) in their review of business doctoral programs took a similar approach, defining career outcomes as post-graduation career paths, income premiums, job mobility, increased employment and satisfaction. This approach enabled them to capture outcomes data from current executive students as well as alumni. Silva et al. (2016) also studied postdoctoral career outcomes, capturing employment by workforce sector and by career-type. To arrive at their definition of career outcomes, Jiang and Kim (2019) examined the difference in early career outcomes for international master's recipients (IMRs) as compared to domestic master's recipients, both of whom graduated from U.S. institutions. The authors combined three factors to calculate career outcomes for recent graduates: 1) major-job match, 2) earnings and 3) job satisfaction. Kool et al. (2016) made a more significant shift in how they defined career outcomes in their study comparing Dutch honors alumni with their non-honors alumni counterparts. The authors defined "early career outcomes" as alumni reflections on work engagement and resources available on the job. Instead of capturing placement statistics like NACE, they focused on evaluating the actual experience of the graduate on the job. These varying definitions of career outcomes make it difficult to compare findings across studies, limiting the insights that can be gleaned.

Influences on Career Outcomes

While the definitions of career outcomes varied widely, there were a number of researchers that utilized the findings from their studies to illuminate the people and resources that positively influenced outcomes for graduates. Individuals within the institution were influential and supported student career readiness and ultimately career success. Xu and Adams (2020) highlighted the role that counselors can play in helping students strike a balance between goal-oriented career preparation and open-minded career exploration. Other studies advocate for the role of faculty and mentors in the career preparation and pursuits of students. Grabowski and Miller (2015) reflected on the beneficial networking relationships students had with faculty including mentoring, career path guidance, networking connections, and support after graduation. In their examination of a STEM program, Habig et al. (2018) discussed how students were able to stay on their STEM path because of access to scientists and educators who became a part of their social network, and the resulting college and career advice they received along with valuable connections.

In addition to people who played a role in positively influencing student career outcomes, several studies touted curricular and co-curricular resources that were a benefit. In some cases, the resources were embedded within the academic experience. Miller et al. (2017) recognized the benefits of the tightly prescribed music course plan connected to direct career paths that aided graduates in achieving successful outcomes. The alumni in Grabowski and Miller's (2015) study viewed their PhD program's research process as influential on their career and professional development. In addition to these academic experiences, several studies highlighted programs made available outside the classroom. Tiessen et al. (2018) conveyed how increasing access to experiential learning for course credit helps level the playing field for all students. Hu et al.

(2020) found a positive relationship between students who engaged in career exploration opportunities and their career outcomes. Correspondingly, Habig et al. (2018) found that participation in career workshops helped students prepare for careers and to persist in STEM. These collective insights demonstrate how institutional leaders can provide access to agents and resources that can contribute to graduate career outcomes.

Notably, many studies focused exclusively on collecting and reporting the outcomes data and gave no consideration to the influential sources that played a role in attainment of the outcomes. As Feig et .al (2016) asserted, "through these statistics we need to give students voice as they articulate their career goals, how they changed over time, and their overall satisfaction with both the training/mentoring they received and the way in which it shaped their career" (p.49). While many researchers rightly advocate for the importance of collecting the data, future research on career outcomes can significantly contribute to the field by revealing the stories behind the numbers.

Challenges with Career Outcomes

Across the studies, researchers also identified challenges that students face with achieving their desired career outcomes. The studies revealed both internal and external factors that students must navigate. Xu and Adams (2020) conducted an extensive study on ambiguity aversion and found that when experienced by students early in college, it can have detrimental impacts leading to poor career development and low job search self-efficacy as they near the end of college. Relatedly, Miller et al. (2017) underscored the importance of adequate career preparation and assert that collecting career outcomes data can yield insights into how institutions can help students most effectively prepare to enter their desired field. Aversion to ambiguity and inadequate career preparation reflect internal barriers to attainment of desired

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outcomes. Urbanaviciute et al. (2016) defined internal barriers as "person-focused factors such as lack of ability, motivation or interest in pursuing career goals" (p.12). While these internal challenges require students to seek help and to embrace necessary changes, the studies collectively highlighted significantly more external factors that can foster inequitable career outcomes. Urbanaviciute et al. (2016) defined external barriers as "environment-focused contextual factors such as financial problems, family demands, and employment restrictions" (p.12). These factors are made visible through studies that exhibit the ways that socioeconomic and contextual factors can create challenges for students transitioning to the workforce (Hu et al., 2020; Shauman, 2016; Urbanaviciute et al., 2016).

Hu et al. (2020) determined that low socioeconomic status (SES) students perceive higher resource scarcity, so they are likely to try to obtain a job quickly rather than investing in career activities that lead to ideal fit, enhanced career satisfaction and future advancement as their higher SES peers do. In addition to economic factors, Urbanaviciute et al. (2016) indicated that "gender, age, occupational field and other contextual factors in relation to the labor market can cause employability chances to vary" (p.17). Shauman (2016) illuminated these challenges in her study of the gender and wage disparities faced by female college students which reveals that "occupational segregation by gender among the college-educated workforce remains significant" (p.152). Shauman (2016) attributed this disparity to "gender segregation of college majors which places men and women onto different and unequally remunerated occupational paths" (p.153). These disparities not only limit career paths for female graduates, but also result in wage disparities. Shauman (2016) found that "women tend to earn less than men only a year after graduation in every type of major" (p.168). Career paths and wage gaps create inequitable career outcomes, as do discriminatory practices. College students can face prejudice in the job market

based on gender, race, ethnicity, age, and other factors. Jiang and Kim (2019) provided a compelling example in their comparative study of international and domestic master's degree recipients. They found that career success for international master's candidates may be severely limited by discrimination against foreigners. Jiang and Kim (2019) identified several culturally based barriers to employment including perceptions of English language skills, lack of knowledge of available job opportunities, and acculturation challenges. These factors create unique external barriers that international students face when seeking to obtain career outcomes.

Beyond challenges of discrimination and overcoming socioeconomic factors, graduating students are also beholden to the conditions of the job market. Tiessen, Grantham, and Cameron (2017) reflected that "graduates recognize that the conditions of the job market play a large role in determining career outcomes and career success" (p.37). Jiang and Kim (2017) recounted the plight of international master's candidates who face challenging immigration regulations, making it difficult to secure U.S. work visas. Silva et al. (2016) reflected another example of job market impact in their study of postdoctoral scholars and the oversupply of candidates in comparison to available faculty positions. As made clear by these challenges, more needs to be known about the ways in which students attain career outcomes. There are more factors outside the control of students that they must successfully overcome, so understanding the assets students leverage and the agents who can influence these outcomes is important. Institutions also need to be careful about how they define success and measure career outcomes. Miller et al. (2017) cautioned institutional administrators about ceding to external pressures to use income as the measure of career success. Collecting robust career outcomes data, corresponding with socioeconomic data, will yield insights that can inform institutional leaders about critical

resources to support student success and programs they can put in place to aid students in navigating past internal and external barriers.

Recommendations

Through the findings of their studies, the authors provide several recommendations to help students secure outcomes and to advise institutional leaders on how they can most effectively harness career outcomes. Researchers discuss several ways that students can enhance their likelihood of obtaining career outcomes. A visible theme across studies is the importance of networks and connections to contacts on and off campus. Hu et al. (2020) highlighted how career counselors can serve as essential resources by guiding students through career exploration and persistent pursuit of career goals. This sentiment is echoed by Hu et al. (2022) with the caveat that counselors must be mindful of the influence socioeconomic status has on students' perceptions of resource scarcity when seeking employment. Other authors advocate for the importance of mentoring and networking. Grabowski and Miller (2015) recommended that administrators provide networking opportunities throughout the academic program as well as after graduation, including access to fellow students, faculty, alumni, and key industry executives. They also specifically recommend formal mentoring programs as an avenue to support students and to motivate participation in relevant conferences. Similarly, Silva et al. (2016) based on their research on postdoctoral candidates, advocated that the development of an alumni network will help graduates "connect with opportunities for career exploration, identify skill and knowledge gaps, and cultivate professional networks" (p.6). This aligns with guidance from Urbanaviciute et al. (2016) who underscored the importance of competency development for students. In addition to these practical recommendations to support student attainment of career outcomes, researchers also put forth several strategies surrounding data collection.

A common issue raised by researchers is the importance of including demographic variables in career outcomes data collection (Grabowski & Miller, 2015; Miller et al., 2017; Silva et al., 2016). Grabowski and Miller (2015) encouraged institutional leaders to consider how demographic factors affect motivations and outcomes of recent graduates. Beyond collecting the career outcome itself, they stress consideration of other variables like job satisfaction, job mobility, and employment levels. Collection of this data can be informative for current students and program leaders. Miller et al. (2017) specifically highlighted gender and race/ethnicity as demographic variables to study to ascertain what might influence career outcomes and skill development. Silva et al. (2016) maintained that "tracking career outcomes is the first step in addressing the career-planning needs of current and future postdocs" (p.6). They asserted that tracking this data as graduates move through their careers alongside demographic data such as gender, ethnicity, and age, will help institutional leaders to access trends that can inform the approach to career support and training. Jiang and Kim's (2019) study of international master's students provided a relevant example. Through their collection of career outcomes and corresponding demographic data, they identified a trend related to the increasing importance of relevant work experience for these students. With this knowledge, universities can be intentional about the strategies they employ to provide the experiences these international students need to obtain their desired career outcomes.

Beyond providing recommendations for what data institutions collect, researchers also advocate for how the data is collected and how it is used. Based on the importance of this data, Makela and Hoff (2019) encouraged a keen focus on data quality issues including data sources and decisions about what data is included or excluded. These decisions directly align with how institutions choose to use the data. Silva et al. (2016) suggested that institutions are obligated to

share alumni career outcomes data with current and future students. Feig et al. (2016) recommended that the "data collection process should happen as seamlessly as possible, allowing analysis at a later time, aggregated and de-identified, to understand the broader trends" (p.49). Using this approach, data managers can capture developmental experiences offered throughout the academic program and later analyze which of these activities aided in skills development that led to attainment of career outcomes.

This review of literature reflects the many ways that career outcomes can be defined, collected and reported. For my study, I will align with the NACE definitions and reporting guidelines for undergraduate programs. Adhering to these standards will provide relevant context for analysis of my findings. The literature also recounted the ways that faculty, mentors and counselors, as well as programmatic resources aided students in attaining career outcomes. As Black women face unique challenges when entering the workforce, having an appreciation for the internal and external barriers affecting career outcomes will be instructive for my study. In addition, understanding how institutional agents can provide support to Black alumnae will shed light on the forms of social capital they provide. I will now discuss what the literature has revealed about the role and influence of institutional agents.

Institutional Agents

Numerous studies have explored the support provided by institutional and protective agents to Students of Color during college. I apply these phrases coined by Stanton-Salazar (1997), *protective agents* as family and community members, and *institutional agents* as individuals who have status, authority, and access to resources within institutions. My study seeks to understand how Black alumnae perceive cultural and social capital they can leverage to make the transition from college to career. Understanding the sources of this wealth is a critical

aspect of my study. Across the literature, every study referred to Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2011) social capital framework. Paramount to the framework is the concept of the 'institutional agent', who:

> transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities . . . [so that] a segment of society gains the resources, privileges, and support necessary to advance and maintain their economic and political position in society. (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 6)

This concept has great relevance for my study as the definition points to the importance of understanding not only the support institutional agents provide during a student's collegiate experience, but also the residual impacts that may aid in a student's transition from campus to career. I will begin by discussing how the occupational role of institutional agent is reflected in the literature. I will then discuss three themes emerging from the studies: the impact of institutional agents, the cultivation of institutional agents, and approaches to effective agency. In the section that follows, I will examine the ways that protective agents, specifically parents and families, provide support to students during college.

Who Are Institutional Agents?

While the researchers universally embrace Stanton-Salazar's (1997) definition of "institutional agent", the professional roles held by institutional agents across studies varied. A couple of studies focused exclusively on faculty as institutional agents (Bensimon et al., 2019; Carraso-Nunguray & Pena, 2012), while other studies engaged a variety of roles across the institution. Some researchers predetermined specific roles for the study and then sought participant feedback on how individuals in those positions served as institutional agents (Brown & Sacco-Bene, 2018; Garcia & Ramirez, 2018). However, the more prominent approach

reflected in the literature was the empowerment of student participants to self-identify who they considered to be institutional agents. Through these studies, students identified faculty, admissions counselors, academic advisors, college deans, academic deans, program directors, student services staff, peers, and tutors as agents who supported their success (Museus & Mueller, 2018; McCallen & Johnson, 2019; Dowd et al., 2013; Museus & Neville, 2012; Garriott & Nisle, 2018). Whereas the most commonly cited role was that of faculty, the findings from these studies reflect the heterogeneity of professional roles held by institutional agents.

Impact of Institutional Agents

While the roles held by institutional agents differed across studies, a clear theme emerged from the literature: the impact of institutional agents on student success. Researchers found that provision of access to institutional resources, institutional capacity building, and the desirable characteristics of institutional agents were primary vehicles for imparting agency to students.

Access to Institutional Resources

The studies show that one of the primary ways institutional agents made a positive impact on students was by providing access to institutional resources, however, the Black alumnae interviewed by Reavis et al. (2022) advised that institutions support the success of Black women by avoiding a "one-size-fits-all" approach to campus resources and opportunities. McCallen and Johnson (2019) found that "institutional agents, specifically college faculty, play a significant role in college success by providing intellectual capital and access to institutional resources to aid students in navigating the college environment" (p.1). The forms of intellectual capital and institutional resources varied across studies, but a consistent theme was enhancing the navigational capital of students, notably also one of the forms of community cultural wealth. Nora (1990) highlighted the important role agents played by helping students learn about

financial aid resources, navigating the processes and procedures, and even extending

opportunities to work on campus. The agents in Garcia and Ramirez's (2018) study served as

direct support, integrative support, system developers, and networking support for students.

Museus and Neville (2012) found that agents helped bridge students to larger campus support

networks and connect them with important information and support. Bensimon et al. (2019)

described this as the work of "integrative agents" who incorporate students into collegial

interactions, providing connections to their own professional networks to facilitate access to

institutional resources.

Beyond providing tangible resources and information, some studies found that

institutional agents offered critical emotional support for students. Dowd et al. (2013) recounted

how institutional agents "primarily engaged in helping students by teaching them to navigate

collegiate cultures... and permitting them to acquire a sense of belonging in the existing system"

(p.22). The exceedingly positive examples of support illustrated across studies show the

importance of student access to institutional agents. For Students of Color who are often first-

generation, having support to effectively navigate the university is essential. Dernberger (2022)

underscored the key role of agents in providing access to connections and opportunities, yet

cautioned about the importance of equity as some faculty and staff offered opportunities only to

top-tier students who were already doing well. While the wide-ranging impact of individual

agents was demonstrable across studies, researchers also highlight the ways in which many

agents engaged in institutional capacity building.

Institutional Capacity Building

Bensimon et al. (2019) described institutional capacity building as "an institution's

willingness to grow capacity to provide equal academic experiences, recognitions, and outcomes

for members of different racial and ethnic groups" (p.1692). In their study, they shared the example of a professor who created opportunities for his colleagues to interact with Latinx students. "He understood that his colleagues might be blind to the potential of Latinx students unless they had a chance to counter implicit bias and stereotypes through their own direct experiences" (Bensimon et al., 2019, p.1709). The faculty in this study also played a proactive role in recruiting Latinx students into STEM undergraduate and graduate programs, thus transforming recruiting practices on the campus. Garcia and Ramirez (2018) also highlighted several ways leaders and administrators at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) focused on capacity building. One of the administrators used the grants she received to initiate undergraduate research programs for underrepresented students. Another administrator had a unique approach to providing students with access to social capital. "Dr. Arias does not work directly with students, but instead works to integrate faculty into the professional networks that can help them advance their support for students" (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018, p.370).

Findings reflect that many of the administrators served as institutional brokers by connecting colleagues on campus with the focused priority of serving Latinx students. The low number of studies cited shows that more work needs to be done by institutional leaders, yet these examples underscore the importance of utilizing capacity building to extend the reach of institutional agents. However, capacity building is only one aspect of institutional impact and the importance of the role of individual agents cannot be overstated.

Characteristics of Institutional Agents

While most studies sought to uncover the forms of institutional support provided by agents, there were also researchers who desired to understand the characteristics of institutional agents. Carraso-Nunguray and Pena (2012) identified four common characteristics of agents as

described by student participants: 1) a sense of personal responsibility for student success, 2) high academic expectations for students, 3) developing strong personal connections with students, and 4) shared personal education stories. The transfer students in Dowd et al.'s (2013) study indicated the characteristics they valued were "instructors who cared about students and their learning, fostered students' academic interests, developed their skills, and bolstered their confidence" (p.15). Students of Color in the Museus and Neville (2012) study and the subsequent Museus and Mueller (2018) study described similar characteristics of agents, including sharing common ground with students and humanizing the educational experience. "Participants described how key institutional agents transcend their professional roles to be involved in multiple aspects of their lives" (Museus & Neville, 2012, p.444). While the descriptors of these characteristics differ slightly across studies, the prevailing finding is that the collective characteristics portrayed by institutional agents were interpreted by students as a display of care.

Brown and Sacco-Bene (2018) focused their research on an HBCU campus, one of the only studies in the review of literature whose participants were agents, rather than students. The agents described four areas of support they provide to African American males: navigating challenges, providing support, engaging in close relationships, and investing time and resources. The authors identified related sub-themes, many of which reflect characteristics like listening and caring, intrusive advisement, serving as a positive role model, and sharing similar stories. While this is only an example of a single study, it affirms that the characteristics described by these agents mirror those cherished by students across several studies. Many of the characteristics displayed by agents reflect the essence of the forms of cultural wealth, and I

theorize that the nature of the agents plays a significant role in the knowledge and resources they transmit to students.

Cultivating Institutional Agents

Thus far, I have described the roles held by institutional agents, the forms of institutional support they help to facilitate for students, and the characteristics they possess. Many authors also very intentionally utilized the findings of their research to advocate best practices for cultivating more institutional agents on campuses as they recognize the challenges and opportunities that exist. For instance, McCallen and Johnson (2019) described structural barriers such as limited student access to full-time faculty, making it difficult for faculty to engage and mentor students. Conversely, Bensimon et al. (2019) indicated that the social position of the four Latinx faculty members in their study as full tenured professors "gave them power to circumvent and subvert routine organizational logics and routines and put those resources to use on behalf of Latinx students" (p.1711). These examples reflect the potential that exists to cultivate institutional agents if they are properly positioned within the institution. To accomplish this objective, researchers endorse institutional advocacy practices as well as strategies for fostering effective agency.

Several studies point to the role of agents and correspondingly the ways that advocacy can be cultivated within institutions. Garriott and Nisle (2018) advocated that "Institutions should be purposeful and directive in their provision of campus supports to first-generation college students" (p.447). This sentiment is underscored by Soria and Stebleton (2012) who indicated that "faculty who actively work to enhance first-generation students' sense of belonging may affect not only their academic engagement but also their persistence toward graduation, a benefit to students and the institution" (p.683). To attain these outcomes, the

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authors stress the importance of increasing formal and informal faculty-student interactions. Researchers also underscore the importance of the positionality and professional development of faculty. Bensimon et al. (2019) recommended that "Faculty members who wish to act as institutional agents on behalf of Latinx and other marginalized groups take on administrative roles as program directors, department chairs, and deans and create a clear agenda of transformation" (p.1713); Additionally, they recommended that "faculty who wish to act as institutional agents serve on admissions committees and be willing to take on related functions" (p.1714). Carraso-Nunguray and Pena (2012) advocated for community colleges to consider investing in long-term faculty development. They stated, "When faculty first learn from students by developing relationships with them and then process what was learned with others, they develop a critical consciousness that informs more responsive teaching and advising practices with Students of Color" (p.50). Collectively, authors recognized that the successful work of institutional agents requires institutional support.

Effective Agency

In addition to advocating for institutional accountability, many of the researchers provided specific recommendations for ways institutional agents can be effective in their efforts to support student success. Brown and Sacco-Bene (2018) recommended agents take time to understand the unique challenges African American men face "simply because they are both Black and male" (p.39). They also advocated for agents to work with students to construct strategies that can address their needs, and to invest in providing resources to help students succeed. Museus and Mueller (2018) endorsed four approaches for effective institutional agency: 1) establish common ground with students, 2) humanize educational experiences, 3) emphasize a proactive approach, and 4) serve as a role model for learning and success. Stanton-Salazar

(2011), the architect of the social capital framework, also had several recommendations emphasizing social networks. He asserted that effective agents exhibit a network orientation, evaluate the structure and diversity of their own social network, serve as a network bridge to gain exposure to other potential agents, and assess the quality of their network. Kezar et al. (2020) echoed this network-orientation, suggesting that college educators consider [...] connecting historically marginalized students to a support network of program staff to promote career self-efficacy. Dowd et al. (2013) also got fairly granular with their recommendations by providing an extensive list of "Resources for Inquiry and Reflective Practice" that faculty and administrators can engage with to increase their capacity to act as institutional agents (p.25). These resources include self-assessment inventories for transfer students, published reports with data tools and narrative profiles, and STEM toolkits for increasing Latina and Latino Baccalaureates.

While the specific recommendations for agent effectiveness vary widely, there was one area of guidance echoed across a subset of studies with respect to the racial/ethnic identity of institutional agents. According to Bensimon et al. (2019), "While it is not essential for institutional agents to be of the same race or ethnicity as their students, having a shared culture, language, and life experience can assist faculty in seeing themselves in their students and knowing how to assist them" (p.1712). Museus and Mueller (2018) underscored this perspective, noting that "several of the Southeast Asian American participants discussed the positive impact of agents who shared their racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds" (p.200). Similarly, Museus and Neville (2012) stressed the importance of racial minority students connecting with faculty, administrators, and staff who share their racial and ethnic backgrounds" (p.447). McCallen and Johnson, (2019), the only study to examine transmission of cultural wealth, found that when

assessing the effectiveness of faculty members with conveying all dimensions of cultural capital, first-generation students perceived their race/ethnicity as integral.

Collectively, the studies foreground the importance of the identity, role/positioning, characteristics, and impact of institutional agents. Across most of the studies, researchers embrace a level of accountability beyond their individual studies to proactively offer tangible practices to advance the work of institutional agents. Many made efforts to capture these insights in a separate section that followed the limitations and conclusions of the study. In sum, the literature reflects the critical importance of not only understanding the impact of institutional agents on student success, but also the commitments required to foster institutional agents.

Protective Agents

The aforementioned discussion of institutional agents demonstrates the numerous ways these individuals on college campuses have a positive impact on students during their academic pursuits. However, Barnett (2004) in her study of family support for Black students in the Ivy League advocated that "more attention should be focused on the manner in which parental interaction might be encouraged by university officials as a means of aiding students while they attempt to navigate their way through college" (p.57). The study showed that parents are very influential and play a critical supportive role for students. Institutional agents should not only provide direct support and resources to students but should also find effective ways to integrate parental involvement. To better understand the influence of family, also known as "protective agents" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), I conducted a review of literature. I selected studies that concentrate on familial influence from matriculation through the period immediately after college. There were few studies that exclusively focused on Black women in college, but many

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researchers did focalize on Students of Color (and in some cases the data was analyzed by race/ethnicity) thus providing insights into parental influence on Black college students.

Forms of Parental Support

Through the literature I identified five themes reflecting forms of parental support during college: college adjustment, emotional support, transition to career, academic success, and capital resources. I will discuss each theme and conclude by summarizing implications for higher education.

College Adjustment

A few studies highlighted the ways in which parents support the adjustment of students to college. Barnett (2004) found that "many parents prepared their children for college along the way by giving advice ranging from developing study skills and habits, choosing selective schools and programs for their children, teaching them to set priorities and be responsible, managing race relations, and generally preparing them for the future" (p.62). The forms of support varied and provided students with early foundational knowledge for their success in college. The value of this parental support and training was evident as "ninety-eight percent of students in the research survey indicated that their parents motivated their decision to enroll in college" (Barnett, 2004, p.63). The students understood the importance their parents placed on education. Although this study focused on Black students who were transitioning into predominantly white Ivy League universities, the study did not discuss how parents prepared students to navigate challenges related to race. However, other studies specifically sought to examine racial-ethnic socialization provided by parents. Blackmon and Thomas (2014) described *racial socialization* as "the process by which African American parents provide children with an understanding of 'intergroup protocol' when interacting with individuals from the majority culture, and *ethnic socialization* as

the process by which African American parents communicate messages about ethnic identity and 'intragroup protocol' for interacting with other African Americans" (p.304). Notably, the study found that the racial-ethnic socialization experiences of African American college students were positively linked to experiencing greater parental career support.

Understanding how to navigate these social dynamics is a form of resistant capital, defined by Yosso (2005) as knowledge and skills oppositionally developed which aid in challenging inequality, encompassed within the cultural wealth African Americans possess. Causey et al. (2015) also studied African American college students, examining the constructs of racial socialization, parental involvement, social structure, family structure and self-esteem. Unlike the Blackmon and Thomas (2014) study which reflected the beneficial connection between parental support and racial socialization training, Causey et al. (2015) found parental involvement and social support were better predictors of self-esteem, while racial socialization was not a significant factor. Whether social support, guidance on negotiating identity, or advice for establishing practical habits, the knowledge transmitted by parents was an important factor for the African American students adjusting to college in these studies. Melendez and Melendez (2010) also considered college adjustment by examining the effects of parental attachment for white, Black and Latina/Hispanic women. They parsed out findings and for the Black subgroup, found that "aspects of students' perceptions of their parents' understanding, acceptance, and availability had an influence on their ability to manage the academic and emotional rigors of college" (p.429). The parental relationship is meaningful for Black women coping with the educational demands of college and general psychological distress in college. These studies cumulatively illuminate how adjusting to college can elicit distinct needs for emotional support.

Emotional Support

Studies not only focused on emotional support during the adjustment to college, but also homed in on the forms of emotional support provided by parents throughout the college experience. Barnett's (2004) research investigated family involvement among Black college students and found that family support was significantly important in decreasing stress and providing an emotional outlet. Through analyzing the interaction between Black and African American families and their children after they have left home to attend college, findings indicated that mothers, in particular, served as an emotional base and students called home frequently. Roksa and Kinsley (2019) also sought to understand the importance of family emotional support in respect to student academic outcomes like GPA and persistence. Across this sample of low-income families, researchers found when students reported receiving more emotional support from their families, they achieved a higher GPA, accumulated more academic credits, spent more time studying, and engaged more extensively with faculty. Additionally, "students who felt more emotionally supported by their family reported greater psychological well-being and were more likely to feel like they belonged at their institution" (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019, p.429). This study highlights the significant influence parents have on emotional well-being and the correspondingly positive effects on academic outcomes and student success. The authors also combat deficit views of low-income families by shining a light on the rich assets of emotional support parents provide to their children during college.

This asset-based view was also advocated by Silver and Roksa (2017) in their examination of the senior-year transition. They noted that parental emotional support was a theme among first-generation students in their study. "These students valued the emotional support their parents provided, but most were aware their parents would not be able to facilitate

their senior-year transition with information or finances" (Silver & Roksa, 2017, p.257). While socioeconomic status creates constraints for the financial role some families can play, the parental emotional support uncovered through this study provides a powerful example of how families can help students persist academically.

Lustig and Xu (2018) also focused on family emotional support, investigating the relationship between family-of-origin cohesion and adaptability and a student's ability to make effective career decisions. "*Cohesion* is defined as the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another, and *adaptability* is defined as the amount of change in the family's leadership, role relationships, and relationship rules" (Lustig & Xu, 2018, p.151). The study findings associate high family cohesion with less decision-making confusion or anxiety to commit. Additionally, high family adaptability resulted in low external conflict. The results show yet another positive impact parents can have on student emotional support. At the same time, this is a cautionary tale that the state of the family, if not cohesive or adaptable, could have a devastating influence on the anxiety levels and well-being of the student.

Transition to Career

Lustig and Xu's (2018) study on career decision making was one of several studies concerned with the role parents play in their students' transition to career. Whiston and Keller (2004) conducted a systematic review of literature including 32 studies to examine the interface between family of origin and career development. The results across studies indicated that "the career development and maturity of college students and young adults are influenced by the family of origin, especially by parental emotional support, autonomy support, encouragement, and warmth" (Whiston & Keller, 2004, p.540). Where possible, the authors included in the review evaluated findings by race/ethnic group, although not all studies provided this data. They

found that parental support was particularly important for the career development of African American and Latinx college students. "These students of color frequently cited parental encouragement, which included availability, guidance and advice, acceptance of career choices, and supporting autonomy. 60% of African American and Latinx participants reported their parents had worked any job to 'make ends meet' which influenced the children's career direction toward more professional occupations" (Whiston & Keller, 2004, p.539). So not only did parents provide important emotional support, but their own employment situations indirectly motivated students to seek more lucrative professions. "These collective studies indicate the family of origin influences college students' career development and maturity, occupational exploration, vocational identity, assessment of career-related abilities, career commitment or decidedness, and occupational selection" (Whiston & Keller, 2004, p.548). How students view their vocational skills, what career paths they decide to pursue, and what they weigh when making career-related decisions are all influenced by parents.

Silver and Roksa (2017) also sought to understand the influence of parents on the senior-year transition for first-generation and continuing generation students. Unlike previous studies, they focused on the education level of the parents and how it impacts the ability of college seniors to manage uncertainty and responsibility while planning for life after college. "Students with at least one parent who completed a four-year college degree are considered continuing-generation students, and those whose parents had not completed a four-year degree are considered first-generation students" (Silver & Roksa, 2017, p.251). Researchers found that the influence of parents varied not only between first-generation and continuing-education students, but also by race. "For those who were continuing-generation, White students' parents typically supported or at least did not actively discourage uncommitted exploration. Students of Color, on

the other hand, often noted that their parents advised them to make more firm commitments for the future" (Silver & Roksa, 2017, p.253).

While continuing-generation parents directly influenced how their students embraced responsibility, it was very different for first-generation students. "They spoke of responsibilities to their families of origin after graduation, which meant they prioritized securing stable jobs or graduate education" (Silver & Roksa, 2017, p.254). For these students, it was not conversations with their parents that influenced their post-graduate planning, but rather the lower career status of their parents and perceived financial needs of the family. Raque-Bodgan et al. (2013) also sought to understand the influence of parental support within the context of socioeconomic status and variables of race, gender, and perceived barriers, both educational and career-related. While the students were all middle class, participant experiences differed across gender, but not race. "Results show that women perceive more emotional support from parents than men, however there were no gender differences related to verbal encouragement, instrumental assistance, and career modeling provided by parents" (Raque-Bogdan, 2013, p.348). This study is an outlier as most of the studies in this review found some differences in parental influence based on race. As Blackmon and Thomas (2014) illuminated, "African American students face challenges associated with developing a positive career identity and finding employment, highlighting the importance of understanding the role African American parents play in student career development" (p.302). While post-graduate career outcomes are important, it is also essential to understand parental influence on student academic success.

Academic Success

In Barnett's (2004) study of African American students enrolled in Ivy League universities, "seventy-six percent of students reported that it was their parents who helped them

persist in their efforts to graduate" (p.62). The encouragement received from parents was a motivating factor for students and influenced their performance in college. Li et al. (2022) found a direct connection between students' academic performance and parental support, and the authors stressed the need for sustained parental emotional support to navigate academic barriers. Beyond academic persistence, Ma (2009) specifically evaluated parental influence on college major selection considering gender, race/ethnicity, and nativity. According to the findings, "students from lower SES families are more likely to major in technical, business, and life/health fields, which generate more job opportunities and higher economic returns than humanity and social science majors" (Ma, 2009, p.223). Students from lower income families seek to capitalize on college major to secure financial returns after college. This correlates with earlier studies which found that the lower career status of parents influences students to pursue more lucrative career paths. Perna and Titus (2005) considered parental influence on college enrollment and assessed the experiences of African American and Hispanic students. "The positive relationship between the frequency of parent-initiated contact with the school about academic issues and the odds of enrolling in a 4-year college or university is of greater magnitude for African Americans than for high school graduates of other racial/ethnic groups" (Perna & Titus, 2005, p.505).

Parent-related school contact served as an important influence on college enrollment for these students. "Descriptive analyses show that African Americans average a higher level than Whites, Hispanics, and Asian Americans of parent-student discussions about education-related topics and a higher level of parent-school contact about academics" (Perna & Titus, 2005, p.508). The engagement of parents in college going discussions played an important role in the eventual enrollment of their students. However, parental influence for first-generation college students may not always be grounded upon an accurate base of knowledge. Tippett (2020)

conducted a study to investigate the expectations that parents impose on an ethnic group of first-generation college women and found that students generally accepted parental advice regardless of whether parents had cultural capital related to the issue. This study further illustrates that whether the initial pursuit of college, academic choices during college, or advocating for persistence to graduation, parents are indispensable champions for their children.

Capital Resources

Studies also considered the capital resources provided by parents. Financial capital is an important resource for students as well as social capital and cultural capital which provide access to social networks and information respectively. Perna and Titus (2005) in their study on college enrollment found "both the levels of parental involvement for an individual student and the volume of social, cultural, and economic capital that are available through social networks are related to the likelihood that a student will enroll in college" (p.510). The ability of parents to provide access to the right resources and opportunities had a direct influence on student enrollment.

In Roksa and Silver's (2019) study of students preparing to make the transition out of college, they also found that parents were instrumental in providing resources and their assistance was overwhelmingly favored by students over university services and resources. "Parents of continuing-generation students were intricately involved in the transition process, asking questions, providing guidance, and connecting their children with employment opportunities" (Roksa & Silver, 2019, p.1062). These parents leveraged their professional networks, helped with the graduate school application process, and helped with the job search process. In contrast, "first-generation students did not look to their parents to read resumes, discuss which graduate school to attend, or provide job opportunities" (Roksa & Silver, 2019,

p.1063), although these students did value the emotional support of their parents. This lack of access to financial capital, social capital and cultural capital creates a disadvantage for first-generation students which is why more needs to be understood about the community cultural wealth received from families and how it has helped in the transition from campus to career. When families have the ability to provide financial and other resources, it provides tangible advantages for college students (Hamilton et al., 2018; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019; Silver & Roksa, 2017). In Silver and Roksa's (2017) exploration of inequality in the senior year transition, they found that parents of continuing-generation students provided financial support and helped students secure employment. The authors found a tangible difference across ethnicity/race as "White students often used parental resources to support exploration, and Students of Color leveraged these resources to secure stable opportunities for life after graduation" (Silver & Roksa, 2017, p.255). Although both groups of continuing-generation students have access to parental financial resources, this illustrates the difference in lived experiences and how Students of Color are more apt to place a priority on leveraging the degree to more urgently advance career and economic prospects.

Hamilton et .al (2018) studied parental involvement in the college experience of their daughters and found that the experiences varied widely based on socioeconomic status. "The study found that affluent parents serve as a 'college concierge', using class resources to provide their daughters with academic, social and career support and access to exclusive university infrastructure" (Hamilton et al., 2018, p.125). These parents provided guidance for college major selections, aided in securing highly sought-after campus housing, provided network connections to sororities, and provided access to internships. "This contrasts sharply with the less affluent parents, self-described as 'outsiders' who were unable to help their children and overall found

the university unresponsive to their needs" (Hamilton et al., 2018, p.125). These less affluent parents could not offer academic support, had no access to internship connections, and were unfamiliar with the college social scene and sororities. As the researchers tracked the women after the study, they found that the majority of affluent daughters graduated within 4 years, while none of the less affluent women completed their degree. As illustrated by these studies, parental capital can have significant impacts on the student collegiate experience from enrollment to graduation. The Hamilton et al. (2018) study participants were all white women which powerfully illustrates the significance of parental socioeconomic status on student success. Based on their findings, researchers offer several recommendations to universities to foster parental support.

Practical Implications for Higher Education

The studies in this review collectively highlight the inequities that exist for college students whose parents have a low socioeconomic status. Per Hamilton et al. (2018), "these class differences during college lead to qualitatively different educational experiences" (p.125). To discourage opportunity hoarding and effectively maintained inequality, researchers advise institutions to provide resources to support the success of low-income and first-generation students. This sentiment is echoed by Roksa and Silver (2019) who acknowledged that "socioeconomically disadvantaged families have less social and cultural capital and thus less capacity to facilitate children's educational and occupational success" (p.1065). University administrators must find ways to bridge this gap. Melendez and Melendez (2010) recommended "the development of culturally sensitive interventions, practices, and policies within the college environment to facilitate adaptive student development during the college years" (p.432). Perna and Titus (2005) suggested that "allocating resources to promote parental involvement is an

effective approach for programs that are designed to increase the college enrollment of underrepresented groups" (p.487). Based on her findings, Barnett (2004) advocated for universities to foster "early parental support and encouragement, increased parental interaction after the student has left home, interaction in a cultural community, individuals to whom students can turn in times of crisis, and faculty and mentor support" (p.65). These examples signal the shared importance of institutional agents and protective agents to provide optimal support, particularly for low income and first-generation Students of Color.

Researchers discussed several considerations for institutional agents. Roksa and Kinsley (2019) advocated for "educating advisors, and other staff interfacing with low-income students, regarding the role of families in fostering their success" (p.433). Whiston and Keller (2004) similarly asserted that "it is important that counseling psychologists understand how families can have a positive influence and facilitate student career development" (p.493). Raque-Bogdan et al. (2013) agreed that if career coaches understand parental influence, "they can help students find alternative sources for career-related support while they are away from home and also develop new interventions that help students cope with career-related barriers" (p.340). Silver and Roksa (2017) underscored the role of career coaches and recommend they "develop strategies to support college seniors that facilitate students' efforts to incorporate parents as sources of social support during the transition" (p.258). Lustig and Xu (2018) suggested that career coaches inquire about the family-of-origin dynamics to understand how close the family is and to better understand how decisions are made. All these recommendations honor the role protective agents play in the collegiate experience for their students while advocating that universities adopt equitable practices to address gaps that may exist in social support, financial capital, social capital and cultural capital, particularly for low-income Students of Color.

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Conclusion

The studies in this literature review demonstrate that incorporating an asset-based perspective like community cultural wealth supports Students of Color in their college pursuits and during their academic programs as they are empowered to leverage and further develop forms of capital. While prior literature has addressed CCW across a broad range of areas within higher education, studies specifically examining any topics related to career were very few. Consequently, there is a gap in research exploring the relationship between CCW and career outcomes. My study will address this gap while also aligning with the asset-based perspective fostered by other authors. The focus of my research on undergraduate Black women is motivated by a desire to combat the deficit-based discourse that promotes unique challenges as they pursue career pathways. The literature reflects that more remains to be understood about how Black women in college define and develop their intersectional identities, and my study on the relationship between cultural and social capital assets and the transition from campus to career will expand the base of knowledge. An understanding of the under-utilized assets, cultural wealth, they bring to campus from their homes and communities would aid Black undergraduate women in their self-awareness and identity development.

The review of literature reflects that more needs to be understood about the relationships Black women have with their families during college and my study will illuminate the ways protective agents contribute to asset-development. Researchers also advocate for the accountability of faculty and institutions of higher education to commit resources toward the success of Black women in their degree pursuits. By incorporating a significant sample size, my research can capture which relationships and support structures in the institution provide the greatest advocacy for asset development. The literature shows that institutional agents can hold a

range of professional roles within the institution and play a pivotal role in helping students access resources to support their academic success. There are very few studies that explore the role of institutional agents in the transmission of cultural wealth or the acquisition of career outcomes. By applying Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model and Stanton-Salazar's (1997) social capital framework, my study will offer more holistic insights into the way Black undergraduate women perceive the influence of protective and institutional agents, illuminating the role and cultural background of the agent(s), what (if any) cultural or social capital was transmitted, and how these individuals contributed to their post-graduate career outcomes.

Distinct from the extant literature, my study will illuminate the influence of demographics as well as the individual stories of Black undergraduate women and their career outcomes. Overall, my study will add to the literature by offering perspective into what aspects of cultural and social capital are most readily utilized to advance career prospects for Black undergraduate women.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

For this study, I aim to uncover the aspects of cultural and social capital that have contributed to students' transition to the workforce and pursuit of advanced degrees so these skills, abilities, and sources of knowledge can be recognized and harnessed to combat inequitable outcomes for Students of Color in higher education and the workforce. By exploring Black alumnae's perceptions of cultural and social capital, I hope to discover the potential influence of protective and institutional agents on acquisition of cultural wealth and first-destination outcomes. This chapter explains the epistemological and philosophical stances that inform my approach to this research study. In addition, I describe the methodological design I employed and summarize the data collection methods I used. I conclude with an overview of how I will analyze and interpret the data, reflect on the ways in which my research design was responsive to participants, and discuss strengths and limitations of the study.

Philosophical Stance

The set of profound beliefs that each evaluator holds as his or her worldview about the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and the nature of human nature (axiology), is reflected in the approaches he or she chooses to employ in practice – knowingly or unknowingly, consciously or unconsciously. Bawden (2006, as cited in Mertens, 2009, p.43)

As previously detailed, my study design involved a multiple case study approach in which the lived experiences of Black alumnae were illuminated through in-depth interviews. To advocate for participants and yield meaningful insights, my worldview, as defined by Bawden (2006), should align with my methodological design. Mertens (2009) indicated that a worldview is a metaphysical construct described by specific philosophical assumptions (basic beliefs), also

known as a paradigm. I espouse multiple worldviews which reflect my philosophical assumptions (see Table 2). Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) recognized that embracing a dialectical perspective, differing points of view, can reveal different ways of knowing about and valuing the social world. Embracing both the constructivist worldview and the transformative paradigm added significance and understanding to my study that would not be attained by taking up only one point of view.

Table 2. Philosophical Assumptions

Ontology	Historical Relativism	Multiple realities
Epistemology	Constructionism	Truth arises out of engagement between researcher and subject
	Transformative Worldview	Knowledge is relational and historically constituted; Challenge deficit thinking; Generate change
Theoretical Perspective	Critical Theory	Power relations used to change situations
	Black Feminism	Simultaneity of race, class and gender
Axiology	"Living the Virtues"	Courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, and humility
Methodology	Multicase Study	Black alumnae

Epistemology

While the constructivist view seeks understanding and the transformative view challenges deficit thinking, there is alignment in the value they collectively place on relationality. Both recognize that knowledge is created through interactions between researchers and participants,

and that meaning is constructed as people engage with realities in the world. These worldviews align with my desire to uncover new knowledge by interacting and relating to my study participants and also my belief that the Black women in my study have different realities from one other. While there is some alignment between the worldviews, they differ in many ways and I will discuss the distinct attributes of each.

Constructivist Worldview

My study incorporates a constructivist philosophy which holds that "many perspectives are available and that they need to emerge during the research process to fully describe the complexity of a case" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 117). In the constructivist form of inquiry, "research is shaped from individual perspectives to broad patterns and ultimately to broad understandings" (Denzin, 2012, as cited in Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 36). My study objective is to understand and discover, not to prove a hypothesis. Incorporating a constructivist paradigm will enable truth to unfold through the interplay between subjective and objective. Applying a constructivist worldview will elucidate the relationship as described by participants between socio-demographic status and career outcomes, thus informing my sampling approach for participants to interview.

My choice of interviews as the qualitative method is also informed by my constructivist worldview. Mertens (2009) explained, "In the constructivist paradigm, the researcher would establish rapport with the people in the study through sustained contact and anticipate multiple constructions of reality in the words of the persons with the lived experiences" (p.234). My field of career services is very relationally driven, and I thrive in cultivating relationships with students, campus partners, employers, and alumni. When seeking to address a problem, I naturally engage with others to gather information and assess my options. Engaging this same

approach in my research is very authentic to my philosophical assumptions and my desire to discover, understand, and consequently inspire transformation.

Transformative Paradigm

> The differential mode of social movement and consciousness depends on the practitioner's ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological stand best suited to push against its configurations, a survival skill well known to oppressed peoples. (Sandoval, 2000, p.60)

The transformative paradigm prominently guided the purposeful random sampling of participants based on their first-destination status as well as the approach to the qualitative interviews. As Denzin (2010) described, "The pursuit of social justice within a transformative paradigm challenges prevailing forms of inequality, poverty, human oppression, and injustice" (p.102). This worldview, with its focus on motivating social change, inspired an inclusive approach incorporating all first-destination statuses and provided a lens through which I can seek to understand the stories of the participants. According to Mertens (2009), the transformative paradigm is "based on assumptions that prioritize the furtherance of social justice and will utilize research methodologies that lead to a greater realization of social change" (p. 3). My belief is that knowledge is relational and historically constituted and my individual conversations with each woman provided insights into how different people experience phenomena due to power and positionality.

The purpose of my research is to provide an understanding of how Black women perceive the phenomena of cultural and social capital, and to generate change by shedding light on the rich assets they leverage to make the transition from college to career. This approach provides a counternarrative to deficit perspectives of Black women. According to Olesen (2000), "Research

focus is not just on experience, but how that experience emerged" (p. 352). Engaging Black women in interviews allowed me to not only reflect the shared experiences of these women, but also the unique differences among the group, and their reflections on their intersecting identities. Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019) asserted that exploring within-group differences would yield understanding of the support resources, services, and relationships Black undergraduate women may need. In research, Black women are often blended in with other People of Color, and when studies do focus exclusively on Black women, the findings are generalized as though all experiences are the same. As a Black woman who shares the experience of completing an undergraduate degree, I wanted to ensure that my research approach honored the lived experiences and perspectives of the women in my study, thus embracing multiple realities and definitions which can yield social change.

Axiology and Ontology

In addition to my epistemological assumptions, my axiology, views on ethics and values, is guided before anything else by my Christian beliefs related to truth, honesty, and treating others with care and respect. I find this corresponds to what Macfarlane (2010) described as "a belief in the importance of possessing certain virtues that make it possible to lead a 'good' life" (p. 23). The author advocated 'living the virtues' as a means for researchers to live out their research ethics. Macfarlane (2010) espoused virtues including courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, and humility. In my research ethics, these virtues materialize in several ways:

- I embrace courage to challenge my own assumptions.

- I evoke respect for the Black women who are my focus.

- I adopt resoluteness to maintain transparency during all facets of the research.

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- I invoke sincerity to ensure accuracy in relaying study results.

- I summon humility by being self-critical and reflexive.

I enacted these virtues by communicating these commitments to the participants for accountability and by reflecting before and after each interview in my journal, noting the ways I lived the virtues, as well as adjustments I could make to embrace them more fully. My ethical beliefs, inspired by transformative and constructivist worldviews, are grounded in advocating for social justice which also informs my ontology.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) stated, "The constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities)" (p.35). Correspondingly, Mertens (2009) stated, "The transformative ontological assumption acknowledges that multiple realities are socially constructed" (p.48), so my identification of gender and race for the women in my study defined their realities in the context of power dynamics. By exploring difference, not only across race and gender, but also amongst the group of Black women, the stories of the alumnae reflected their definitions of reality. Denzin (2010), in his discussion of moral and ethical criteria for evaluating critical qualitative work presented the principle of *authentic adequacy* which "represents multiple voices, enhances moral discernment, and promotes social transformation" (p.26). My ontological beliefs about human nature resonate with the spirit of authentic adequacy, summoning a call to action through my research.

Research Questions

Through exploring the phenomena of cultural and social capital, the study will address the following research question: *What are Black alumnae perceptions of their experiences at Woodington University?* The purpose of the research question (RQ) is to ascertain how participants reflect on their experiences at UW and in what ways these reflections align, or do

not align, with the commitments, outcomes and resources communicated by the institution. Additionally, this research question will yield insights into participants' perceptions of their sources of capital (e.g. family, community, faculty, counselors) to understand what assets they brought to college as well as the cultural and social capital acquired in college, and in the period following graduation. The RQ will also aid in understanding the role and influence of familial and community relationships, as well as the role of institutional agents and resources in participants' use of cultural and social capital in career preparation and to attain first-destination outcomes.

As discussed in Chapter 1, I plan to incorporate Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework and Stanton-Salazar's (1997) institutional agents social capital framework to interpret participant responses. Each of the studies in Appendix A incorporated the forms of capital as captured by Yosso (2005) and Stanton-Salazar (1997), reflecting that these frameworks have been deeply explored and I seek to join the conversation. As reflected by the study interview questions (see Appendix B), I did not use the terminology of these frameworks when engaging with participants, however, by inquiring about family and community experiences as well as campus curricular and co-curricular engagement, I can later code the qualitative interview data with the relevant forms of capital. I will now discuss in detail the overarching case study methodological design as well as the approach to qualitative methods.

Study Design

I will begin this design overview by discussing what a qualitative design entails and how I apply its research characteristics to my study. Subsequently, I will discuss the case study approach and its advantages and disadvantages.

Qualitative Research

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), "Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (p.4). In other words, qualitative research is focused on the participant and how they make sense of the world. As Hatch (2002) states, this type of inquiry focuses on "understanding how individuals make sense of their everyday lives" (p. 6-7). The focus of my research is how Black alumnae perceive cultural wealth and social capital and its influence on their transition from campus to career. Conducting a qualitative study enabled me to engage deeply with study participants to seek their perspectives on the phenomena of cultural and social capital. It is their individual and collective lived experiences within the setting of a minority serving institution that is uniquely understood through qualitative inquiry.

There are many common characteristics of qualitative research that align with my philosophical stance and approach to the study. Acknowledging my reflexivity as researcher is an important aspect of conducting qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hatch, 2002), and I clearly communicated my positionality – my background, how it may influence my interpretation of findings, and what I hope to gain from the study. My positionality is captured in Chapter 1 and I discussed it directly with my participants prior to conducting the study. Qualitative research is conducted in a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hatch, 2002; O'Leary, 2017), and my focus on understanding the experiences of participants within a minority serving institution enabled me to talk directly with each alumna to understand her perspectives within the context of the campus setting. The researcher in qualitative inquiry is a key instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hatch, 2002), and my collection of data through interviews using an instrument of my own design aided in deeply

focusing on participant experiences. Yet, I embraced an emergent design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hatch, 2002; O'Leary, 2017), characteristic of qualitative inquiry, so I modified the questions as appropriate to engage in the best practices for my study.

In addition to conducting interviews, I reviewed archived first-destination survey data, public university documents, and kept a research journal, embracing the use of multiple methods which is common in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The interviews produced a large quantity of data for analysis and I applied inductive and deductive logic (Creswell & Poth, 2011; O'Leary, 2017) used in qualitative research to identify patterns, codes and themes. Also central to qualitative research is obtaining participants' multiple perspectives and meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hatch, 2002; O'Leary, 2017). I sought to understand the meaning of cultural wealth and social capital held by participants (as inferred by their relationships and campus experiences) and to reflect their diverse views. However, it is not just an understanding of their perspectives, but in the qualitative tradition, I accounted for the influence of contextual features (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) and how their experiences were situated within the minority serving institution (MSI). By embracing multiple perspectives and how the women were situated within the context of the MSI, I hoped to achieve a key aim of qualitative research – providing a holistic account (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hatch, 2002; O'Leary, 2017) by developing a complex picture of the cultural wealth and social capital phenomena within the setting of the MSI. Conducting qualitative research enabled me to obtain a detailed understanding of the phenomena and my specific approach of case study defined the subject of my study.

Case Study Approach

According to Yin (2006), the ability to study a case in its real-life context is a strength of the case study method. The setting for my case is a minority serving institution in the southeast United States and the study incorporated a multiple case approach with the stories and experiences of each study participant as the primary unit of analysis. Yin (2009) asserted that case studies are optimally utilized when addressing explanatory questions, such as "how" and "why," in situations where the researcher has limited control over events, and in real-life contexts when the research focus is on a contemporary phenomenon. Yin (2006) also suggested that a strength of case study methodology is the ability to go in-depth. This methodology aligns well with my research question and the purpose of my study to understand perceptions and experiences of Black alumnae within a minority serving institution. Yin (2006) also indicated that case studies benefit from multiple sources of data. My use of different forms of data – interviews, archived records, and documents – provides multiple sources of evidence which can be triangulated. Triangulation, establishing converging lines of evidence, lends credibility to the multicase study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2006), contributes toward attaining a more in-depth understanding, and will make my findings more robust.

Features of Multiple Case Study Design

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "Case study is a good approach when the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases" (p.100). The multiple case study approach was valuable for my study as I wanted to understand how each individual case and the collective cases of the Black women fared with obtaining career outcomes within the setting of the minority serving institution. Creswell and Poth (2018) found it preferable to select cases that

reflected different perspectives, and my selection of participants reflecting different first-destination categories yielded more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena of cultural and social capital. As asserted by Lodico et al. (2010) "The goal of a collective case study is to understand both the uniquely individual aspects of the case as well as their commonalities" (p.158). The multiple case study approach illuminated the relationships in college, both familial and institutional, that influence career outcomes as well as the forms of cultural and social capital that aided in the transition from college to career.

However, Stake (2005) cautioned that "the benefits of multicase study will be limited if fewer than, say, 4 cases are chosen, or more than 10" (p.22). An extremely low number of cases won't provide enough insights into the commonalities across cases whereas inclusion of more than 10 cases makes visible more commonalties than can be properly explicated. My focus on eight cases aligned with the benefit of the case study approach to go in-depth and my qualitative design properly placed the emphasis on the Black women and their experiences. Additionally, the focus of my research on Black alumnae is motivated by a desire to combat the deficit-based discourse that promotes unique challenges as they pursue career pathways, and employing multiple case studies aided in greater understanding by capturing detailed accounts from each study participant. Parker and Lynn (2002, as cited in Mertens, 2009) also asserted that "case study methodology is appropriate as a means to capture the Critical Race Theory narratives and stories that challenge preconceived notions of race" (p.175). My application of community cultural wealth, grounded in Critical Race Theory, and Black Feminist Theory to assess findings across multiple case studies challenges dominant ideologies in a way that would not be possible with a single case study.

While there are many distinct features of multicase studies, there are also several factors that made the scale and scope of a multiple case research study viable for me to conduct as a sole investigator. First, my coursework in *Educational Leadership Research Methods* and *Mixed Methods Research Design* has equipped me with relevant knowledge to conduct my study. Second, coming from my background in the field of career services, I knew the variables to include in my study. I also had access to an existing set of first-destination data which streamlined the sampling and outreach process to prospective candidates enabling me to conduct the qualitative study within a focused period of time.

Methods and Tools

In this section, I will describe the research setting, my approach to participant selection, and the data collection methods I employed to further clarify the alignment of the overarching methodological design with the study purpose.

Research Setting

The research setting for my mixed methods case study is a minority serving institution (MSI) in the southeast United States, Woodington University (UW)[1]. The campus enrolls approximately 50% of students from minoritized ethnic groups which made it an ideal site to uncover specific findings about Black alumnae. UW is situated in a metropolitan area and attracts traditional, non-traditional, and online students, one-third of whom are first in their families to graduate college (first-gen), who enroll in undergraduate degree programs across a diverse set of Schools and Colleges. The characteristics of the student body are also particularly relevant to my study. The Student Affairs division at UW determined that Black female students are the most actively engaged on campus and are the predominant holders of leadership roles in campus organizations. Additionally, over 50% of all UW students work while going to school,

which provided a unique opportunity to see how students with real-world experience viewed their acquisition and cultivation of cultural and social capital. The rich diversity of UW provided a compelling cross-section of Black alumnae whose diverse experiences yielded abundant data for analysis.

Participant Selection

For this multiple case study, I specifically focused my research on Black women who hold undergraduate degrees from UW. I engaged purposeful sampling to identify the participants for my study. As Mertens (2009) indicated, this sampling approach is "based on the researcher's conscious decision to obtain data from individuals based on a rationale that they are the best sources of such information" (p. 214). I pursued purposeful sampling by first engaging in criterion sampling to define the criteria of characteristics for my participants. I conducted the study during the spring semester of 2022, and I engaged the most recent graduating classes for which first-destination data was available. After obtaining IRB approval, I requested access to the data the UW career services center utilizes to produce the annual employment report. I secured the 2019-2020 data to reflect outcomes from the most recent data set (The 2021 first-destination data was not available until after my study had already commenced). My criterion sampling reflected three key categories of participant characteristics:

- Recent Alumnae/Grad Year - The data from the career center provided access to graduates who completed their undergraduate degree in the most recent three-year window.
- Gender/Race - The data was coded by gender and race which provided ease of access to outcomes for Black alumnae as compared to others.

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- Self-Reported - Within the list of graduates, I purposefully isolated those with the job source of "self-reported".

Requiring that participants met this criterion helped to ensure I could answer my research question.

Data Collection Methods

In addition to selecting the best methodology to address the purpose of the study, I also carefully considered the specific methods and tools I employed. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), "Researchers often supplement participant observation, interviewing and observations with gathering and analyzing documents produced in the course of everyday events" (p.160). For this study, I analyzed relevant documents to learn more about UW's setting and student commitments. I also engaged in direct observations of the setting to glean the ways that students experience the campus setting and what resources and opportunities exist to support their academic pursuits. The document analysis and observations contributed to my in-depth description of UW, offering context for the setting. The most in-depth aspect of the study was engaging in participant interviews to provide an answer to my research question. The interviews included two rounds of conversations, as well as seeking their feedback on the findings to validate that what was written reflected the women's voices.

Document Analysis

I began my data collection by engaging with documents associated with UW. As stated by Marshall and Rossman (2011), "Various kinds of documents can provide background information that helps establish the rationale for selecting a particular site, program, or population" (p.160). By engaging with the documentation at the same time I was conducting my participant selection process, my focus on Black alumnae within this MSI was reaffirmed. The

documentation also informed the development of my interview questions, allowing me to obtain

more comprehensive insights from participants about their campus experiences.

Data collected through observation in a natural setting enables the research to uncover

cultural nuances and obtain contextual information (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The data I

collected offered rich content that portrayed the values and engagement experiences of students

in the UW setting. Collecting and analyzing this data provided robust insights for my narrative

introduction of the campus. Spending over 10 hours reviewing documents provided greater

understanding of UW's commitments and resources as a minority serving institution, but I also

wanted to be physically present in the setting and engage in observation.

Observation

Marshall and Rossman (2011) indicated, "Whether enacted formally or informally,

observation entails the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors, and artifacts

(objects) in the social setting (p.139)." I would describe my observation as informal with a

primary focus on spending time casually observing the people, their interactions, and the routines

that occurred within the campus setting. I observed a total of eight hours in different

environments on campus, inside academic buildings, in green and recreational spaces, and in

spaces where students gathered to eat and socialize. I not only focused on student-to-student

interaction, but also the ways students interacted with faculty and staff through the resources

offered on campus. The purpose of observation was to understand the campus setting to provide

context for the study. UW is also a minority serving institution, so I was interested in gleaning if

there were resources or experiences that appeared to uniquely respond to this institution type.

Marshall and Rossman (2011) recommend a note management strategy to support the

observation process. During each observation, I captured on-the-spot notes which I later

organized into field notes. By exploring and analyzing the data collected via observation, I

produced a rich description of the campus which contributed important background and context

for understanding the perceptions of Black alumnae.

First-Destination Survey Data

While the document analysis and observations contributed to the campus description, I

separately reviewed and analyzed first-destination survey documentation to inform participant

selection. Yin (2006) indicated that a strength of the case study method is the ability to collect

data in natural settings, as compared to relying on derived data. While he acknowledged that a

survey is well positioned to tell you how often something has happened, he argued that case

study is ideal to help the researcher get a close understanding of a situation. While the

quantitative survey data would be considered "derived," the readily available data increased the

feasibility of this study: Not only is a newly designed survey time-consuming for me, it did not

make sense to ask former students to repeat participation in an already completed survey.

Additionally, the survey adhered to national collection and reporting standards and had been

executed by UW for over five years, thus strengthening the reliability of the data. With this

knowledge, I analyzed the university's first-destination career outcomes data survey to guide the

qualitative sampling strategy and interview protocols.

Participant Recruiting

To more fully understand perceptions participants had of cultural and social capital, I

selected a representative sample across first-destination reporting categories including *employed,*

continuing education, own venture, still seeking, and *not seeking*. I incorporated a purposeful

random sampling approach and I started by randomly selecting three women from each reporting

category and inviting them via email to participate in in-depth interviews. As my goal was to

conduct interviews with eight Black alumnae, I continued to randomly add to this prospective participant list to backfill those who declined or were non-responsive. I used the random sampling functionality in Excel to identify alumnae to invite and fortunately interest in the study was high and recruiting was completed within a few days (Table 3).

Table 3. Participant Recruitment

First-Destination Category	Number of alumnae contacted	Number of alumnae committing to the study
Accepted Job	11	3
Continuing Current Job	6	1
Seeking Job	2	2
Seeking Continuing Education	2	0
Accepted into Grad School	2	1
Own Venture	3	1
Outreach Summary	26	8

My study findings are intended for those who work in higher education where return on investment as evidenced by achieving post-graduate career outcomes has become a visible metric tied to degree completion. For this reason, universities tend to favor reporting on outcomes of graduates who have obtained jobs or received acceptance into graduate schools. I reject neoliberal notions that these are the only important measures of degree success, and I believe that Black alumnae across all first-destination reporting categories will be positioned to offer insights into the impacts of cultural and social capital. For this reason, I incorporated maximum variation sampling so the first-destination categories intentionally differed across women in the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined maximum variation as a sampling strategy to represent diverse cases and to fully describe multiple perspectives about the cases"

(p.158). I later discovered when interviewing the alumnae that some of their reported outcomes changed from what was initially captured via survey around the time of graduation, however the outcome categories remained diverse. Exploring different first-destination outcomes aided in greater understanding of perceptions of cultural wealth and social capital.

Interviews and Data Integration

Qualitative researchers use interviews to uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds" (Hatch, 2002, p.91). My interviews focused on participants' sociodemographic background and their perceptions of cultural and social capital (based on curricular and co-curricular engagement in college), relationships that served as sources of capital, and how access to forms of capital contributed to their transition from campus to career. A key objective for the study was to engage with participants, so I opted to employ interviews to harness the in-depth nature of the case study approach most effectively. Observations would not provide the same depth of direct engagement and focus groups would not allow for the individualized engagement necessary to capture each "case" and reflect the unique stories and experiences of each woman. And as previously stated, my choice of interviews as the qualitative method was also informed by my constructivist worldview. My choice of method was also influenced by the subject of my research - Black women. A prominent theme across extant literature underscored the unique challenges Black women face as they negotiate race and gender, along with their other identities, as they move through spaces on college campuses.

Engaging Black women in interviews allowed me to not only reflect the shared experiences of these women, but also the unique differences among the group, and their reflections on their intersecting identities. My use of qualitative inquiry, which gets to a granular level through the study design, enabled me to explore the differences. The format I employed

was guided interviews, where I used a predetermined set of questions to help me uncover the participant's views while giving space and respect to the way each participant structured her responses (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Responsive Research Design

Informed by my belief systems, positionality, and conceptual frameworks, I will reflect on the ways in which my methodological design was responsive to study participants. My objective through my multiple case study approach is to combat deficit views of the Black community by highlighting the cultural and social capital Black women leverage to achieve career outcomes. Hesse-Biber (2012) advocated for researchers to pay attention to both the specificity and uniqueness of women's lived experiences. With this in mind, I thoughtfully selected a methodological design – multiple case study – that I believe was uniquely structured to fulfill this objective. I will discuss how my research philosophy and methodological design aligned to offer three distinct foci which honored and responded to the uniqueness of my participants: 1) sociological imagination and social justice, 2) purposeful methodology, and 3) valuing identity.

Sociological Imagination and Social Justice. First and foremost, my research orientation involved application of the sociological imagination which Mills (1959) asserted "enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals" (p. 5). Mills (1959) advocated, "It is the political task of the social scientist – as of any liberal educator – continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals" (p. 184). I seek to combat deficit perspectives of Black women within

the current sociocultural context by illuminating the rich cultural and social capital they possess and the resulting impact on the transition from college to career.

By applying my sociological imagination, my study embraced the historical backdrop of racism and inequities while honoring the intersectional identities of Black women so paramount to gaining new knowledge. As Mills (1959) espoused, "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (p.3). Because my research captured reflections of experiences that occurred within a system of education, it is important that I consider my findings within the context of history and social norms. In addition to the base of sociological imagination, foundational to my overarching philosophy is embracing a social justice-focused inquiry rather than strictly scientifically based research. According to Denzin (2010) this meant taking the perspective of the participant and ensuring interpretive sufficiency. Denzin (2010) clarified, "Interpretive inquiry attempts to show how individual troubles and problems become public issues" (p. 31). By bringing to light the challenges faced by Black women in their career pursuits and taking their perspective, I hope to make clear the ways in which cultural and social capital can be leveraged for professional advancement.

Purposeful Methodology. The comprehensive nature of my methodological design required knowledge of multiple case studies, qualitative methods, interview protocols, and analysis. Malhotra Bentz and Shapiro (1998) advocated for a mindful approach to inquiry, a creative act which allows what is there to manifest itself in a new way. To achieve this, the authors recommended "to steep yourself deeply in the research methods techniques" (p. 54). It was significant for study participants to trust me with their stories, and I wanted to accurately capture, portray, and leverage their experiences to contribute to what is understood about Black undergraduate women. Manning (2016) warned, "method stops potential on its way, cutting into

the process before it has had a chance to fully engage with the complex relational fields the process itself calls forth" (p. 33-34). This means that selection of method needs to be strategic to ensure the process can unfold in a way that aligns with the study purpose and researcher objectives. As Fine et al. (2003) advocated, "Methods are not passive strategies. They differently produce, reveal, and enable the display of different kinds of identities" (p. 51). Selection of my methodology, methods, and corresponding theoretical frameworks were purposeful to honor the subjects of the study and most effectively tell their stories.

Valuing Identity. The multiple case study approach, paired with qualitative methods, allowed me to be responsive to what the data was telling me and provided a richness that would not be realized through a single case alone. As Denzin and Lincoln (2003) stated, "Class, race, gender and ethnicity shape the process of inquiry, making research a multicultural process" (p. 29). Rather than consider only the career outcomes of Black alumnae, I captured sociodemographic data from participants as well as gathered information about family and campus experiences. This approach aided in bringing visibility to any inequities faced by the women in the study. Ardovini-Brooker (2002) asserted, "Feminist researchers recognize the social identity of the research, i.e.: race, ethnicity, class, and gender, as relevant to the validity of the knowledge produced by the research process" (para. 16). A feminist epistemology influenced my philosophical assumptions, so I viewed the inclusion of sociodemographic data as essential to the attainment of knowledge. In sum, my research approach was responsive to participants by acknowledging the sociocultural context within which the women were situated, engaging a purposeful methodology, and valuing unique identities, thus facilitating relevant analysis and interpretation of findings.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis and interpretation of data was informed by the study purpose, research question, my review of literature, and forms of data. Wolcott (1994) warned of the tendency for researchers to "treat everything at the same level of detail" (p. 16). In my approach, I made clear delineations in how I managed and treated the data as I moved through description, analysis, and interpretation. I employed Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) procedures for qualitative data analysis and interpretation. The authors identified six steps: 1) prepare the data for analysis, 2) explore the data, 3) analyze the data, 4) represent the analyzed data, 5) interpret the results, and 6) validate the data and results. I will begin this discussion with Step 1 – preparing the data for analysis.

Prepare the Data for Analysis

At the beginning of this multiple case study, I engaged with first-destination data which reflected the status of recent graduates within six months of graduation and was reported via an electronic survey administered by the career services office. The survey invited graduates to categorize their first-destination as employed, continuing education, still seeking, not seeking, or other. I prepared the data by reviewing all variables for the 2019-2020 graduating classes and eliminated any data records that were incomplete. For example, if a survey response reflected the first-destination status, but did not disclose starting salary, the record was completely removed from the data set. Marshall and Rossman (2011) advised, "Careful attention to how the data are being reduced is necessary" (p. 211). After updating the data set, I was left with a list of 3,317 potential Black alumnae from which I could identify study participants. Utilizing criterion sampling, I incorporated a purposeful random sampling approach to randomly select women across first-destination categories to interview for this qualitative study. The interviews were

recorded via Zoom and transcribed in Temi, and then reviewed multiple times for accuracy. By comparing the Temi transcription to the recorded Zoom sessions, I made corrections to errors that were reflected in the digital transcriptions. I paid particular attention to pauses and inflections so that the transcribed language reflected the sentiment and emphases of the participants.

Explore the Data

Wolcott (1994) advocated for engaging with the data as originally recorded and treating the data as fact. Exploring the qualitative data include reviewing the electronic Temi transcript for every interview I conducted. I interviewed the eight participants for two hours each, in two separate one-hour interviews. To explore this data, I employed two approaches. In the first approach, I captured short memos with my reflections on the transcripts. The memos reflected where I found commonalities as well as generally noteworthy content related to my research question. In the second approach, I developed a codebook which Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) described as "a statement of the codes for a database" (p.213). I created a list of codes (Table 5) with code definitions allowing me to condense data into topics relevant to my research question. According to Saldaña (2021), "Descriptive coding summarizes in a word or short phrase the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (p.134). In my study, some codes were prefigured deductively in alignment with the interview questions while the rest emerged from the data, and collectively they comprised the codebook.

Table 4. Topical Categories

Round I Interviews - Initial Codes	Round II Interviews - Initial Codes
Future Goals	Faculty & Staff
Race/Ethnicity/Gender	Faculty & Staff of Color
Educational Background	Faculty/Staff Influence
College Enrollment	Post-Graduation Goal
Major Selection	Next Career Step*
Campus Experience	Steps to Achieve Goal
Family Relationship During College	Resources Lacking
Family Influencing Success	Institutional Support
Campus Involvement	Friends
Most Favorite Campus Experience	Family Support
Least Favorite Campus Experience	Pandemic
First-Destination Survey	Skills/Knowledge
Mental Health*	Current Career*
Ethnicity of Friends	Connections*
	Internship*
	Research*
	Career Readiness*

Note. Codes subsequently added while cleaning and organizing the data

Analyze the Data and Represent the Data Analysis

Following initial exploration of the data using coding, I analyzed the database to address the research question. Wolcott (1994) advocated to "expand and extend beyond a purely descriptive account with an analysis that proceeds in some careful, systematic way to identify

key factors and relationships among them" (p.10). To accomplish this, I engaged in inductive

thinking, described by Hatch (2002) as proceeding in analysis from the specific to the general by

finding connections among elements. My inductive analysis of this data included assessment of

socioeconomic status (SES) of parents, educational level of parents, parental occupations, forms

of capital, and sources of capital. As the initial step, I deeply read the data to determine my

frames of analysis using In Vivo Coding (Saldaña, 2021) to capture the terms used by

participants as the codes, thus reflecting my commitment to honoring the voices of the Black

alumnae. Hatch (2002) described these frames of analysis as "how you will break your data into

analyzable parts" (p.163). These frames offered a way to begin to look at the data and to

subsequently identify domains. Stake (2005) asserted, "Codes sometimes start too early to reduce

complex phenomena to simple categories. I used Microsoft Excel and hand coded these domains

to clarify and critically challenge the patterns across the data.

Through descriptive coding and In Vivo Coding, I identified codes based on my

conceptual frameworks, concepts emerging from my literature review, frequently used words

and phrases from the data itself, and from my insights as a researcher. To capture the findings, I

subsequently grouped the codes into broader themes to help the reader understand the ways in

which the themes emerged from the data. My objective is to "place the knowledge of the

participants at the center of the inquiry" (Mertens, 2009, p. 285) and illuminate the lived

experiences of the women in my study. In the findings chapters, I will provide direct quotations

to reflect what the women have shared, and I will also reference subthemes to provide additional

clarity. Madison (2005, as cited in Mertens, 2009) suggested that "feminist theories lead to

questioning the data about the domains of race and gender and what effect the intersection of

these variables would have on social relations" (p.283). Additionally, Ropers-Huilman and

Winters (2010) asserted, "the negotiation of lived experiences may take shape and be interpreted differently because of uniquely intersecting experiences" (p.38). The authors sentiments are a reminder that individuals within the same group do not have the same essence. Analysis of the qualitative data will be critical for explaining how SES data intersects not only with the lived experiences, but also with perceptions of cultural and social capital.

Using these systematic procedures to conduct thematic analysis will aid in identifying what Wolcott (1994) described as "essential features and relationships" (p.24). I will make the themes emerging from the analysis visible by displaying the findings and patterns in charts.

Represent and Interpret the Results

Interpretation goes beyond description and analysis to determine what is to be made of the findings. Wolcott (1994) urged researchers to "make sense of what goes on, to reach out for understanding or explanation beyond the limits of what can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis" (p.10-11). My analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data will deepen what can be understood and inferred from the data. For the cultural and social capital data, I will summarize major qualitative results and describe how the research question, *What are Black alumnae perceptions of their experiences at Woodington University?,* is addressed by the findings. Wolcott (1994) stated, "When the claim is made that an interpretation derives from qualitative/descriptive inquiry, the link should be relevant and clear" (p. 37). The author advocated for researchers to be clear about which claims are based on field research. My objective is to make direct linkages between the stories recounted by the Black women in my study and the research question as posed. As Wolcott (1994) asserted, "In the very act of constructing data out of experience, the qualitative researcher singles out some things as worthy of note and relegates others to the background" (p. 13). Making visible patterns and

themes, as well as reflecting quotes that emerged from the interviews, will enable me to capture the story emerging from the data.

Critical to my interpretation are Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) framework and Stanton-Salazar's (1997) institutional agents social capital framework (IASC). Wolcott (1994) asserted, "Adopting any framework imposes structure on the descriptive account, if structure is what the research – or the researcher – needs" (p. 20). In my case, the CCW and IASC frameworks are essential to my interpretation of the data. Following the CCW and IASC frameworks will facilitate an appropriate level of interpretation as I seek to explain how the forms of cultural wealth and social capital emerge from the data, and the ways in which they influence career outcomes.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), "Interpretation brings meaning and coherence to the themes, patterns and categories, developing linkages and a storyline that makes sense and is engaging to read" (p. 219). The interpretation is about storytelling and really describing the perceptions and experiences of the women in the study. Wolcott (1994) also advised conferring with others, and I will engage my chair to give voice to my thought processes as I move through the analysis and interpretation phases. I will also leverage my personal experiences and draw personal assessments of the findings based on my extensive experience in the field of career services and engagement of thousands of students and alumni. As previously stated, I have led career centers on three university campuses, and I have witnessed the disparities in career outcomes among the graduating classes.

As a Black female administrator, I am regularly sought out by Students of Color, and particularly Black students. I am very proud of my race and heritage, and it is deeply meaningful anytime I can contribute to the development of students with whom I feel a strong sense of

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community. I have found that Black students are not always equipped with the knowledge, resources, or networks to aid in pursuit of their career goals. Through this research, I hope to understand how Black alumnae perceive the resources and people that contributed to their career development and career success so that I can share these findings with fellow practitioners and future students to provide a career road map that encapsulates approaches to leveraging and acquiring social and cultural capital. I was particularly interested in conducting this study at an MSI to see how Black women fare in an institutional setting that is purported to be strategically focused on helping students to overcome racial and socioeconomic barriers. In a setting that is equipped to be more embracing of Black women, it is important to understand perceptions of access to cultural wealth and attainment of career outcomes. Wolcott (1994) advised that it may be necessary to critique the research process depending on what is uncovered or not uncovered. Based on what I glean about community cultural wealth, social capital, and career outcomes, I will be open to analyzing the research process itself for greater understanding.

Data Validation and Reporting

As I engaged in the data collection and analysis, I also wanted to ensure that these approaches would establish validity of the data and results. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) noted the focus in qualitative studies is "assessing whether the information obtained through the qualitative data collection is accurate, such as examining the extent to which the information is credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable" (p. 217). The authors recommended using multiple strategies to determine quality; and I used member-checking and external examination. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), member-checking involves taking summary findings back to study participants to determine if the findings are an accurate reflection of the experiences they relayed. I validated with participants at two points in the study: 1) review of the

interview transcript and 2) the summary of findings. My study findings will emerge from the personal stories and lived experiences of these women, so dual validation is important to me. Five of the eight women responded after reviewing what I had captured in writing. They confirmed that they felt what was written reflected what they shared. In some instances, I also received rewording requests to clarify their initial sentiments, which I incorporated.

Once the data analysis and interpretation procedures are complete, I will focus on writing the report for the study. Yin (2009) described four varieties of written case study reports and I plan to use the classic single-case study in which a single narrative is used to describe and analyze the case. In addition to the narrative, I will incorporate tables and graphics to capture socioeconomic data and study findings. For the compositional structure of the report, I will use a linear-analytic structure. Yin (2009) described this as a standard approach in which the sequence of subtopics begins with the problem statement and a review of literature, followed by methods used, findings, conclusions, and implications. Not only will this format align with the standard report for my graduate program, but it also aligns with the format of many journal articles.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

My discussion above of the steps I have already taken, along with those that I will take, to ensure data validity and credibility, will help garner trust from my study participants and others who read the research. However, validity unto itself is not enough. The credibility of my study is also reflective of my own ethical commitments. My foremost commitment is to focus, as Denzin (2010) advocated, on ethical research that makes a difference in the lives of study participants, in my case, Black female undergraduates. Fine et al. (2003) indicated researchers must rely on personal values and virtues in order to handle ethical issues in the field. Similarly, Denzin (2010) recounted, "Ethical conduct has to be guided by an inner voice, by one's

conscience" (p.79). I previously discussed my Christian values and the overarching virtues I embrace as a person and as a researcher. Those foundational ideals signify that in my research I will seek to be charitable, treat others well, and seek justice.

My own personal ethical beliefs also align with the words ascribed by the Belmont Principles for ethical research – respect, beneficence, and justice. However, Denzin (2010) clarified that these principles are not synonymous with advocacy for social justice. He points out that, "*Respect* is achieved through informed consent agreements, *beneficence* through perceived risks or harm, and *justice* through assurances that the subjects are not unduly burdened by being required to participate" (p. 73). While these are important ethical facets to any study, I embraced Denzin's challenge to go beyond these guidelines for research and took my ethical commitments further. I sought to establish trust, show vulnerability, and create a space where my interactions with the women in my study were relational, not transactional. I also wanted to ensure that every woman understood the objectives of the study, and I invited them to offer perspectives beyond my prescribed questions by listening and respecting their voices. As Denzin (2010) stated, "All research should be approached as a negotiated partnership, and all participants should be treated as equals" (p.109). My study was thoughtfully designed to ensure that the research honors the lived experiences of Black women and deepens understanding of their stories.

In addition to core values of care and concern, the structure of my research lends itself to embracing ethical approaches by checking the data at several points across the study which aids in yielding trustworthy findings. As Denzin (2010) concluded, "methodology, ethics and inquiry are folded into one framework" (p.79). My epistemological views, beliefs, theoretical perspectives, and methodology were all carefully determined and will be curated with the goal of achieving social justice and fostering change in higher education through my research.

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Strengths and Limitations

This study features several strengths including the design of the study, the experience of the researcher, and the relevance of researcher knowledge. The qualitative approach, incorporating participant interviews, facilitated in-depth insights into the experiences of each participant. This method embedded within the multiple case study not only provided a more detailed understanding of the perceptions of the participants, but it also facilitated cross-case analysis to understand the unique differences as well as the similarities of lived experiences. Additionally, the use of the first-destination survey data to create the sample allowed maximum variation sampling to understand the perceptions of participants with different career outcomes, making the findings potentially richer.

In addition to the study design, my role as researcher added strength to the study. As a higher education administrator for 20 years, specifically within the career services space, I have deep knowledge of first-destination survey data as well as the sources that influence these outcomes. These insights allowed me to diversify the sample to maximize potential findings. Over the years, I have individually coached hundreds of students, including many Black women, so I leveraged this knowledge when crafting interview questions for this study. I also have direct experience managing a career center at a Minority Serving Institution, so I brought my own lived experiences with regard to the setting of the study.

While the study design and researcher background are a strength, some limitations remain. The scope of the study was limited to Black alumnae from a Minority Serving Institution (MSI) and the size of the study was small to ensure that the interviews could be conducted within a focused period of time. As a result, the potential influence of the setting on perceptions of Black alumnae is limited to the MSI and does not factor in other institutional types like

Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Predominantly White Institutions. The interviews also focused on a period during, and following, the worldwide pandemic so many of the barriers faced by the women in the study may not have been present if other time periods were studied. The overlap with the pandemic presents a unique perspective, but possibly also a limiting view. Despite these limitations, I am passionate about the focus of my research, and I believe the multiple case study design described above represents a scalable, impactful study which I hope can yield insights for higher education professionals who engage with and support Black undergraduate women.

CHAPTER IV: SITUATING THE INDIVIDUAL CASES

The purpose of this chapter is to present the Black alumnae who contributed to this multi-case study. Each woman is a case comprised of her unique stories and experiences. The lived experience of every participant is compelling, and features aspects of her upbringing as well as the factors that ultimately led to college enrollment. As evidenced through my review of the literature, scholars advocated for more granular exploration of differences among Black women, a key objective of this study. These case profiles include the family financial and educational background, while also highlighting unique experiences which have shaped the alumnae's perspectives on topics including racial identity, navigating barriers, and college selection. Understanding the path that brought each woman to Woodington University (UW) not only honors the distinctions between participants' experiences, but it also provides background and context for understanding the perceptions alumnae have of their time at UW, as reflected in Chapter Five.

Alicia

Alicia grew up in a single-family household and had good relationships with both her parents. She primarily lived with her mother and her sister; who had a different father. Both of her parents were working class, and Alicia recalled how difficult it was growing up in a low-income household:

> I knew at a really young age that we were poor. Oh God, it's weird to pinpoint an age, but it's not hard to pinpoint a feeling. I was really young, probably about three, but I remember we lived in this house and we got evicted. They came and threw our stuff out in the yard. I had this rocking chair that the neighbors built for me and the rocking chair

was in the yard and it was broken. I remember feeling really bad because the neighbors

would have seen it broken.

This was one of Alicia's earliest memories of feeling different. But she also described her

awareness of their poverty as very fluid, which showed up across different spaces in her life as

she was growing up. Living in poverty did not stand out at one point in time, it was always

present for Alicia in different ways. She described "very distinct markers," which amplified the

visibility of their economic situation:

> I would see other kids getting picked up in like really nice cars. I remember my
>
> mom wanted to buy this really pretty car, but when she came to pick me up from school
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> {…} she showed back up in this raggedy crap that we had. It's just that distinction of our
>
> car from all the other kids' cars; like I remember that.

Alicia's father worked for a consumer goods manufacturing company moving trailers

from dock to dock, and he retired when Alicia was in high school. Alicia's mother was a

housekeeper and over the years worked for a hospital, nursing home, college, and most recently,

for the school system. Some of these job changes were to earn more money, and others occurred

because her mom was fired at various points when she couldn't find anyone to watch Alicia, her

only child at the time. The occupations of her parents were motivating, confirming to Alicia that

she did not aspire to "a life of labor." It was not only the observation of her parents' arduous

work, but also the limited earnings that motivated Alicia's thoughts about her own future career

prospects. She recalled her mother not making a lot of money, evidenced by the housing project

they lived in; however, she made too much money for them to qualify for food stamps. Alicia

reflected on her accommodations growing up:

We just bounced around from one crappy apartment complex to the other. And then after that we moved back in with my dad. We stayed there for about two and a half years, and then my mom saved up money and bought a double-wide trailer.

Her surroundings made Alicia feel as though they were living below the poverty line, a legacy passed down across generations.

Both of her parents grew up poor in South Carolina. She did not know what her dad's family did for a living, but her mom's family picked tobacco. The family history also motivated Alicia to work hard to ensure she did not face a future of manual labor. Her parents did not have the shared experience of attending college, and they also were unable to finish high school. Her mother did not go past third grade. Growing up, Alicia always thought her dad had a high school education:

He was really smart - like, he was just really good with math. I just thought he went through school much further. But recently, about a year ago maybe, I was at the doctor with him and someone asked about his level of education and he said four, and I'm like, wait, what?

This revelation was shocking to Alicia because she had never questioned that her dad had a high school diploma. Despite limited education, her parents were both big proponents of the importance of going to college.

For Alicia, the messaging early on from her parents was, "you have to get good grades, and you have to go to college." She knew her parents wanted her to have a better life, and they believed a college education would help her get a good job and get her out of poverty. So, from middle school Alicia set her sights on going to college. When planning for college applications, Alicia decided she wanted to leave home. Middle school and high school were not pleasant for

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her, so she decided not to apply for any in-state schools. Alicia was accepted into every college to which she applied. Two of the New York schools were too expensive for her to consider, and the more affordable option in Brooklyn was ruled out by her dad.

Alicia opted to attend Temple University in Philadelphia although she had never been to the city or the campus. She made a lot of friends at orientation and was excited about attending Temple, but soon everything changed:

> Then break came and of course my parents still had to pay money every semester after financial aid. They paid for fall and then when it got time for spring, it was just up in the air. My dad was like, well I have some money, but I don't have a lot. My mom had none. My aunt was going to pay for it, but I felt like I was made to feel guilty by my mom. I said that's alright, I just won't go back. So, then we drove back to get all of my stuff.

Alicia sat out the Spring semester and then transferred to UW where her boyfriend was enrolled in the Fall. She was encouraged by her mom to live on campus, but it took time for her to make friends. She had made good friends at Temple and her first instinct was to try to get back to Temple, but she realized that it was not feasible:

> And then I was like, it is what it is. I was super upset. I was super mad. I felt defeated. And I'm like, oh my gosh, this is the end of my college career. I'm not gonna do anything with my life. And you know, just this feeling of failure. Like this is it. Apples don't fall apart from the tree.

By her third year, Alicia eventually made friends and also persisted to graduate with a double major in Religious Studies and Media Studies, but she struggled to find a job tied to her major.

She worked at PetSmart during school and continued to do so after she graduated. She tried on numerous occasions to find a job related to Media Studies, with no success. Four years later, she reenrolled at UW to pursue a second bachelor's degree with the hopes that would help her career prospects. She started initially in Finance and then transitioned to Sociology. Alicia found it challenging to find her fit when she returned to campus:

> When I came back to school, I was well aware of the fact that I was older, so I had a complex there. And I'm sitting in class with like 18, 19-year-olds, and I'm 26. I just didn't really fit in, so I just really didn't try to make friends.

While the journey was difficult to arrive at this point, Alicia's pursuit of her second degree at UW would open new doors, and this period of her college experience is explored and portrayed in this study.

Antoinette

Antoinette was raised by educators, and so the importance of learning and development was very present as she was growing up. Her mom was a professor and researcher, and her father was a teacher at the middle and high school levels. Antoinette reflected on her parents' education and careers with pride:

> My parents were probably the most unique in our family. Everyone else went to community colleges later in life to get like a basic business degree or some kind of trade education. But my parents are the only ones who went straight into college and got PhDs or master level degrees.

Antoinette's parents met in college and her mom later returned to university to complete a PhD in community psychology. Antoinette admitted she was significantly influenced by her

mom and her successful work as a professor. When Antoinette enrolled at UW, her father also pursued his own professional development:

> And then my dad actually started going to college as well to get his masters while he was a teacher, and he still is a music teacher. My dad got his master's in music education from Columbia, and we graduated at the same time.

During that period, Antoinette's mom obtained a higher professor rank at a neighboring institution to UW where she focused on racial equity in education. She subsequently moved into nonprofit work after Antoinette graduated from UW.

While her parents had strong educational credentials, that did not always translate to abundant finances:

> My family was kind of on the brink of low and middle income. We definitely struggled sometimes, but for the most part we could afford what we needed. And my parents are divorced. They've been divorced since elementary school.

Her dad lived in New York while her mom was based in North Carolina. Despite the marriage dissolving, Antoinette maintained good relationships with both parents. She described not seeing her father as often, and with her mom's proximity to UW she was a primary resource for Antoinette. She described that her mom would "point her in different directions," like reminding her to complete the FAFSA and offering guidance. When she needed financial support, that primarily came from her mom, but Antoinette worked during school to offset expenses.

When it came to the decision to pursue an undergraduate degree, both of her parents were influential:

The idea of going to college, it's always just been there. That's part of my family. My parents, they went and got degrees, and they taught us education is important. You go to college. You figure out what you want to do. So, it's always been there. My mom she's been on college campuses since I was little. So, I've kind of grown up in that environment where that was the norm and that was just always something I was definitely gonna do.

Antoinette recalled how her parents were always focused on the importance of achieving good grades and doing high quality work. It also became familiar for her to be around a college campus, as she often spent weekends there with her mom. Her dad also took her on college tours during high school, so she felt encouraged and supported by her parents to pursue a college degree. When it came to deciding where to enroll, Antoinette described, "I'm kind of a simple person. I knew I was gonna go to college, but I really wasn't too big on which college I wanted to go to."

There were, however, a few factors that ultimately influenced her choice of UW. Her mom had accepted the new position at a nearby university and she knew she would be close. Antoinette also had friends she grew up with who were going to UW. It provided comfort to know she would be there with them. Antoinette applied to several institutions, but none of them were Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). This was a purposeful decision on her part:

Growing up in predominantly white institutions, I just felt like I wouldn't be comfortable at an HBCU. I felt like I wouldn't fit in. I think my family had an opinion. They definitely wanted me to consider it. They were very Afrocentric growing up. They had the African mask hanging up around the house, the chair, drums... they were definitely empowered that way.

Antoinette's parents encouraged her to pursue HBCU enrollment and she felt they did not understand why she did not see a predominantly Black institution as a fit. Despite their preferences, they did not influence her choice or pressure her in any way.

Antoinette ultimately landed on UW and confirmed her enrollment:

> UW, I felt just offered the best option. And I liked the diversity. It wasn't too far from home, but a nice distance. So it was close enough to something I knew. UW was a step away from an HBCU, but it was in a comfortable way that I could process and deal with.

Antoinette found an environment where she was surrounded by diversity. Growing up in Caucasian-dominated schools, she had already decided she wanted a completely different experience. Her hope was to be a part of a campus community where she could connect to her cultural ethnicity while fostering that for others as well.

Amanda

Amanda's parents separated when she was five years old. She lived primarily with her mom, although she had a relationship and ongoing communication with her dad. Her parents both worked, but she was aware that money was in short supply:

> I grew up in a low-income household, but my parents did a good job of me not knowing that... I did everything I wanted to do, I was able to get everything I wanted to get, so I was fine. I mean, I knew we didn't have money.

She joked about memories of meals with questionable ingredients that were stark reminders of their limited access to funds; however, Amanda reflects on her childhood fondly. Neither their financial situation nor the separation of her parents cast a negative light, and she

was happy growing up. Her parents "made it work," and she specifically complimented her mom for doing a good job as a single parent:

> My mom - that's like my main person though. {…} Not to say my dad doesn't do much, but he doesn't (laughs). He does what he can here, there, whatever. But you know, like it's really my mom who really supports me.

Her mom was a strong supporter in all ways, including her encouragement of Amanda to enroll in college. However, neither Amanda's mom nor dad went to college. Both obtained their high school diploma and attended some community college. While advanced education was not part of their journey, both parents were in the workforce:

> Well, my mom, she always worked in like the HOA housing with apartments and stuff, as long as I can remember. My dad, he was always a manager of like different stores or whatever but he was always transitioning to new jobs.

Amanda saw the example of her parents working, and it was not until one of her other brothers went to college that she really began to think about higher education as a path:

> I guess it was just like seeing what my older brothers did. One went to college and the other was working. I was like, hmm, it's looking like I either go to school or work, and I didn't want to work. So, you know, {college} was a chance to get out of the house, explore a little bit.

She vividly recalled that she did not want to go straight from high school to working, and so college appeared to offer an alternative path. She was adamant that she did not want to work and knew she had to do something else.

Through most of her K-12 schooling Amanda was not focused on pursuing an undergraduate degree, but that began to shift:

The decision to go to college came in high school, I would say probably like my

senior year it kind of really hit me. Maybe at the beginning - probably when everyone

really kind of started talking about it and all that stuff.

Prior to this time, college had not been a consideration. In addition to hearing about the

plans of her peers, Amanda started getting mailings from colleges. She subsequently realized that

she performed well on the ACT in her junior year and perhaps college was a viable path for her.

Beyond the external motivations spurred by her peers and the college collateral pieces, her mom

was also very influential:

My mom, she always pushed for higher education. She's a firm believer in

knowledge is power, and higher education can unlock a lot of doors and all that stuff, so

she really did push for education and the importance of a college degree.

In addition to pushing for college, her mom was a motivating factor because she was

clear with Amanda that if she did not enroll in a university, she would have to do something.

Amanda knew this meant finding a job (which she did not want to do), so it became an

easy decision for her to pursue a degree. Although she was resolved to enroll, her motivation was

low. She remarked, "I don't think I was really excited about going to school. Period." She started

researching UW, looking into the program offerings, and then went to campus to tour. After

gathering this additional background on the university, she felt it could be a good fit for her.

Amanda admitted she can get overwhelmed with too many options and is also the type who,

once she finds something she likes, does not see the point in searching for anything else. As a

result, she only applied to UW. After being accepted, she remembered feeling nervous, while at

the same time knowing it was a good decision. One of the appealing aspects of UW was campus

diversity, which was in sharp contrast to her prior experience:

My high school was predominantly white. I have always been like the only Black

girl in class, even in Maryland. I was like the only Black girl in class, but I was popular

there so I did not mind (laughs).

Identity is something Amanda always valued. As she stated, "I'm a Black woman and I'm

proud of it." She had an interest in knowing her family history, exploring her roots, and tracing

her ancestry. She brought this passion for Black history and culture to UW, where she connected

with other Black women who became an instrumental part of her collegiate journey.

Tasha

Tasha is from a small town and was raised by her mom who had always been a single

parent. She is not close with her father, and they don't see each other often but they do speak by

phone. He works as a bus driver in another state. In contrast, Tasha's mom had a significant

influence on her as a role model for both career and education:

So a lot of the things she did as I was growing up, I've taken on. I definitely have

like a hyper-independence about me. She works at the government center as an

accountant. She put herself through school twice and has a master's degree. So that's

something I've always looked up to.

Tasha recalled her grandmother had encouraged her mom to stay in their small town and

just get a job:

And my mom was like, I am not doing that. I have to go to school and I have to

do this. So she did it all herself. All the paperwork, all the everything. And I cannot

imagine, I wouldn't even know where to start. She did all that by herself.

Her mom went to night school and also took online courses while Tasha was in

elementary and middle school, and successfully completed both her bachelor's and master's

degrees in accounting. Her mom was the only one in her family to get a degree, and Tasha is proud her mom strived to have a better life than others in their small town.

Following her degree completion, Tasha's mom built a successful career as an accountant and worked in the automotive and air transportation industries as well as in the government sector. Based on her mom's career and other life changes, Tasha experienced different income statuses as she was growing up:

I feel like it's hard to say, but it does feel like we were low income growing up. I will say when I transitioned from middle school to high school, it was high income because my mom got married to a white man. It was the flip of a switch, like day and night in the income situation. So I feel like I experienced all of it.

The transition from middle to high school was significant for Tasha. She described her time growing up in the small town as "not super lavish," and from kindergarten through eighth grade, she attended schools which were predominantly Black or Hispanic until she moved to a big city as a result of her mom's marriage:

So I went from growing up with everyone I knew in kindergarten to a new school with 2,000 people in it, and it was truly overwhelming and there was no diversity whatsoever; not one bit. So that was a rough transition in itself, but it did teach me a lot of things about just being open to getting to know new people and being more confident about making friends.

One of the challenges Tasha faced growing up was constant questions about her ethnicity, which further complicated this transition:

People would always ask, like what are you? You have to be something like, you

have to have something else in there. And that's like a nonstop thing my entire life. And

I'm just like, I'm – I'm just Black. Like, I'm just me.

For example, her hair was a regular point of interest for people who could not reconcile

the texture of her hair with her racial identification as an African American.

Tasha was regularly challenged by people asking if she was mixed race. Her parents were

both Black, and she was always at a loss when attempting to address questions about her race.

Correspondingly, she never felt confident in her own identity. Recently, however, Tasha

uncovered new knowledge about her family history:

I just found out this year that I actually have something different in me. My

grandfather is not who I thought he was. He's white; fully white. That's been a process,

but it helped me gain some identity. Like it really explains some things. Just like feelings

I've had, you know, communicating with people or relating to people. So I just learned

that two months ago.

While Tasha is still trying to reconcile this aspect of her identity, it has offered some

clarity, and she described "feeling more comfortable in her skin." Despite this new insight, Tasha

still considers herself African American and identifies with the race of her parents.

Ultimately, Tasha's choice to attend UW was partially influenced by the diversity of the

campus. After attending a predominantly white high school, she found the idea of engaging on a

college campus with people of different races appealing. The decision to go to college came for

Tasha in high school:

And I think at that point it clicked. Even when I was a freshman I was like, I'm

gonna have to transition out of here at some point so I need to set myself up to be able to

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do that. And on top of that, my mom of course said, "You need to go to school." So yeah, there wasn't really an option where I was not gonna go to school.

She recalled difficult moments in high school where she would lose focus and feel overwhelmed, but her mom was insistent she "keep it together." Her mom's persistence and willingness to pay for her to attend college was a motivation, but Tasha was also intrigued by the opportunity to branch out and have a new experience. She liked the idea of being out on her own, so she became comfortable with the notion of going to college. Tasha applied to three state universities and UW was her top choice. She ultimately enrolled at UW, as it provided some distance from home, offered a diverse setting, and provided a "comfortable and relaxed" environment. This desire to create distance from her family and to foster her independence became a significant aspect of Tasha's lived experience at UW.

Melissa

Melissa grew up in a close-knit family and described her parents as her best friends. They were not only her support system, but she also enjoyed talking with them. Her parents both obtained educational credentials related to their professions:

> So my dad, he actually majored in communications at Adelphi University. And he got into social work later in life. He ended up getting his masters when I was about one years old. So it was a little bit of a later start for him, but you know it was just this road that he ended up traveling on. My mom was an accountant. I don't even think she had her bachelor's; I think she just went to community college.

Melissa's early years were spent in New York, and she had a great childhood. The family lived in New York City and she attended an arts magnet where she developed friendships with

diverse classmates. Developing relationships with friends of Japanese, Ethiopian, and African American heritage was a highlight of her time growing up.

Melissa credited the culture in New York as having a pivotal influence on her inclusive mindset and she relished the opportunities she was afforded:

> I think I had a very good childhood where like, as far as equity and access to things, it wasn't a struggle. My family was pretty well off. I was able to go to the same events and have the same access to things like my other peers who weren't Black.

The family's financial situation changed when they relocated from New York City to Charlotte, NC. Her dad became the sole earner in the family and so finances were more restricted:

> So we went from a two-parent household that was working to just one. And it was also during the depression of 2008, so it was really rough for us. I would say I've categorized my family maybe lower middle class, maybe upper lower class, kind of like in between. Like we're not having access to so many things, but we're also not on the streets, you know what I mean?

It was difficult for Melissa's mom to find work, so she made the decision to return to school and obtained her bachelor's degree in accounting. She then went on to earn her master's degree in public administration. Melissa remembered her mom being in school for a long time – nearly eight years in total.

While the transition to the South was hard financially for the family, it was also personally challenging for Melissa. She described being bullied by her classmates; not based on her race, but based on other aspects of her physical appearance and cultural presentation:

I had a very thick New York accent when I first came to North Carolina. I had

glasses and I was very small, and so a lot of kids made fun of me because of that. It's

funny, because I was bullied so badly I actually got rid of my accent completely and

started to kind of assimilate into the Southern culture.

Melissa worked very deliberately to change her speech, and she found this adjustment

was pivotal in helping her establish friendships in a community she described as "very

predominantly white and very close-minded." While she did not recount any issues of racism,

she had been consciously aware of her race as a young girl:

I would say like growing up, I don't know if this is an experience for a lot of

Black women, but I do have to say that I was kind of ashamed of being Black. I think I

did not really understand the multitude of what a Black woman is. When I was under the

age of 10, I never really understood what Black meant.

Melissa has always identified as a Black woman and it is an aspect of her identity she

appreciably valued as she got older. She described herself as "lighter-skinned," and found she

was often mistaken for being Dominican, Ethiopian, or other races.

Melissa was also always mindful of how cultural competence was reflected around her.

For example, she was enrolled in an international studies program in high school and all of the

instructors were white:

So they're talking about this worldview, right, but there's no one who is a part of

that cultural competence. All of my Spanish teachers were white. None of them had a

little ounce of Latino or Latinx background at all.

Melissa continued to place importance on diversity and inclusion as she pursued college

enrollment. She always expected to attend college and was fully supported by her parents. She

viewed college as "the next level for me to kind of understand myself in the world that I was in."

The diversity of UW was definitely a factor for Melissa in her choice:

> I just liked the faces I was seeing on campus at UW. I was liking how diverse it was, especially for a college in the south. I loved the ambiance. I loved the faces I was seeing. I enjoyed it.

Beyond the diversity of the campus, Melissa appreciated that UW was not too far from home. She also received a scholarship, and many of her friends from high school were enrolling at UW. She described her friends as the deciding vote. She admitted she was scared to make friends on her own, and it helped to have friends she knew who were going. The other important aspect for Melissa was her academic pathway:

> I was planning to make my major social work, so when I saw that was one of the majors that they offered I was really happy. I did some research, and they had a pretty good social work program, so I just decided to go with it.

Her pursuit of social work, ultimately following in the footsteps of her dad, would unfold a transformational growth experience for Melissa and set her on the trajectory for her future career.

Renee

Renee grew up in a middle-class family with her parents and two siblings. Her sister was seven years older, and her brother was four years younger. Her parents had conservative values, and faith was an important aspect of their family dynamic. Renee described a loving home and close relationships with her family. She identified as Black, while acknowledging there was more to her family history:

I don't always necessarily specify my ethnicity, but I am Native American and African American but I usually just say I'm Black. My grandfather was Native American and Black, but I feel like the Native American side, we just didn't really get into that much. Like I know about the tribe that my great-grandmother was a part of. I feel like sometimes when you tack on another ethnicity, people always want to ask questions. I don't really know and so I just don't talk about it.

Renee enjoyed a close relationship with her grandfather, who was a pastor, and her extended family.

Her parents were advocates for a college degree even though that was not their own experience:

My mom has an associate's degree, but she didn't attend a four-year school. And my dad attended a four-year college, but he did not graduate. He never went back to finish. He was a junior and he couldn't pay his tuition, and my grandparents also couldn't afford it, so he dropped out.

Subsequently, her dad became a writer and worked different jobs in security, city government, and parking operations. Renee's mom worked with Bank of America in accounting for 20 years and transitioned to Compass Food Group in a finance role when Renee was in high school. During the 2008 recession, Renee's mom was laid off from Bank of America and for a two-year period before she found her position at Compass, their middle-class status was challenged:

Like when she said she got laid off, I will say finances were a little tighter during that time. It didn't really change the access that me and my brother had, but I more so was

cautious of how I asked for things. At that time, I was like maybe I shouldn't ask for these toys or maybe I shouldn't want new clothes.

While Renee felt it was necessary for her to balance what she requested from her parents, she always felt she had what she needed, and the family's finances normalized once her mom secured employment.

While the career paths of her parents were very different, her mom and her dad both had a significant impact on Renee's outlook. Her mom modeled a strong work ethic. She was not only successful in her core profession, but she was also a part-time Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). Her mom displayed a capacity to take on heavy workloads and manage it all well, an approach Renee also embraced. Renee also observed her dad's journey as an author and the time it took for him to experience success in his artistic pursuits. This made a strong impression on Renee, an artist and burgeoning entrepreneur, and was a source of motivation. Renee viewed her parents as role models in many ways, but an area of disagreement amongst them was the importance of a college education:

> So I didn't necessarily feel like I needed college for what I wanted to do in life. And so I kind of had this plan to just graduate high school and work for a couple years if my parents allowed me to live with them, and just save up to pursue my dreams. But I think because of their situations and feeling like college was like a way out, they really started to press me to go to school.

Renee recalled having many arguments with her parents about going to college.

Renee described her dad's side of the family as "very education savvy" because all of her aunts and uncles have multiple degrees. One aunt is a lawyer, and an uncle obtained his MBA

degree. Her dad was the only one who never obtained a college degree, and she believed his own career path is what caused him to push her to enroll in college:

> Based on my dad being an independent author for so many years, I think he just didn't want me to have that struggle. So that's kind of what led me to come to school my freshman year. So pursuing college was me just wanting to satisfy my parents, and not necessarily feeling like they were supportive of me going the more artistic route.

Renee also observed her peers going on college tours, and she received positive reinforcement from her instructors to pursue a college degree:

> I had teachers telling me that I should be applying to Ivy Leagues because of how smart I was. I graduated with a 4.5 GPA, but at the time I guess I looked at college as like, if you want to be a doctor or lawyer, you need college. But I knew ultimately my long-term goals were still going to be more creative. I just didn't see the value in it.

Despite her reservations, the influence of her family and her faculty ultimately motivated Renee to pursue college enrollment.

The family toured UW along with two of the highest ranked universities in the state, and Renee applied to all three:

> I just really liked UW. Like when I was on the campus, I really liked it. And I told my parents, I'm going to this college. My dad really wanted me to go to one of the top ranked universities. I got in and he was like go there just because of the reputation, but I wasn't really clicking with that campus.

Although she was pushed against her will to attend college, Renee admitted she found community at UW, learned more about herself, and had a valuable experience. Renee became

deeply involved on campus, which led to life-long friendships and opened doors not only for full-time employment, but also for the successful launch of an entrepreneurial endeavor.

Bria

Bria was born and raised in Washington D.C. Her mom immigrated from Nigeria before Bria and her twin sister, Bella (also featured in this study), were born. The twins also have a younger sister who later followed in their footsteps and enrolled at UW. Their dad relocated back to Nigeria and was not in the picture when they were growing up. Her parents stayed in regular contact, but Bria rarely spoke with her dad directly. Bria described growing up in a single-parent household with limitations, yet her mom persevered:

> I would say my family situation was low income, but I don't think I realized that until I got older because I think my mom did a pretty good job of providing what we needed. We were definitely low income, because I needed help to be able to attend college. The fact that I was qualifying for financial support let me know, oh, okay, I am low income.

Her mom not only was a strong advocate for education, but she was also a role model for Bria. She obtained her undergraduate degree from the University of the District of Columbia, then obtained her master's in social work at Howard University when the twins were in elementary school. Bria described her mom's job as "working with children who are going through tough times." Bria's mom worked to pay her way through school, but their aunt lived with them at the time and also took care of them.

Bria ascribed the relationship with her aunt and extended family as an important aspect of the Nigerian culture:

I think I just grew up with a really close family. I think that also could be a cultural thing, like being Nigerian. Everything is centered around family and just making sure your family is good. They're very proud of us.

Bria has pride in her Nigerian culture and always identified as "African-American," which she defined as "an African in America," but others did not always note the distinction:

I like to explain it like this - when a police officer sees me, they don't necessarily see a Nigerian, they just see a Black woman, but like, they don't understand that Black people come from different cultures. Growing up, this was a struggle because I'm seen one way, but I see myself another way. So it was like hard.

While Bria often felt strangers viewed her identity as generically Black, she relished making connections with other Nigerians and engaging in her culture:

The Nigerian culture is very prominent and it's really big for me. I like in the culture how close everyone is, how supportive everyone is. If I see another Nigerian where I am working, then we're automatically going to connect and talk to each other. We share the same experiences, like the way we grew up with our parents and what we like about our culture and things like that.

Bria never lived in Nigeria and has never visited, but she claims the country as her own. One of her goals is to find a way through her future profession to help her country. She acknowledged that Nigeria faces many issues related to security and safety and she hopes to make a positive impact.

Bria described her relationships as a way she has sought to maintain a strong affiliation with Nigeria:

I feel like I do tend to make a lot of Nigerian friends or African friends in general because a part of me is missing because I have never been there. I feel like I am not missing out if I have those type of friends.

In addition to finding her identity within the Nigerian and American cultures, Bria also navigated different racial compositions during her K-12 schooling. She grew up in a Black neighborhood and attended school there, but when she transitioned to high school she went to a different part of D.C. and the school was predominantly white. It was a "culture shock" for her but shaped how she thought about her future college experience:

I experienced both sides of going to school with different cultures and I decided that I needed to be around where Black people were, but I also wanted to experience or become friends with other different people and cultures as well.

These experiences informed her choice of UW. Bria always knew from a young age she would go to college, because her mom always stressed the importance of getting a college degree.

Bria was also self-motivated by her desire to pursue a career in medicine:

What motivated me was just wanting to be a doctor and helping other people. I knew that I wanted to help people like myself, and there were clear steps to becoming a doctor, like going to college, med school, and things like that.

Her aunt, who was a nurse, also influenced her decision to go to college. Growing up, Bria observed her aunt studying in nursing school, which was a source of inspiration. Bria conducted a search on Google of "the most diverse colleges," and UW came up. She applied to several universities, but affordability became the predominant driver of her selection. She received external scholarships, UW also gave her a scholarship, and as a public university, it was

the most affordable option. By enrolling at UW, Bria ultimately accessed the diversity she was seeking as she developed friend groups of Africans in America as well as African American/Black women.

Bella

Bella and her twin sister, Bria, grew up in Washington D.C. with their mom and younger sister. Their dad returned to Nigeria, their family's home country, when they were very young. Bella talked to him occasionally growing up but does not view him as having any influence on her education or career plans. Her dad graduated high school, but he did not go to college. Bella does not know much about his line of work. Bella's mom was the sole provider for the household and worked hard to provide for her children:

> Mom, when she came to the U.S., I think she was 20. When she came, she was younger than I am now I believe. She came to college here. She did community college and then she did college, and then she did her master's in social work. She completed her master's when I was in elementary school.

She recalled her mom also took some nursing classes, but never got the nursing degree, and instead pursued her occupation of social work. Bella is very proud of her mom and grateful for all she has invested in her and her sisters:

> She sacrificed a lot, so I know that I need to be successful. I think she motivates me and my sisters to be successful, especially because she's the only parent that we have and we want to make sure that we're honoring her in our success; and also that we can take care of her later and also make her proud.

Growing up in a single income household, Bella knew financial resources were limited. Bella was keenly aware she could not ask for certain types of clothes or new shoes because her

mom could not afford it. The girls attended private school, which was also a visible reminder of their low-income status:

> We were on scholarship because we went to private school, which my mom, when we were younger, she paid with her credit card. And then when we were older, we had a D.C. opportunity scholarship so we paid that way. The scholarship also paid for our school trips.

While the scholarship allowed them to obtain a private Catholic school education, there were occasions where they were left out of school traditions:

> When we had dress down days at school, we had to pay money and we couldn't afford it, so we wore uniforms. I think it was embarrassing to not be able to dress down. We also couldn't participate in pizza days. I think it's embarrassing when you're a child and like you're different.

Limited resources meant when it came time for college, Bella would have to apply for scholarships to avoid taking out loans.

Bella had always known she would go to college and never considered an alternative path. Like her sister, Bria, she had a shared passion to become a doctor, and so she knew college would be the first step toward achieving that goal:

> I think God would be the main one who guided me and my sister to want to be OB-GYNs, because we're able to support each other. I think it is really helpful to have someone who is exactly on the same path so that we can help each other.

In addition to sharing a common career interest with her sister, Bella also received encouragement and support of her educational and career goals from her family. For example, her mom, aunt, and uncles all went to college, and so it was a regular topic of discussion among

the family. She knew a college degree was important for each of them to get to where they were in their careers.

Her family not only modeled the importance of higher education, but also offered guidance:

> I guess for a lot of Black communities, but I know for Nigerian communities, it's kind of like a village raises a child. And so my uncle would talk to me and Bria about pursuing higher education, making sure that we're on the right track, making sure that we had the right types of friends and kind of not lecturing us, but like just teaching us.

Her other uncle also shared about his work in Germany and the types of opportunities which exist abroad. Within the household, her mom and her aunt were both very actively engaged in teaching the girls, and they cultivated an active learning environment for them. For college applications, Bella and Bria created their target list together to make sure they applied to the same schools:

> There was a website that showed different universities, and I looked at the demographics to see if there were enough African Americans where I would feel comfortable and that there were also other races. I didn't apply to as many HBCUs just because I wanted a little bit more diversity.

After attending a predominantly white high school, Bella also knew she did not want the same experience in college.

Bella identifies as a Nigerian American woman, and she always felt different from African Americans:

I feel like I don't act like most, maybe that's stereotypical to say, but I didn't feel

like I fit in with a lot of African Americans. So I guess I was kind of scared to go to an

HBCU.

Similar to her sister, Bella knew between external scholarships and what was offered by

UW, she would not have to pay anything for college; and she was really happy with her decision.

She also found the diversity she sought across race and income levels at UW. She valued her

Nigerian upbringing in D.C. but was excited to have a different experience at UW.

Conclusion

The case profiles provide context for the life experiences of the women prior to arriving

at UW and the different paths that brought them to campus. While the women's paths varied,

they each ultimately embarked on the same collegiate journey; enrolling at UW. Yet these case

profiles highlight clear distinctions in socioeconomic background, family structure, racial

identity, and educational experiences. Knowledge of these background stories will contribute to

understanding the perceptions, as captured in Chapter Five, that participants have of the role of

barriers, relationships, and their own personal attributes in relation to their campus experiences.

CHAPTER V: BLACK ALUMNAE'S PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES AT UW

The purpose of this chapter is to answer the research question*: What are Black alumnae perceptions of their experiences at Woodington University?* These findings provide a greater understanding of the perceptions study participants' have of their experiences on campus – navigational barriers, relationships, and engagements – and the personal attributes that supported their educational pursuits. The response to the RQ reflects the cross-case findings emerging from thematic analysis of the experiences of eight Black alumnae who completed their undergraduate degrees at Woodington University (UW). The perceptions of participants were discerned through interviews exploring their experiences during college as well as the transition from campus to career. Familial relationships as well as institutional relationships were explored, campus engagements and resources were discussed, and steps pursued to achieve post-graduation goals were described. The perceptions of participants reflect important relationships and campus experiences that contributed to their growth and development, in addition to their personal attributes.

The Role of Navigational Barriers

The time of this study overlapped with the global pandemic which began in March 2020. Participants faced barriers not only emerging from the pandemic, but also resulting from institutional barriers, which in some instances resulted in delayed goal realization. This discussion will begin by exploring three barriers the alumnae faced as they navigated within the institution: 1) lack of access to resources and information, 2) inadequate career preparation, and 3) the perception that they lacked relevant skills and experiences. I will conclude this section by discussing the participants' perceptions of the challenging aspects of the pandemic as well as unanticipated, yet positive, benefits.

Institutional Barriers to Success

For many of the women, their lack of access to resources and relevant knowledge was a hindrance they had to overcome. Alicia was a first-generation college student, and she felt the gap in knowledge and experience as she navigated her time at UW:

> How can I put it? I feel like I would've gotten much further if I had examples of what being in college was like, if I had family members who went through college, who had done the college experience. I didn't have "the rule book."

Alicia's reference to the "rule book" reflected a conversation that occurred in one of her sociology courses. The professor shared that the people who are successful in college are the ones who have "the rule book." It is the people who know how to navigate, and in that moment, Alicia was reminded that she didn't know how to navigate:

> So, it was just pounded into me, college, college, college, when you graduate college, you'll be able to get a good job because you'll have a college degree. I just didn't get a lot of support for what I really wanted to do.

The lack of access to resources and knowledge made the path more difficult for Alicia. She completed her first bachelor's degree yet was unable to secure employment tied to her degree. When she returned the second time to pursue an additional degree, it was the guidance of a faculty member that helped her to ultimately navigate toward pursuing a graduate degree. Alicia reflected that she would have been better had she simply known the rules to navigate. Her faculty were instrumental in guiding her through the process to apply to graduate school.

Antoinette also related to the importance of having access to the right knowledge. She believed UW was not lacking in what they offered, but from her experience, students had to know what was going on. As an example, she acknowledged she never knew about the career

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center and its resources. While she felt she owned part of that responsibility; she also

acknowledged that it represented a significant source of knowledge that would have been

valuable to her job search. The exchange with Amanda below also highlights how career

readiness knowledge was unavailable to her:

> Nicole: Were you able to afford to go to a prep class or like how did you prepare
>
> for the GRE?
>
> Amanda: Oh, they do that? (laughs)
>
> Nicole: That answers my question. (laughs)
>
> Amanda: Well, the GRE, I just did like the online prep test. I didn't go to class or
>
> anything. I just looked and skimmed it online. I probably should have studied a bit more
>
> for that, but I don't know. And then I would like research YouTube videos on just how to
>
> take the GRE and stuff like that, but I didn't even know what a good score was.

While Amanda was resilient and found ways to prepare for the exam, she lacked

knowledge about how the exam was assessed and the options that existed to support her

preparation.

Bria and Bella, both biology majors, felt a similar lack of knowledge when it came to

preparation for medical school and the MCAT entrance exam they were required to take. Bria

recalled that she did not initially understand the process:

> So, I realized that there's definitely steps that you need to take before you enter
>
> med school like volunteering and trying to get clinical experience. But I think I learned a
>
> little bit later, or I underestimated, how hard that process was. I thought that I would get
>
> into med school immediately after my senior year, but that's not how that works because
>
> the application process is like a year.

Bria described talking to her advisor and discovering that she did not know much about the medical school process. Bria took efforts in her own hands and started to look through YouTube and Google to try to gather knowledge about the steps involved as well as sources for study materials. There was a specialty pre-med advisor that focused at UW on med school and Bria did not gain access to her, but she made a point of reviewing the resources that were posted outside of the advisor's office to try to fill in gaps of information about the roadmap to med school. She later received a second advisor because she was on the pre-med track. He knew a little about the process, but she found that he told her things she already knew like the importance of maintaining high grades and taking the MCAT.

Bria believed she had a lack of access to the knowledge and resources that would have aided her preparation for the med school application process:

> I think my degree prepared me as far as the classes and the material I learned, definitely being a science major prepared me for MCAT learning and then also going into medical school, but what I wish was different was access to specific track preparation. I wish I had clear advice and mentors who could tell me, okay, this is your schedule and what you need to do in order to achieve your goal of attending medical school.

Bria wished her advisors had specific knowledge about the process and that resources were available on campus to help her learn about med school. Additionally, UW's biology major was geared toward environmental biology which amplified the lack of support she felt in her pre-med journey. Another area of frustration was advising related to her coursework. She did not learn until later that it is helpful to take classes in a certain order to have greater understanding of the MCAT. As a result, she took some classes later than she should have. Bria perceived that the

advising for pre-med was lacking and did not provide the support she needed which was a barrier she had to navigate.

Bella reiterated the gap in pre-med resources at UW:

> We did have pre-med counselors, but I feel like I didn't really use my guidance counselors that much. I feel like I had the general guidance counselors and the ones that I had personally weren't as helpful. I had to figure out on my own what classes to take and when to take them.

Both Bella and Bria found they had a lack of access to specific pre-med counseling. Bella also recalled learning about an MCAT study course, but she was unable to afford to pay for it. She wished UW integrated MCAT preparation into the program. Bria similarly shared that if she had the financial resources, she would have taken the MCAT classes. Bella also felt she lacked knowledge about the approach to applying for research internships which she combatted through prayer and her own self-directed search for relevant information.

Not knowing the steps to take and the resources to access was a barrier that made it more challenging for the participants to navigate during and after college. The absence of the "rule book" made their goal pursuits more difficult, but they were also challenged because they were unsure of how to prepare for their goal pursuits, and they questioned if they possessed the necessary skills and experiences to receive consideration. The feeling of not being fully prepared for their career pursuits was shared by Tasha, Amanda and Antoinette and they found this to be a barrier to the attainment of their goals.

Tasha found she lacked access to networking resources:

> I do typically just kind of float on my own so I'm not surprised that my college experience went that way, but I do see where not having connections can make things a

little bit less easy to navigate. I wish I would've had the courage to go out and make those

connections.

While she acknowledged there were steps she could have taken to develop network

relationships if she had known, she believed this was a resource that was difficult to access at

UW. She recalled that her friends in different majors like interior architecture and retail studies

had close knit relationships with their professors and made helpful connections as a result.

Tasha felt that she missed out on the opportunity to develop networking relationships and

she was disappointed that connections could not be easily made through her communications

studies major. She believed having connections with individuals on campus would have made it

easier to secure employment after graduation:

> But I will definitely say, I didn't know what to do. Like if I went to an event, I
>
> didn't really know how to network, how to speak to someone and try to get myself into a
>
> job. I also felt like I didn't have anything to talk about.

As a result of this perceived barrier, Tasha resigned herself to put in random job

applications with full knowledge that she lacked clarity about what she wanted to do. She

recounted that her efforts to apply for "any and everything" did not bring any results. Tasha

faced an obstacle because she did not know what to do to secure a job and she wished she would

have been more properly prepared to help herself succeed.

Based on her personality, Amanda also felt challenged to network to secure connections

and job prospects:

> And me being shy and stuff didn't really help either. I do know that those
>
> connections and relationships are important. I feel like I probably could have built

relationships with a few of my professors, but I would've had to take the step and I don't really do that. I wasn't doing that at the time. I wasn't networking properly.

She knew she was not fully prepared, and she sensed when the pandemic hit that it was going to be hard for her to secure a position since she did not already have something lined up. She wished UW provided career guidance that would have helped her navigate the job search during a pandemic. Antoinette also struggled with her preparation for the job search:

I didn't feel prepared. I Googled how to interview. I didn't know what questions they would ask. I never knew to have the conversation about how to approach interviews. I did not discuss with family. The only thing I knew to anticipate was sharing my strengths and weaknesses.

Not knowing what to do, as described by Antoinette, was a common feeling amongst the study participants.

In addition to feeling underprepared due to a lack of knowledge and resources, some of the women also faced difficulties because of a perception that they lacked the skills or experiences necessary to pursue their career goals. Tasha not only felt unprepared, but she also believed she was underqualified. She did not feel she had put herself out there enough or achieved the level of accomplishments that others in her major had. There were positions she did not try for simply because she believed she was unqualified. She felt she lacked campus involvements and networking connections which placed her at a disadvantage.

Renee also faced uncertainty about her qualifications while on the job hunt. She applied everywhere at first and then quickly realized that some career paths like fashion marketing or merchandise buyer were not entry level jobs and so she would have to take on an assistant or

lower-level role to have a chance to work her way up. She found this discouraging and had

hoped the process would be more straightforward for her:

> I don't have enough experience. I don't have a portfolio set up. You know, they're
> asking for you to submit all these things. All I have is a cover letter and a resume. So I
> was like, I'm not gonna stand out.

Renee adjusted her approach and targeted roles where she thought she had a better chance

and she ultimately secured a position through a warm networking contact that was in business,

but not directly related to her major.

Participants felt uninformed and unsure what steps they needed to take, and in many

instances, they faced uncertainty about their qualifications and level of preparation to achieve

their career aspirations. These barriers presented challenges as they attempted to navigate

processes and pathways to achieve their goals. In addition, the women also found themselves in

the midst of a global pandemic which offered its own challenges as well as some surprising, and

welcome, benefits.

Unexpected Global Health Crisis

As previously discussed, this study was comprised of Black alumnae who completed

their undergraduate degrees at UW in August 2019, December 2019, and May 2020. The timing

of their degree completion uniquely thrust them into the worldwide pandemic that uprooted so

many people's lives, forcing them to adjust their career aspirations. Despite the challenges they

faced, the pandemic birthed unexpected career outcomes and new opportunities for many of the

women. The participants recounted three key steps they took to achieve positive career outcomes

during the pandemic: 1) adjusting to the pandemic, 2) embracing flexible career plans, and 3)

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reflecting and thinking differently. They credit their adaptability as essential to adjusting their plans and thinking, and key to navigating the pandemic.

The women discussed the adjustments they had to make because of the pandemic, the emotional and mental impacts they experienced, the opportunities that were lost, and the barriers that arose. Melissa recalled with crisp detail how the pandemic unfolded for her:

I was pretty stressed out and so I told my supervisor in March that I was gonna go back home for my father's birthday and I would be back in three or four days. Literally the next day I get a phone call from my supervisor to attend a mandatory video meeting and she informed the RAs that the school was on lockdown and everyone who was away from campus was not allowed to return.

Melissa immediately started panicking because she was thinking about the groceries sitting in her apartment refrigerator while also realizing that all her clothes, makeup, and toiletries were also there. She was stuck at her parents' house, and they had downsized, so without adequate space or access to her belongings she felt like everything was starting to fall apart. She initially continued her internship online, but that was quickly canceled. With the pandemic emerging in March and her graduation in May, she was forced to complete her remaining classes online via Zoom. As a result, she lost access to campus resources, including her therapist who had been a guiding source for navigating life's challenges. Melissa was also heartbroken in the realization that her extended family would not have the chance to witness her walk across the stage on graduation day.

Bella also felt like she missed out on something important by not getting to participate in the graduation ceremony. She was proud of her hard work and her status as first-generation Nigerian, and she wanted her mom to be able to enjoy that moment with her daughters:

I was definitely really sad about not walking. It was actually something I would think about, like daydream about, walking the stage. I graduated summa cum laude, and I was really proud of myself. And my mom was proud as well. We were all just really excited for graduation and celebration.

Unlike Bella, Bria relished not having the expense of graduation, however both sisters were grateful that they would have another opportunity to graduate after their anticipated completion of medical school. Although Bella missed out on an in-person graduation ceremony, she was grateful to the Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG) Future Leaders Program which made special efforts to host a virtual celebration for her, Bria, and the other participants. Bella also was hit hard by the time lost with her friends during her senior year. She felt the shift to move back home was abrupt and found it difficult to no longer be in the same state as her friends. She had a different picture in her mind of her final year with her friends and she felt the pandemic took that away from her. She viewed missing graduation and her separation from her friends as lost opportunities.

While Bria was not as affected as her sister by missing out on graduation, she was stunned by how quickly everything changed:

I never thought we would be in the pandemic. It was very crazy. No one knew what to do because obviously we never had that type of disease spreading so quickly and not knowing what could happen. At first, they were like no more in person class, everyone stay in their dorms and try to do things online, and you know, that was fine for a while. And then maybe a week or two later, they sent us home.

Leaving campus was the first major adjustment, the second was the shift to online learning. She found some exams more challenging because the course content did not lend itself

to a virtual format. She also struggled initially with adjusting to the schedule of waking up and attending each class online. After graduation in May, everyone was still at home and Bria recalled initially taking time to relax, but then switched her focus to studying for the medical school entrance exam. It was during this time that she realized she really did not know how to prepare and that simply reading to learn the material was not enough. The combination of these factors made it clear to Bria that her dream to enter medical school would be delayed, which was a difficult concept to contend with.

Like Bella and Bria, Alicia also felt the impacts of the rapid onset of the pandemic. She recalled having what she described as a mental breakdown when she was sent home from campus and subsequently furloughed from her part-time job. For Alicia, it felt like a crisis of identity:

> We were all home during the pandemic. My mom was home. My sister was popping in and out of the house with the kids because daycare was out. And I didn't realize how much of my identity was tied to school. And so, I'm just kind of sitting at home every day. Not going to school. Not driving anywhere. So I kind of became super depressed.

Although this was a very difficult time, she described some positive impacts such as receiving unemployment benefits and stimulus during the pandemic. She also recalled the accommodations made by a professor who had a reputation for being hard and how helpful that was at a time she was struggling with turning in her work.

Unlike the other participants, Amanda was already out of school well before the pandemic hit so she did not experience the stress of leaving campus to complete classes online, but her post-graduation plans were negatively impacted. She originally planned to find

employment in January, the month following her degree completion, however that is not how it played out:

> When I graduated, I had no plan at all. So when COVID hit, I was really at a loss. After graduation, I honestly just kind of kept the same waitressing hours because I needed a break. I had planned to start actively looking but it got really hard.

When everything shut down in March, Amanda felt like COVID-19 added a new barrier to securing employment. She was at a loss with what to do and it was early in the pandemic when everyone was forced to be at home. Amanda wished more had been available through UW to assist:

> In a way some resources were lacking, but if I was to say, I mean, it would've been nice if the university sent out information about how to find a job during a pandemic or helpful tips for how to make yourself stand out. That would've been really nice.

Months passed and it was not until one year after graduation that she secured her job at FedEx.   Delayed goal attainment was a reality of the pandemic for many of the alumnae. The pandemic fostered a shared reality of shifting plans that were previously never in question. Due to the sudden onset of the pandemic, participants lost access to campus resources and relationships, had to adjust to online learning, and missed out on the culmination of their degree completion. For many, the pandemic created uncertainty about next steps and their futures overall. The pandemic not only required participants to adjust how to navigate degree completion, but they also had to embrace flexible career plans to achieve post-graduate outcomes. Antoinette attained a positive outcome through the university which allowed her to navigate the uncertainty of the pandemic. Like others, Antoinette initially adjusted her plans to account for the pandemic:

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I thought I would do an internship. I didn't want to go to grad school. I applied for some internships, but it didn't work out because of COVID. I knew I had to work my way up in the industry so I thought pursuing an internship would be a way for me to have something on my resume.

Antoinette could have never anticipated that she would end up receiving and accepting a position with her UW campus employer after graduation. She never had to secure interviews for other jobs because this offer came so quickly.

Antoinette's story of facing initial difficulties, adjusting, and then ultimately achieving a positive outcome was also echoed by Renee. She remembered applying for jobs in October ahead of her December graduation. Her goal was to land something in January, but the pandemic made it tough and was a barrier she could not anticipate. Renee eventually got a job in February and started on March 16 just before everything shut down for the pandemic. She reflected on how fortunate this timing was:

What's also ironic is even though of course I was ready to graduate, part of me felt like maybe when I first graduated, I should have waited another semester especially when I didn't get a job right away. I also just wanted a little bit more time on campus since I had just joined my sorority. But then the pandemic happened, and it was a good thing I went ahead and graduated. I would've been so upset.

Renee was very grateful that she got the job when she did. She discussed how several of her friends had internships cancelled and she also knew people who were laid off. While it was hard to onboard remotely, she was relieved she had taken on a position she really enjoyed.

While Bria and Bella experienced a significant delay in their application timeline for medical school, they fared much better with their pursuit of research work. Bria was very focused on finding a job to gain experience:

> I graduated in May 2020, and it was in the middle of the pandemic. So, it was a little bit hard to find a job or even figure out how to navigate getting into medical school at that time. I decided I would work for a little bit. I came back home to D.C. and applied to many jobs, and I ended up getting a job, not too far, working with Johns Hopkins School of Medicine as a research technologist.

She achieved an important personal goal by securing this research position. The pandemic complicated Bria and Bella's plans for medical school. Two gap years slowly turned into three as they realized that the process to prep for the MCAT would take longer than anticipated. Despite these challenges, Bella also focused on pursuing a research internship. Because of the pandemic, she knew she did not have to put pressure on herself to get something right away. Unfortunately, many of the internships she applied for withdrew the opportunity because of the pandemic and decided not to hire anyone. Bella was fortunate to be accepted for an internship at the Children's Hospital which was her top choice. Although the pandemic presented a challenge to Bella in several ways, she was pleased with the outcome of securing her top internship choice.

While it was not easy, many of the study participants were successful achieving their career aspirations. Each were forced to navigate the difficulties of the pandemic; however, their persistence and hard work were rewarded with attainment of their goals, although these may have shifted along with the tumultuous landscape.

While everyone experienced challenges that required a flexible response, several of the women also highlighted positive and unexpected outcomes that arose for them during the global health crisis. For some, the pandemic presented a pause, an opportunity to reflect and think differently, which they had not realized they needed. Bria credited the pandemic for enabling her to carve out much needed space for quiet and focus:

> I think stopping and having a moment of quietness basically is what the pandemic was. It actually helped. I remember I deleted social. That was the year I deleted a lot of my social and kinda just focused on my relationship with God and that was actually really good. That was like a really good moment for me.

Bria also valued that she could study full time without interruption. She felt the pandemic offered many positive aspects for her.

Tasha and Amanda both experienced significant delays with securing what they considered to be a post-graduation job that utilized the knowledge they gained through their degrees, both still experienced positive impacts during the pandemic. Tasha described her time of self-discovery and growth:

> The pandemic was good and bad. I loved staying in the house. That was one of the best experiences. But when it came down to real life and like having a job and paying for my apartment, I wasn't mature enough to handle my unemployment money like I should have. But it was just all around like a really teachable experience. I feel like I just learned, I got a chance to connect with myself again and I felt like I found it showed me what I needed to work on.

During this time, she was also fortunate to work consistently throughout the pandemic and she never got sick with COVID-19, so she found the overall experience to be pretty enjoyable. Amanda also reflected on this time very positively:

> I feel like the pandemic gave me time to finally relax. Because like I said, I was going back and forth commuting my senior year. It gave me room to breathe. I just really enjoyed the slowdown during that time.

Amanda was also pleased that she was able to accomplish quite a bit during the pandemic including moving into her own apartment and ultimately finding a job.

While Alicia and Melissa were in pursuit of graduate school and did not have to navigate the job market like the others, they both found that the pandemic opened doors they would have never accessed otherwise. While the pandemic started very rocky for Alicia, it led to an ideal outcome. Alicia was initially very discouraged by the grad school application process because she had low scores on the GRE and worried that would prevent her from being admitted to the program. She discussed her concerns with the faculty and program staff, and they gave her advice on how to conceptualize her experience at UW, they also informed her that the application is reviewed holistically, and most importantly, they clarified that she could waive her GRE score. After receiving letters of recommendation from her professors, she was accepted into the program one week before classes commenced. Alicia attributed this outcome to the pandemic. While she acknowledged that the pandemic was hard for many people, she described being grateful on many levels that it occurred.

Melissa was also on the path to grad school after deciding to take a gap year. The pandemic hit Melissa hard, yet she managed to shift her plans:

I think the pandemic really affected everyone in so many different ways and for

me, mentally I was not in a good place. I decided it would be better if I took a gap year to

figure myself out and to postpone grad school. During the pandemic, I was working a

little bit, but I also created a podcast about mental health.

The podcast became not only an outlet, but also a way for Melissa to share all that she

learned through her degrees in social work and human development and family studies. She also

credited the pandemic with giving her an opportunity for reflection that caused her to go a

different direction and pursue an out of state program:

I think I would have stayed at UW because that's just what I wanna do. It's much

easier. But I think the whole pandemic kind of helped me figure out like, what is my life?

What do I wanna do with it? And I realized I don't wanna stay too close.

Melissa ended up applying at UW and several out of state schools and after receiving a

scholarship from Fordham, she enrolled in their master's program. Melissa was proud that she

remained open to moving outside of her comfort zone to facilitate growth. Melissa believed that

if the pandemic did not happen, she would not have gone out of state to complete her master's

degree. Another positive outcome was her decision to pursue advanced standing, a one-year

degree program as compared to the two-year format she had in her sights pre-pandemic. This

approach saved her both time and money. Melissa described 2020 as traumatizing, but also a

wonderful period of growth that she appreciated. Like many of the other participants, she

adjusted her plans based on the pandemic and it yielded positive outcomes.

For many of the women, this period offered a moment to think differently about what a

next move might look like, leading to some unexpected and positive outcomes. Yet, the

pandemic also presented unforeseeable barriers that varied for each person, and somehow, they

managed to make the necessary adjustments despite the disruption to their mental well-being and career aspirations. While the pandemic presented unprecedented challenges, it was not experienced in isolation. Participants engaged in supportive relationships on and off campus that contributed to their growth, development, and pursuit of career aspirations, discussed next.

The Role of Supportive and Influential Relationships

In addition to sharing their experiences with barriers, participants reflected on the positive influences in their lives; particularly, the relationships they valued with family and friends during their campus experience as well as post-graduation. These relationships were described as not only emotionally supportive, but also as key facilitators of connections to resources and information.

Family Provided Connection, Emotional Support, and Aspirational Influence

The relationships the women had with their families during college were influential in different ways. Participants described their 1) connectedness to and support of family during college, and 2) aspirational career support and accountability provided by the family.

All participants recounted how they stayed in touch with family during college, but the frequency and ways they engaged varied. Some of the women in the study were from family situations where their parents were divorced or never lived under the same roof, with a single mother heralded as the primary source of support for some. For example, Amanda received continued support from her mom and her extended family:

> I would say family support during college it's pretty much been the same. They've
> always been pretty supportive. My mom has always been very supportive. She makes it
> her thing to be very supportive. So, she supports us in everything we do, no matter
> what. She was always there.

Amanda depicted her mother, who was a single mom, as her go-to person during college. She described how her mom encouraged her to focus on school and not worry about anything else. Amanda felt comfortable going to her mom who provided money and general support to her when she was in school.

Like Amanda, twins Bella and Bria are very close with their mom, and she was a significant support to them during their four years of study at UW. Bria commented on the frequency of their communication:

> A lot of people thought we were crazy, but my mom called us every day. She still calls us every day. It was mainly just, hey, good morning, how was your day and things like—or how was your day yesterday? And are you doing well in your classes? They were just like brief conversations.

Sister Bella expressed an appreciation for the sacrifices her mom made to make it possible for her and her sister to go to college. She felt her mom influenced her success in college and acknowledged that her mom is still sacrificing for them now. But they also reflected on the importance of their extended family. For example, Bria attributed the closeness of their family to being Nigerian and it being a part of the culture. She described how everything is centered around family and that her aunt and uncles are very proud of her and her sister, Bella and also made a point to check up on them throughout their time at UW.

Bella described how the strong family ties were present in their communications throughout college:

> Sometimes we'll have like family calls, or my aunt will be on the phone, or my aunt and my uncle, and my mom's family. They're very funny. So, I feel like it's fun to just have family time and just like talk with our family.

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This ongoing and frequent communication with family served as a source of support for Bria and Bella and was an essential aspect of their academic success at UW. Although they came from a low-income household, they described having abundant emotional support and a good family dynamic. Having the support of their family helped them to navigate the rigor of their biology major, stay connected even though their family was at a distance, and bolstered their mental health.

While Amanda, Bella and Bria reflected that their main source of familial support came from their mothers, the other women referenced a presence of both their father and mother. In the cases of Alicia, Antoinette, and Tasha, their parents were not together, but they were in communication with their fathers. Renee and Melissa were the only participants whose parents were married and living in the same household during and after the time following their studies at UW. Alicia lived at home and commuted to college, so she did not have the same experiences as the other women in terms of establishing patterns for staying in touch while being away from family. Rather, she described that her relationship with her family during college was much the same as it had been before college. During the initial period of her undergraduate studies when she did live on campus, she came home every weekend. She lived with her mom and sister and was in regular contact with her dad. Alicia stated, "I mean nothing changed really as far as I can think of because it's not like super crazy drastic things happened because you know, I came back home." While acknowledging that communications did not change, Alicia also did not reference any specific ways in which her parents supported her during her degree pursuit at UW. Her parents were both insistent that she attend college, yet Alicia acknowledged that she never sought their advice or counsel as neither had attended college themselves.

Unlike Alicia, Antoinette was able to solicit advice during college, particularly from her mom. She described that her mom had a heavy background of college and education so there were a lot of pointers she gave her. However, she reflected on the relationship and support she received from both parents:

> I don't—I don't know the word for it. I would say the family relationship during college was simple. Like my mom, even though she commuted, I guess she was very tired, so she didn't come to visit me often. My dad lived in New York, so he didn't come to visit at all, but I would get like phone calls or talk to them every now and then. And then financial support sometimes was... my mom, my mom mostly did her best, but that's kind of why I had a work study job to help take care of that.

Antoinette found that the support from her parents differed, describing that her dad was more "business-minded" so when she told him about a problem, he would tell her exactly what needed to be done. In contrast, her mom was someone she could vent to, and she would just be there to listen. Her mom was also in the same city as UW so she could offer physical support as well. Looking back on college, Antoinette acknowledged that both of her parents were supportive.

Like Antoinette, Tasha was in touch with both of her parents as she explained:

> There was a lot of texting and calls with my mom, but she wasn't necessarily like, you need to call me every day. I think she just let me have my time to myself because I had a really stressful high school experience, so I think she gave me some wiggle room. For my dad, I know we talked, but I can definitely say it doesn't feel like I talked to him that often.

Tasha appreciated the space that her mom gave her and reflected on her time at UW as one of growth and development and coming into her own as an adult. But in hindsight she also felt like she should have been more involved with her family. She acknowledged that she was so wrapped up in her hyper-independence that she missed out on things at home. It is something she wished she would not have done but recognized that she was growing on her own and doing things for herself and so it just unfolded that way.

Tasha self-described an unintentional pulling away from her family, however Renee recounted how she intentionally created space from her family. The relationship and the communication changed over time. Renee explained that when she started at UW, she went home every other weekend and she talked with her mom on the phone every day but by second semester it became three or four times a week. She did not speak to her dad or her brother as much, even though she was close to both:

> If I'm honest, I pulled away from all of my family. But I will say, my senior year, my grandfather passed and I just kind of got back to knowing, understanding how important family is. So, I started clinging to my family a lot more and understanding that I can still be myself.

Experiencing the loss of her grandfather prompted Renee to check in a little bit more with her parents and she was reminded that she is a big part of their lives and she believed it was important to not neglect the relationship. She also admired that her parents never spoke down to her and always "spoke life," meaning they were consistently uplifting and encouraging. Something that she recalled fondly was how her mom prayed with her and for her during college, and how she could call her mom whenever she was stressed out.

Melissa shared a similarly close bond with her mom, and like Renee, she grew up in a

house with married parents with whom she was close:

> I would say my family and I have always been very close. Like I would talk to my family
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> members every single day. My parents, they were like my best friends. I've kind of had
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> those relationships, especially with my mom, where I literally talk about everything. Like
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> nothing's really restricted.

Melissa described how she had to set boundaries when she got to UW, particularly with

her mom, to tell her there would be things that she would not share with her and that she needed

her mom to trust how she raised her. She also reflected fondly on the emotional support she

received from her parents during college:

> My mom was kind of like that soundboard. I would say she was someone who I could
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> really discuss anything with. My dad, I wouldn't really discuss it with him because my
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> dad can get very passionate. And when I'm going through a really hard situation, he also
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> feels that too. And so, he always wants to advocate for me.

She reflected on something she learned in college that she brought home to her family

which influenced their communications. When talking with her family she would ask them to tell

her, "Do you want pieces of advice, or do you want me to listen?" As she modeled this for her

family, her dad adopted this approach too and instead of always offering advice he would ask

what she needed.

While college was a time of growth and development and several of the women

embraced their newfound independence, family support continued to be an important aspect of

their time at UW as they maintained contact, sought advice, and embraced the support that was

provided. The participants in this study maintained close communication with their families throughout college and this included interactions regarding their career aspirations.

For many, these discussions started early on when even considering their major selection. Antoinette found her family to be very supportive of her major choice and career aspirations. She felt like even if she had selected Art instead of Spanish and Media Studies, they would have been very supportive and encouraging. Alicia found similar support of her major selection. Whenever her family asked her what she could do with her sociology degree, she shared different career examples and they acknowledged that those were all good jobs. Renee also received questions about her majors:

My family would always ask me, not just my parents, but in general, when I would go home on breaks, "Oh, what are you majoring in?" Whenever I would say my majors, it's like okay, "So what kind of job are you gonna get with that?" So, they already had me feeling like, am I going to have a hard time getting a job?

Her family's inquiries made her question her plans, but she recalled that for her actual job search, it was just something they did not talk about. She never asked her parents if they were concerned about her being able to get a job with retail studies and art administration majors, and they never raised concerns.

This was very different than Tasha's experience. She remembered her mom asking at least a year before graduation about starting to fill out job applications and her mom made her position very clear:

My mom said that I definitely needed to figure out what my plan was going to be. Am I coming home to work there or am I staying near campus? And if I'm staying near

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campus, where am I gonna live if I don't have a job? So, she was definitely very adamant about, "You need to have this together before the time comes."

Tasha knew it was very important to her mom that she was stable and had a job after graduation, but that also caused her to feel pressure. Her mom suggested she go to the career center on campus, which she did, but for Tasha it did not feel natural, and she attributed that to her not really knowing with specificity what she wanted to do. Her mom made it seem like if she just went to the career center, they would figure it all out for her, and that is not how it went:

> After graduation, my mom was very concerned. She was very on top of me and trying to just guide me I suppose; but also, she went to night school. I'm the first one in my family to literally go and live on a college campus. I felt like she didn't really understand my experience, but at the same time I should have been more aware of the windows of opportunity that were there. I think she felt I wasn't taking action quickly enough.

Even though Tasha felt pressure from her mom, she appreciated that her mom also offered support by sending her job postings.

Many of the women had similar stories of parents and families offering direct support to their career goals. Amanda's mom encouraged her to consider law school and even gathered program information from a local university. Amanda gave it consideration but ultimately decided not to go that path. Renee's mom made a point of lifting pressure off the job search by offering that Renee could move home if she had not found anything before her lease expired. Ultimately, Renee did not want to, and did not have to, take advantage of this offer as she was able to land a full-time position within a couple of months after graduation. Antoinette also received support from her parents when it came to her goal of securing an internship:

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My parents influenced my decision. They are big advocates of dipping your toe in and an internship is a good way to try it out and to network. I had conversations with my parents and professors. I knew that I would have to start at the bottom and work my way up and networking was encouraged.

In addition to supporting her goals, her dad was actively involved in providing support during her search process and her mom reviewed her resume.

Alicia's experience was the opposite. She expressed a desire to teach English in Japan after concluding her degree, but her parents discouraged her from pursuing that path. After completing her second undergraduate degree she enrolled in UW's masters in sociology. Bria, Bella and Melissa also had a goal of pursuing graduate degrees. In the case of Bria and Bella, the twins planned to go on to medical school to become OB-GYNs. Despite no one in their family attending med school, Bria described that they received overwhelming support:

While me and my sister have been studying for the MCAT, my mom always made sure that she would cook for us. I didn't have to worry about meals when I was living with my mom. I didn't have to worry about paying for food or contributing. So, I think that was a big support. My aunt actually paid for me and Bella's MCAT books. They all want us to be doctors, so they definitely supported us emotionally and things like that.

Bella underscored the emotional support provided by her mom and aunt, but also reflected on the support she and Bria received from each other during their time completing research internships and in their preparation for the MCAT. She recalled that they shared different resources - everything from practice exams to internship listings, to writing samples. Bella also reflected on how they even supported each other from a distance:

I think that the first time that me and Bria split was when we completed research internships, but in different places. I think even though we were apart, we were still going through the same thing. We didn't have to be physically with each other to provide support. We're able to relate to each other, support each other and talk about different things.

The sisters described that they always helped each other and how if one found a resource, they would automatically share it with the other.

Melissa was also on the path to graduate school and her father became an important influencer not only of her decision to get a master's degree, but also the program in which she ultimately enrolled. She remembered moments during her pursuit of her undergraduate social work degree when she felt like she really did not want to go that path. Her dad's encouragement was instrumental and though he never pushed for her to stay with the degree, they would talk regularly and that helped her to persist. She also admitted that it was her dad who put the idea of getting a master's in social work in her head:

I was talking to my dad, and he was like, "You know, a lot of places, they want you to go to graduate school." My dad always gives me these little tidbits, but he doesn't force it on me. He's like, "If you want to do two-year, that's fine"— but he basically told me to do advanced standing, which is a one-year track.

Once she decided she would pursue graduate school, her dad was her main resource when submitting her applications. Melissa was accepted to every program to which she applied and ultimately selected her father's alma mater. She acknowledged that she picked this university because of her dad and that it created a bond between them to have the shared experience of pursuing a master's degree in social work at the same institution.

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Parents and families provided connectedness as well as emotional and aspirational career support during and after college at UW. They were also celebratory when the women achieved their career goals. For some, this came within a few months of graduation, while others took longer to launch due to the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. Alicia and Melissa enrolled in grad school, and Bella and Bria prepared for their med school entrance exam. Antoinette, Renee, Amanda, and Tasha all secured employment.

Friendships Provided Shared Experiences, Emotional Connections, and Aspirational Support

While families were instrumental, the participants also described friendships they enjoyed at UW as being impactful on their college experience. In some cases, friends from high school joined them at UW and those relationships continued to flourish. In other cases, they met new friends through classes and activities on campus. They reflected on how they navigated to make friends, and how these friendships fostered shared experiences, emotional connections, and aspirational support.

Some of the women discussed difficulties or apprehensions they faced in their desire to make friends at UW. Alicia was the only participant who commuted to campus:

> I went home on weekends because I didn't have friends to like hang out with, so what was the point of staying? I guess there was no point in staying because I had a limited friend group and UW is the go home campus anyway. So even if I did have a big friend group, I would probably still go home because everybody was going home. No one was staying on campus.

She had previously lived on campus when she attended a college in Philadelphia and again when she transferred to UW to complete her first bachelor's degree. But this second go

round at UW she opted to live at home and commute to campus. She reflected on how easy it was to make friends when she was on campus in Philadelphia, but this was not her experience at UW. As a transfer student, she found that the UW orientation catered to an older population and although she was only 19, she was considered a transferring adult, so that created barriers to making connections with other students.

Unlike the external barriers faced by Alicia, Tasha and Bella had to navigate their own internal barriers. They had to fight against their internal perceptions to embrace personal growth by intentionally putting themselves out there to meet new friends. Tasha described that it took a while for her to make this shift but during her sophomore year she decided to focus on making new friends. She described how the rest of her time at UW was more impactful and meaningful after she stepped out of her comfort zone to meet new people. Bella also found she needed to allow for personal growth to position herself to meet new friends. She was (and still is) very close with her twin sister and so, although both were studying at UW, she knew she wanted to take advantage of being on such a diverse campus to meet friends on her own:

> Growing up, it was always me and Bria in the same class. And so, I think I made a lot of friends by people coming up to us and saying, "Are you guys' twins?" And then we would have a conversation or something, but in UW Bria and I didn't always have the same class. So, I had to learn how to speak to other people and make my own friends. I think at UW, I got more confident and more outspoken.

She recognized early on that if she were quiet, she would miss out on meeting new people. She learned that quickly and decided she wanted her experience to be different than high school. She loved that she could meet people who were not like her in biology class, in the gym, or just on campus walking to wherever she needed to be.

While some participants navigated internal and external barriers when initially trying to meet friends, they ultimately found friends in several places at UW which led to shared experiences, emotional connections, and aspirational support. Some of the easiest connections for participants were living with friends or making friends with roommates. The shared experience of living together was positive. Tasha lived on campus her first two years and in the second year she lived with her best friend, which she described as a really good experience. Similarly, during her sophomore year, Melissa lived with friends that she met as a freshman and described it as "great, great times." Meanwhile, other participants moved off campus. For example, Renee described moving off campus to save money her junior year and living with her friend and another roommate. Tasha also moved off campus, where she initially lived with her best friend, and described living in the apartment as an extremely important experience for her growth and development. In addition to living with friends, participants met friends in other ways both on and off campus. Renee described that living on campus really helped her to make friends and to explore all that UW had to offer outside of just a traditional classroom.

For Antoinette and Bria, their involvement on campus was a key factor in developing friendships. Getting involved in clubs and organized activities created a shared experience and friendships naturally formed based on similar interests, as described by Antoinette:

I was involved in intramural volleyball for like three years. That's where I also found some of my best friends. I mean being a part of intramural volleyball meant so much, like, again, that's where a lot of socializing happened for me.

Similarly, Bria met close friends through activities on campus. She participated in a leadership development program where she met one of her close friends. She was also attended the African Student Night events where she met other African students on campus. She felt

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bonded with her friends as they showcased their culture through food and dancing. These on campus experiences were impactful for Antoinette and Bria and led to the development of key friendships.

Alicia also met friends on campus in the classroom and by accessing UW services. She recounted how she was on campus one day and was feeling really depressed. She disclosed this to a classmate, and he told her she needed to go to the Counseling Center, and he walked with her there. Once there, Alicia engaged in group counseling, and she met one of her first friends through this experience. She also described success making a connection in class:

> I made a friend in my creative writing class. We vibed over creative writing and anime and I'm like, I am vibing with this girl who was like four years younger than me probably. Me and her are still friends. So, coming out of that second undergraduate stint, she was the only lasting friendship.

Being older than her classmates was something that felt like a stigma for Alicia, and it made it more difficult for her to make friends. In both examples, cultivating these relationships was made easier by doing it in UW settings.

Another setting that served as an environment to make friends was work. For Melissa, that happened through her work on campus and for Tasha it was her job off campus. Melissa shared that most of her friendships came through her work as a resident assistant (RA) and she highlighted a particular relationship that reflected the growth she experienced:

> I did have one friend who really opened up my eyes. He is a trans man. And my sister she's gay and I have friends who are part of the LGBTQ community, but he was the first person that identified as trans. And that really opened my eyes. We've had a lot of

meaningful conversations about it. I don't know that like just really exposed me to this whole other world that I never really knew.

Overall, Melissa described her friendships and experiences as an RA as transformational.

Tasha also made meaningful friendships at her off-campus job. She described working her sophomore year to earn money. She joined the retail store during a time when they had released most of their original staff and made a lot of new hires. Tasha recalled the shared experience of coming into the process together, sticking it out, and growing together:

> I am very hesitant about things, especially like making friendships. I was a store manager at a retail store in the mall so that was where I was social. I had UW students that I was their manager and those were my best friends. I felt like I got what I needed there as far as socializing.

Except for Tasha who worked off campus, the participants forged their friendships through activities and resources offered on campus by UW. Yet all friendships were fostered based on shared experiences and common interests but as described by the women, the relationships transcended the shared activity, evolving into sisterhood and personal growth.

As the participants reflected on their friendships, they acknowledged that their connections provided essential emotional support. Melissa talked about the importance of the friends from high school who joined her at UW:

> I would say my friends were influential, especially with me choosing UW. They were like that deciding vote because I was like I want to have people who are in my corner. Like, I was very scared to make friends on my own. So, it helped to have friends that I already knew who were going.

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She noted that in addition to their support, she really appreciated that they also pushed her out of her comfort zone to engage in activities and experiences she would not have sought out on her own. Both Amanda and Antoinette underscored the vital role that friends filled which parents could not. Amanda passionately reflected on what her friends meant to her:

My friends are just always there to lend that ear and that support and just to have that someone that's actually going through it with you. They know what it's like versus like my family who can be very supportive, but at the end of the day they didn't experience it themselves. So, it's good to have that peer support too.

Antoinette echoed these sentiments about the importance of peer support:

I think my friends just kind of offered me, and me offering them as well, just that familial support that I wasn't getting at the time. So, I was able to talk to them about stuff. We would have conversations about where we want to go in life, what's troubling us, and what's happening in class.

For Antoinette, her friends filled an emotional gap that was missing from her parents at certain points during her college experience. She shared that there were sometimes that her parents were emotionally supportive but admitted that she was counting more so on friends, herself, and UW resources.

The participants perceived the emotional connectedness to friends as one of the most impactful aspects of their time at UW. The friends also served as sources of aspirational support by providing accountability and encouragement for degree completion and career pursuits. Like Amanda and Antoinette, Bria really appreciated how helpful it was to have friends who could understand her experiences. She recalled taking hard classes and studying together and how going through those experiences made them grow closer. Tasha also appreciated the

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accountability that came with having friends. She admitted that at times where she might be feeling anxious or overwhelmed and her tendency was to stay inside, it was her friends who convinced her to leave her dorm room. Amanda appreciated that her friends made sure she followed through on her commitments:

My friends helped to hold me accountable for things and before we went out, they would ask like, did you at least open your books first? Like did you turn your project in? Like did you study? You know, just checking in with that because you came all this way.

The support of her friends, both socially and academically, was a big part of her experience at UW. And when she pursued jobs after graduation, she would get advice from her friends on the interview and job search process. One of her friends would regularly share YouTube videos to offer support for her job search.

Renee had a similar experience and found her friends to be a helpful source of support for her job search. Even her decision about when to look for a job was influenced by friends:

It was mainly just realizing that I was behind the ball based on my peers. I just kind of saw that a lot of my friends that were graduating in May were already applying in January. So, I just personally wasn't up to speed with that.

Making this observation prompted Renee to begin her job search sooner that she would have on her own. She continued to enlist the support of friends throughout the process. She would call a friend to practice interview questions over the phone and another friend gave her reassurance at times when she got frustrated about not landing a job. Renee also continued to work on her business and her friends and family were a big supporter of her efforts. Antoinette recalled having a friend who was looking for an internship at the same time she was and although the friend did not have a way to help her, she found it nice to have someone who could

relate that was going through the same thing. For Bria, she was intentional with enlisting the help

of her friends with pursuing her career goals:

> I met or reached out to friends who knew that I wanted to be a doctor. So, I
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> remember one friend connected me to his cousin that had already applied and gotten into
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> medical school for the following summer. So, he gave me his number and I reached out
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> to him and talked to him. He gave me advice on how to study and what to do to apply.
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> These types of conversations were instrumental for Bria in understanding the steps she

needed to take to pursue medical school.

Whether engaging in shared experiences, offering emotional support, or providing

resources to support career aspirations, there were a range of positive impacts resulting from

friendships for each woman in the study. Both Renee and Tasha recounted that what they

enjoyed the most at UW was the friendships they made. Renee further described that it is the

relationships that she built that had the most impact even after leaving campus. Amanda and

Bella appreciated the diversity of friends they made which was a reflection not only of their

cultural backgrounds, but also their varied interests. As self-described by participants, their

friendships were a vital source of joy and support throughout their college experience.

The Role of Institutional Relationships and Campus Experiences

The relationships participants enjoyed with family and friends were deeply personal and

emotionally supportive. However, they were not the only relationships that were influential

during their time at UW. Faculty also played an important role in the college experience of the

women. Interactions with faculty took place primarily in classroom settings, but the women also

found value through engaging at UW in campus experiences. The participants' perceptions of

these relationships and experiences, and their corresponding impacts, were far reaching.

Institutional Agents Provided Learning, Inspiration, Advocacy, and Aspirational Support

Participants appreciated several facets of their relationships with faculty. In most cases, their perceptions are based on observations within the learning environment, rather than substantive interactions outside the classroom. In some instances, faculty also provided specific sources of support that aided the alumnae beyond the specific coursework. The most notable forms of faculty influence as perceived by the participants were: 1) learning, 2) reassurance, 3) inspiration, and 4) advocacy.

In the classroom, teaching style and relatability of the faculty were important to several of the women as these factors directly impacted their perceptions of learning. Alicia appreciated the safe space one of her faculty members created in the classroom by inviting students to discuss traumas they have faced and to learn from each other's experiences. Amanda reflected on how much she enjoyed the conversations that some of her faculty facilitated in class which provided insights into what motivations guided that teaching and how they thought. Teaching style was also important to Bria and aided in her learning and comprehension:

> I had a memorable faculty member who was very good at explaining topics. I felt like a lot of my professors explained topics as if we were already college graduates. But this particular teacher, she explained it in very simple terms, and I really liked her class, and it was easy to understand.

Bella echoed the importance of teaching style and found it helpful when the approach aligned with the way that she learned. She also appreciated the rigor of her academic program:

> I think that teachers pushed you. Like even in tests or exams, we weren't asked questions that we had to just regurgitate information. We had to think thoroughly about what we learned during class and then we had to apply it to new scenarios.

Bella discovered that being in a rigorous, yet supportive environment revealed how dedicated and hardworking she was as well as made visible the strengths she was developing at UW. Outside of the classroom, she also felt well supported by her faculty. She regularly visited office hours and received a lot of support. Bella appreciated the teachers that really cared, and their character was the biggest thing that stood out to her. Amanda also felt this sense of care when she found herself in a moment of crisis. Her mom had a stroke and was going to undergo brain surgery. It was a difficult time, and Amanda's mind was not really focused on school. Admittedly, she waited until the last minute to tell her professors what was going on, but she was so grateful that they all worked with her to support her learning and ensure she could complete her course requirements.

Participants not only valued the learning support and development they received, but some women also described faculty as a source of inspiration. Tasha passionately reflected on a faculty member whose care extended beyond the classroom:

> I appreciate her attentiveness and the level of concern, the amount of interest she had for issues regarding campus and the students on campus. She was really willing to cater to specific needs, like just things that people needed within the community and I don't really feel like I had many other professors paying attention to that.

She recalled how inspirational it was to see this in action, and it challenged her to pay more attention to what was going on around her. Inspiration in other cases could also be aptly described as admiration. Participants shared stories of faculty with whom they could relate. Amanda talked about a professor she had, a Black man with braids who openly shared how people perceived him when he traveled to give talks. She loved his authenticity and how he did

not change his image just to fit others' expectations. Renee also had a Black male professor who was a performing artist that she admired:

> I really connected to him mainly because of his artistry. But I'm sure him being Black as well. Just seeing his resume, knowing all the things he's done, working with some major artists on tour, going to Broadway, things like that definitely inspired me.

Renee was also very complimentary of her consumer apparel teacher who helped her to understand the importance of the consumer to marketing. As a budding entrepreneur, Renee found her professor's lectures inspiring and very relevant to today's fashion as well as her own business interests. UW faculty not only delivered compelling lectures and insightful content, but for many of the women, their faculty were a source of inspiration and advocacy.

Participants also recounted how faculty went beyond their teaching responsibilities to advocate for them in different ways. For example, Bella recalled a time when she was working in a research lab to complete her Honors project and she very quickly realized that she did not enjoy that type of research. She planned to just grit it out and stay the course, but then she talked with a professor who helped her think about what she was truly interested in. She ended up pursuing an entirely different project on the maternal-fetal mortality rate in African American women which she considered a game changer:

> I feel like if he didn't help me to take a step back and look at my interests and then support me, I feel like I would've just ended up being miserable. I think that helped me think about what I want to do in the future, and I didn't have to force myself to do something just because it's what I think most pre-meds or doctors do.

Bella also was referred by the same professor to a new UW colleague with whom she could do research. The new faculty member served as an advocate by referring Bella to a

fellowship for underprivileged students offered by his professional association, for which she applied and was awarded. On another occasion, Bella complained to the new UW professor about being constantly tired from studying and he referred her to the director of the biology program. During the conversation, Bella happened to tell the director about her scholarship from the biology department and how it removed a big burden for her mom. In response, the director said she would make sure Bella got the scholarship for the next year – and she did. Bella felt that she received a lot of great opportunities from being a biology major and she attributed that to the advocacy of her professors.

Alicia also benefitted from faculty advocacy, particularly as she pursued grad school at UW. One of her faculty took time to review and critique her statement of purpose and offered support for the GRE:

> When I told the professor who encouraged me to go to grad school that I didn't get the scores, he was like, I will buy you the book. But I was like, no it's okay. I should have let him pay the $60 for that book... what was I thinking?

Although she did not take advantage of this resource, she found she received lots of support from faculty in the sociology department that was instrumental to her grad school admittance. She considered the faculty in the sociology department to have had the most influence on her undergraduate experiences.

Antoinette had a similarly impactful experience, but through her campus employer. She worked in a Center on campus and her faculty supervisor was someone that she identified with:

> My supervisor was the reason I discovered I could be in a leadership role. She saw that I could do more and encouraged me to take on a leadership role. She encouraged

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me and mentored me. I learned a lot from her, in fact, I followed her lead for how I approached managing the team.

Antoinette's supervisor was an advocate, and her encouragement of Antoinette to take on the leadership role was significant as it led to her full-time job with the Center after graduation. Antoinette described the environment as generally very supportive, noting that the faculty director also was instrumental by providing her with access to industry events and conferences.

Melissa also received a lot of support through her campus employment. Her supervisor, during her first year as an RA, was her advocate and had a very positive influence on her college experience:

> We really bonded and I really enjoyed my time with her. We would have conversations where we would talk about other things besides like being an RA and stuff and that was really nice. She also was the one that motivated me to become an RA the following year.

This encouragement to stay on as an RA would end up cementing one of Melissa's most transformational experiences in college. She described being an RA as a "great learning experience that really pushed her out of her comfort zone." It taught her social skills, how to manage a lot of responsibility, and helped her develop her confidence. She indicated that these skills have continued to be instrumental as she pursued and enrolled in graduate school.

Beyond their advocacy, many faculty also provided support for the career aspirations of participants. For some of the women, their faculty supported their aspirations to pursue graduate school. Melissa reflected on the influence of a faculty mentor on her within the field of Social Work:

I would say faculty really helped, like, especially when I was talking about graduate school. I had a lot of conversations with my faculty members, especially my faculty mentor. She was the one that kind of pushed me to think about going to school in New York. She affirmed who I was and that was really, really helpful.

Her faculty mentor became an important part of her graduate school process. They discussed the rigor of pursuing advanced standing for grad school and her mentor was very honest about the competitive nature of those programs and the volume of work, but she expressed her confidence in Melissa's ability to do it. Melissa valued that her faculty mentor could provide support as someone who was so knowledgeable within the social work community. She considered that an asset as she pursued grad school.

While grad school was an early goal for Melissa, the decision for Alicia to go to grad school came later and was deeply influenced by a faculty member:

I got with one of my professors at mid-year and we were talking about my senior paper, and he really liked it. He was like, I can see you turning this into a thesis. And he was like, you know, if you want to do this as a thesis, just come back to UW.

While she was not particularly excited about the prospect of staying at UW for grad school, this was the first time she began to really give it consideration. The professor discussed with her that it might be best for to come back to UW for the master's in sociology as it would give her a better chance of getting into a PhD program if she had the master's already. In the comments on her senior paper, he told her to let him know if she had any questions about grad school. And once she decided to go this path, he reviewed her application materials and served as a recommender. He was pivotal to influencing her decision and her ultimate success with getting

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into grad school. She also had other sociology professors write letters of recommendation and she got accepted the week before classes started.

Other participants also benefitted from faculty support with graduate school recommendations. Both Bria and Bella were the beneficiaries of receiving recommendation letters from biology faculty for their medical school applications. Bria recalled sharing her personal statement with her recommenders which included her reasons for why she wanted to become a doctor. They found their faculty were very willing to offer this support which made the process easier for them. They also pursued research internships to build their experience before med school and their faculty provided letters of recommendation to support them in that process as well. Melissa also benefitted from faculty recommendations. She took a gap year during the pandemic and recalled feeling nervous about the application process but also feeling good about UW as a safety school based on her existing relationships and recommenders within the department.

In addition to supporting continuing education, faculty also championed participants seeking to enter the job market. Antoinette really identified with the faculty in her media major, and they provided a lot of encouragement to approach film as a career. She recalled how they provided support for the job search:

> I had a hard time with my resume, but my supervisor brought in a connection from the career center, and they provided a workshop on how to build a resume which was helpful. Also, in some of my classes the professors talked about resumes.

Antoinette decided she would pursue an internship to build her experience immediately after graduation and the campus community offered a lot of support. Her campus supervisor sent

internship listings to her. She also used university connections and got help from her professors to explore video editing, video production, and project management internships.

Renee received similar support with access to job listings. Her advisor within her arts administration major asked her questions about her interests and then sent her a list of jobs and descriptions she cultivated in the arts which Renee found helpful. Renee was also active in her business fraternity and the alumna who advised the club was a significant resource to Renee during her job search:

> She really helped me sharpen up in my leadership skills, being more confident as a woman and especially like even getting into the workforce. We had sessions where she would help me with my resume. She also helped me get my current job because she worked there at the time.

These connections and career readiness supports were instrumental in helping Renee start her career. Because Renee was not only seeking employment after graduation, but also focused on launching her business, she really appreciated the advice she received from an entrepreneurship professor. Renee credited this professor with helping to shape her business mindset. One tip she found especially useful was the advice to reinvest in her business by not paying herself in this early startup phase. This was something her professor did for three years with her own business and Renee adopted this approach which has paid off.

From the perspective of many of the women in the study, UW faculty support extended beyond classroom learning. They received timely and relevant advice, access to tangible resources and connections, and support for their career pursuits. These relationships were important and contributed to their overall experience at UW. While this was the predominant sentiment, it is important to reflect upon the fact that this was not the case for every woman in

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the study. Bria described a growth process she underwent where early on she was not as engaged with her faculty:

> In my head, I assumed that teacher and student relationship was always that - just teacher and students. So, whenever I needed them for schoolwork advice or help, then that's what it was. But I never like tried to get to know any of my faculty or staff members in a deeper way or as a mentor.

She admitted that there was a point in her sophomore year where she was struggling and felt isolated and was not putting as much effort into her classes. During that time, she took a science course for her major and received a C- which meant she had to take it again. Bria said at the time she did not try to get to know her professor or ask for any help or resources. After this experience, she made a lot of changes in how she approached her schoolwork. The next time she took the course she made a point of sitting in the front row and engaging regularly in office hours. She took the same professor, and she is proud that her instructor not only saw the difference in her engagement and academic performance, but she also became a recommender for Bria's med school application process.

Bria was not the only one for whom it was not an automatic thought to forge meaningful mentoring relationships with faculty. Tasha enjoyed her classes and felt she learned and grew but she described that she did not develop any close relationships:

> I feel like part of it was on my end, but also even though the classes were a little bit smaller, I just didn't feel like I had one-on-one time with faculty. I was never really drawn to any specific faculty, so I never really had that person where I was like, okay, I want to make additional time to get to know this person.

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Amanda shared a similar sentiment. She recalled fondly how having common interests with professors made lectures more interesting and made her feel she could relate with them, but she never had conversations outside of class with faculty. She noted, however, that she did not believe this had a negative impact on her learning as she knew she could reach out to them if questions arose. However, as an alumna, she indicated that it would have been helpful to have the warm relationships with faculty to leverage for recommendations since she is now pursuing grad school.

UW faculty, and some staff, offered learning support to help participants thrive within their majors. However, their impact often went beyond the classroom as they served as sources of inspiration, advocacy, and aspirational support which helped the women to navigate on campus as well as pursue career pathways.

Campus Engagement Provided Motivation, Connections, Resources, and Skills

In addition to the supportive relationships within the institution, the women also benefitted from the experiences they engaged in at UW. While not every woman in the study was engaged in campus activities, for those who did, it had a significant impact on their college experience by serving as a source of motivation, as well as facilitating connections, resources, and skills development.

The women's reasons for engagement varied as well as their perceptions of the advantages. Some of the involvements for Renee and Bria stemmed from their own values-orientation, or motivations, to have a positive impact on others. Renee reflected on her roots growing up in church with a grandfather who was a pastor:

Freshman year I joined the gospel ensemble, but it's no longer at UW. I think the name has changed. I joined my freshman year. I grew up singing in the church, so I

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wanted to have something that reminded me of home and also my roots. I love singing

and I love gospel music.

This opportunity to connect to her roots is something that she valued. In general, Renee

had a desire to be involved and was motivated to make an impact on others. She served in

leadership roles in the Neo Black Society as event coordinator and later as vice president. She

also was initiated into Alpha Kappa Psi, a business fraternity where she was ultimately elected as

president. Another important campus engagement was her initiation into Alpha Kappa Alpha

sorority incorporated, a sisterhood she joined in her final semester at UW. Renee described the

motivations for her involvement:

I guess I just feel like I have a voice and in whatever capacity I can use that I

should because otherwise I feel like I'm not fulfilling my purpose. I see that a lot more

now because of course now I have been more so doing things strictly based on my

passions, but even when I was in school, it's like, okay, how can I be used while I'm here?

How can I impact others?

Renee sought to make a difference and she felt inspired when her brothers in Alpha

Kappa Psi complimented her for the mark she left on the chapter as president. The opportunity to

serve in roles like this at UW allowed Renee to live out her personal commitment to both learn

and teach.

Like Renee, Bria sought to connect to her faith roots and joined a non-denominational

youth group at a local church where she engaged in bible lessons with other college students. She

credited her involvement with the bible study group as a critical support when she was struggling

to adjust her approach to her classes:

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So, I joined a church group my sophomore year. So that was better. They were

helping me. And I was talking to more people like me and who have the same religious

views as me. That was also helping too.

Bria indicated the bible study group was a positive support system and a source of

motivation for her academic efforts at UW. She also found support through her participation in

the African Student Union:

I liked having other people who knew what I was going through or knew about

me culturally. Like I met other Nigerian students and I even met other people from other

countries. I liked meeting people. I felt at home when I talked to them and had events

with them and things like that.

Having a support network that she could rely on, including her sister as well as her

network of friends, was motivating and helped Bria to get back on track after a semester where

she found herself struggling.

Antoinette also sought to get involved on campus. In her personal and professional

aspirations, she seeks to be an entrepreneur and that innovative mindset was present in how she

pursued her involvement at UW:

I remember my first year I wanted to start a feminist club for women of color, and

I actually started it, but we had one great meeting and then we all got too busy. I never

really joined any clubs, but I was like trying to start clubs and they just never went

anywhere.

She also discussed trying to start a screenwriting club. It got a little more momentum and

they engaged in several meetings, but it also dissolved. Similarly, her motivation for that club

was focusing on people of color, specifically women of color in the arts. Like Renee, her hope was to impact others and create spaces where women of color could thrive.

Beyond these examples of personal motivations, most women perceived that the clear impact from their participation on campus was the support they received with career readiness, including access to connections and resources that were useful toward attainment of their future goals. Bria and Bella took advantage of external programs, campus resources, as well as support found within their major. They both valued their participation in external programs that supported their academic pursuits at UW.

The programs were focused on supporting low-income communities and families, so primarily people of color. Their mom put them in the programs and this connection led to a program that ultimately served as the primary source of funding for college. The program, Capital Partners for Education, was not only a source of financial capital, but also a support for career readiness. Bria described the experience:

> The program kept communication with us throughout college and taught us how to network and have good resumes and, you know, just being on top of that. One of the programs hosted a conference weekend and that really helped me to hone in on my resume as well as writing a CV. So, I had those resources already when I was applying to jobs.

Bella echoed the value of the program. She appreciated the program's focus on helping them hone their professionalism. She made a great connection with her assigned mentor who remains a resource. The mentor helped Bella with her personal statement and resume. She recalled that the program reps were good about checking in regularly and during one check in, Bella shared that she had an upcoming interview and the rep offered to help her prepare by

conducting a mock interview. Bella and Bria also were selected to participate in the Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG) Future Leaders program which focused on women becoming future leaders in the STEM fields. Like the other programs, they received scholarships throughout their four years and had access to resources to develop their professionalism.

In addition to the support of these programs, Bella and Bria accessed resources through UW. Bella utilized the UW Writing Center for assistance with drafting her personal statement for medical school. She worked with the same staff member and found her to be very helpful. She visited the Center multiple times to refine and finalize her statement. Meanwhile, Bria participated in the Leadership Challenge which was offered through the Student Affairs division at UW. The focus of the program was to help students develop leadership skills and they offered programs at different levels. This was one of the most impactful campus involvements for Bria:

> I decided to do it because I've always been the type to like professional and personal growth. Through my participation, I learned networking skills. I think I entered college shy and I'm more comfortable now talking to other people or voicing how I feel in certain situations. I definitely think it helped because I am different now.

Bria also was assigned a mentor and received guidance on how to take advantage of resources on campus. She enjoyed her participation, made new friendships, and found the experience was transformational and supportive of her personal and professional growth.

As previously described, Renee was also actively involved on campus. These experiences not only allowed her to positively impact others, but she also tapped into resources to support her career readiness:

> My fraternity really helped me a lot with my professionalism. I wasn't really going to the workshops offered on campus. Through my fraternity is where I learned how

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to get a really good resume and how to interview. So, definitely my business fraternity helped me.

Renee appreciated that her fraternity brought in alumni for professional development as well as partnered with units on campus like the career center. For example, they had executives from companies conduct workshops. Renee also benefitted from the network of Alpha Kappa Psi. One of her brothers suggested that she apply for a job which ultimately became the position she accepted after graduation. The brother thought the role would fit her skill set well and she shared that there was another fraternity brother that already worked there. The brother at the firm reviewed Renee's resume and gave feedback on revisions, and then gave Renee's resume to HR which resulted in an interview. Renee did not have to apply. The network of Alpha Kappa Psi was not only valuable for preparing for her career goals, but ultimately was the critical resource that allowed her to land her job shortly after graduation.

In addition to leveraging campus resources and connections to prepare for their future careers, several of the women in the study reflected on the skills they developed through campus involvement. In Melissa's case, she worked on campus as a resident assistant, and she found the experience to be developmental:

> It was honestly a great learning experience and it really pushed me out of my comfort zone because I would say I wasn't like shy, but I didn't really necessarily put myself in social situations until I became an RA. Like I had to, it was my job.

She described the significance of overseeing the living quarters for 60 freshmen women and how serving as an RA taught her a lot of responsibility. Part of her role was to work with intentionality when interacting with residents, and to create events or support the residents with engaging in campus events. To accomplish this goal, it required Melissa to engage with faculty,

staff, and administrators which also aided in her growth and skills development. She also credits her experience as an RA with helping her become more adaptable. While her personal preference is to follow a schedule, she recalled numerous occasions where she would have to adapt and shift to the circumstances to balance RA responsibilities and academics. She remembered it being difficult at first and it took some time to learn how to best navigate.

In addition to embracing responsibility and adaptability, Melissa learned the importance of selfcare and being willing to engage in confrontation. She described avoiding conflicts before becoming an RA and reflected on how she really developed that skill through this work. Melissa was proud of her work as an RA and encapsulated it as follows:

> I think being an RA is a great experience for everyone. It really teaches you a lot. It really teaches you to really put yourself out there and to get the job done, which was one of the reasons why I wanted to become an RA to begin with.

Beyond the work itself and the skills she developed; Melissa also valued that many of her relationships with her residents continued even after she graduated.

Bella also recognized that she developed skills through her involvement at UW. Like her sister Bria, she also chose to participate in the Leadership Challenge. She completed two levels of the program and credited the experience with her personal growth:

> I think I'm naturally a shy person and I'd rather just stay in my comfort zone, but I think that the leadership challenge really helped me to think more about myself and also what being a leader really meant. It taught me a lot of different skills that leaders have and also that there are different types of leaders.

She found the opportunity to engage in community service through the Leadership Challenge helpful and from the overall experience she gained critical thinking and analytical skills. She also credited the Leadership Challenge with bolstering her confidence.

Bella was also in the biology club and took on leadership roles as the arts and media manager and subsequently as the volunteer liaison. Through her biology major, she was also invited to participate in the disciplinary honors programs based on her strong academic performance. This experience gave her access to conducting research and she honed those skills as well as got to present her research at a conference. Antoinette also attributed some of her skills development to campus experiences. She worked on campus and her supervisor encouraged her to take a on a leadership role which allowed her to further develop that skill set. As previously described, this role led to post-graduate employment. Antoinette acknowledged that project management, organization, and community engagement were all skills and strengths she developed through her job. She also reflected on the opportunity to study abroad and how her experience being immersed with her host family allowed her to develop her Spanish language skills more deeply.

While most of the campus engagement led to career preparation and skills development, there was another UW resource – mental health counseling – that was mentioned by several women as impactful during their time on campus. Alicia recalled a time at UW where she felt depressed and started going to group therapy through the counseling center. Having access to counseling was an important outlet for her and a resource she utilized throughout her time at UW. Notably, one of her closest friendships was made through a group therapy session. Bria also reached out to the counseling center during a time where she was feeling more challenged:

So, I talked to an older woman, but we couldn't have weekly sessions. The access was kind of spotty and not always available during key times likes when I had upcoming exams, but the counselor was really helpful. I talked to her about a lot of things.

Antoinette also engaged with counseling services. She recalled times that were more difficult for her at UW:

I think there were just times also that social life kind of took a turn and really just isolated me at the same time. And like I didn't know or have the emotional support I needed. I was suffering with depression a few times, and probably triggered by like certain social events.

Antoinette described counseling services as useful but seemed to share Bria's critique about lack of access. She also found the counseling center process to be "robotic," making it harder for all students to access.

Melissa also shared a similar mental health challenge with depression, and she found another resource on campus that was instrumental for her:

UW has a psychology department where PhD students are practicing to become therapists and it's like a real therapy session, but they're not clinically trained yet. It was part of a class assignment to utilize their services for a month. I loved my therapist. It went so well that even after like the first month of it being free, I actually paid my own money to be a part of it.

Melissa recalled struggling when she first realized she was depressed. Part of her family history included depression and she had always assumed she was the lucky one that would not have to deal with it. Taking time to engage in the resources offered by the psychology department were an important part of her wellness while studying at UW.

Collectively, the participants painted a picture of personal growth, wellness, and better career preparedness because of the connections, resources, and skills gained through their campus involvements. However, this experience was different for Alicia, Tasha and Amanda who were not as focused on campus involvement. For example, during Alicia's pursuit of her first undergraduate degree, she opted to serve as a Peer Academic Leader and was a member of the Conduct Team, however she described that while both experiences gave her something to do, she felt they did not prepare her for her future career. When she returned to UW to pursue her second undergraduate degree which fell during the time of this study, she chose not to engage on campus, outside of accessing counseling services. Neither Tasha nor Amanda chose to be involved with UW campus offerings. While both described a positive college experience at UW, and building many lasting friendships, in hindsight they acknowledged that getting involved in campus activities was not a priority for them. Tasha described:

I would rate myself a C for taking advantage of resources and being prepared to use them. Maybe it's a B minus because I at least stepped foot in those buildings and made the effort. But I was just so detached and distracted, and I had a hard time prioritizing.

Amanda reflected on barriers she faced to getting involved at UW:

I always said I wanted to step out myself, like get involved and everything. And like I tried. I joined like one club. But that didn't really last long. It didn't really have an impact. It didn't really go anywhere. So, no, I wasn't really involved.

For a majority of participants, campus involvement at UW helped them: connect with others who shared their values and motivations, make valuable networking connections, and experience growth through acquisition of new skills. Moreover, participants expressed that their

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involvement on campus not only contributed positively to their college experience, but it also positioned them for greater success as they made the transition from campus to career. However, it was not only the activities in which they engaged, but the people with whom they engaged that yielded timely and helpful support for the alumnae who were able to take advantage of campus activities. Friends were heralded as the most impactful relationships, yet family and institutional relationships provided access and support that contributed to degree attainment and career pathways.

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The Role of Personal Attributes to Overcome Adversity

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The findings to this point illuminate the perceptions participants have of the roles other people played in their growth and development. Yet, it is equally important to understand how the women perceive the role of their personal attributes in overcoming adversity and achieving success during and after their time at UW. Participants perceived that their personal attributes of independent thinking, authenticity, and initiative enabled them to respectively amplify career aspirations, self-reliance, and personal advancements.

Independent Thinking Elucidated Career Aspirations

Collectively, the participants perceived themselves as independent thinkers. This personal attribute was most pronounced during their discussions of career and educational aspirations including major selection, career pathways, and continuing studies. One of the more prominent themes was the disposition of the participants toward major and career path choices. They had very specific rationale for their selection of majors and the decisions in many cases were made independent from family. They were equally particular about the type of work and graduate school studies they would pursue and some of their habits and dispositions informed the specific content of the work and schooling they perceived to be the best fit. For example, when it came to

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major selection for Bella, she recounted how early on she decided to become a medical doctor and the choice was not influenced by anyone in her family. Based on her goal to become a doctor, she ultimately chose a major, biology, that she felt would best prepare her for this career path. She recalled that she had no interest in chemistry or biochemistry, or majors that fell outside of science. As Bella reflected:

> I don't think my major selection was influenced by anyone. I think that based on my strengths and what I was interested in, I knew that I would want to do something with the human body, and I guess I attributed that to biology.

Renee also described that she arrived at her major of choice independently. She recalled a desire to pursue a creative path for her career but having some uncertainty about whether there was even a college major that would align with her desires. This was also during a period where she ceded to her parents' wishes to go to college. She did not feel that it was necessary to get a college degree to do the work that interested her. She did not see the value in it.

Although she was self-described as creative with a background in poetry, music composition, and vocal performance, Renee described how she made an early decision to not pursue a major in the College of Visual and Performing Arts:

> I kind of was like, maybe I shouldn't do this, but I always wanted to be a singer and then I've always loved fashion. So, when it was time to come to school and because I wasn't classically trained, I knew I wasn't going to get into the School of Music. That's why I went the fashion route for my major.

In addition to becoming a fashion major in the School of Business, Renee later chose to also major in arts administration. She discussed how both choices were passion driven. At the

time, she did not weigh whether she would be able to get a job when she graduated and instead focused on her interests.

Antoinette was the opposite of Renee and focused on practicality of her selection rather than fully following her passions. Prior to college, she had well-developed art and design skills, but her disposition when considering major was that it had to be directly relevant to launching a future career:

> I think I was more so the person that kind of discouraged myself from art. You usually think, you have a family, and they want you to do engineering or science because of the money and pride of having a black girl in STEM. I was definitely questioned. Can I even have a career in art? What can I do with that? Is that worth going to college for?

While she ultimately made the decision to steer away from art and focus on media studies, she did not feel pressure from her family to make a certain choice and made her decision independently. Like Antoinette, Tasha also felt it was important for major selection to tie to career possibilities: "I knew I couldn't, you know, just go try new things and do whatever I wanna do and take random classes. I knew I needed to have a plan that would benefit me in the long run." For this reason, she selected communication studies to ensure she would have a range of career choices available to her.

While their independent mindedness reflected the women's preconceived ideas of what majors would offer value, they also articulated specific outlooks in relation to their career aspirations. Their perceptions about attainment of career goals were influenced by independent thinking. Tasha relayed strong feelings she had at the time about her post-graduate career goals:

I felt like I needed to find a job that was exactly what I wanted, and I felt like I

needed to find it before I graduated. So that did not go as planned, but I felt like the

journey was kind of worth it.

She acknowledged that she felt a sense of hyper-independence which she had seen

modeled by her mother and she believed that was the driving force behind the pressure she

placed on herself to have the right job at graduation. She felt it was important for her to be

completely settled when she left college and to join an employer with whom she would be

inclined to stay for many years. Upon reflection, Tasha acknowledged this disposition was a

direct reflection of her perceived need for stability. She was also motivated to move away from

the retail experience she gained during college:

I'm not comfortable with competing. I didn't want that lifestyle. I wanted

something, and this is where communications came in, I just wanted something where I

could work with people and make people feel better or, you know, do something that

would change someone's day or just stuff like that.

In addition to her strong thoughts about attaining stability, it was important to Tasha that

she could move out of retail while securing a job that would be relevant to her communication

studies major. Amanda shared this desire to move out of retail. Like Tasha, she worked retail

jobs all throughout college and was ready to try something new. Her most important priority was

to find a job with good benefits, but due to the pandemic it took her some time to land her future

position in the shipping industry, so she stayed in her retail job immediately after graduation.

Renee found herself in a similar situation as Tasha and Amanda as none of them were

employed at graduation although that had been the hope. Although she recalled being very intent

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on landing employment quickly, an outlook she adopted independently, she found it helpful to try to take a different perspective:

> I also just know that I'm not the only person who doesn't get a job right after school. There are other people who are working multiple jobs just to make ends meet when they first get out of school. So I also just had to count my blessings and understand that it's a journey and that my end goal is still possible.

She acknowledged that part of being young is sometimes having unrealistic expectations. She ended up landing a job within only a few months of graduation and just ahead of the pandemic hitting. While the timing was later than she had hoped, she was really pleased with the position she obtained.

Participants set their own standards for when they wanted to secure employment and what the employment would entail. Their independent thinking about goal attainment, a core personal attribute, enabled them to persist.

Authenticity Amplified Self-Reliance

In addition to having specific dispositions and preferences which informed their career pathways, participants also exhibited self-reliance to guide their decision making. For some of the women, their time at UW was like an awakening where the experience of independence from their families helped them come into their own. Renee described her process of maturing and flourishing:

> If I'm honest, I pulled away from my family. But I think part of it at first, like I said that first semester, I didn't want to be there necessarily. But then I got into my sophomore year, and I was really more so in my self-discovery. Not saying I was trying

to veer away from how I was raised, but I really wanted to start thinking like Renee and not how I was brought up necessarily.

She learned, through her independence, that she did not agree with everything "espoused" by her family. She learned, also, that this did not mean she could not maintain loving relationships with them – despite this divergence. Her grandfather passing away reminded her how vital maintaining those relationships was. Renee discovered she can be her most authentic self through independence and she can be that (to herself and everyone else) while also having these tight family bonds so long as she creates boundaries within those connections.

Tasha felt a similar sense of self-reliance during her time at UW:

> I felt like I got to create my own life for once. Like I got to dictate what I did in the day, what my room looks like and what I'm going to eat for the day. Like just being able to step into yourself as a person in relationships and day to day activities. That was my first experience with that ever in life.

Tasha grew up in a household led by a single mother and she described that her mother was very vocal as she was growing up. She was accustomed to receiving advice on a range of subjects. She also noted that while she was away at college, her mom gave her space and did not make any demands about how often they communicated. This allowed her to embrace the freedom and independence she experienced at UW. She described herself as "having a mind of her own" which influenced her transition from campus to career.

Tasha accepted a position several months after graduation which she really enjoyed. She described making the mistake of complaining to her mom about some things at work which subsequently caused her mom not to like her job. The concerns were about the health of the

industry and the lack of benefits. Despite these concerns, Tasha exerted her independence and stayed on the job:

> I heard my mom's concerns, but mentally it's the healthiest job I've ever had. Truly happy. Like I've made friends and we sit and laugh all day and fix problems and put out fires together as a group. I just value the environment they've created for us.

Tasha was not alone in making decisions that contradicted parent and family preferences. Amanda shared that despite concerns raised by her mother and grandmother, she decided to move into an apartment the September following graduation, even though she did not have a job. She was self-reliant and made it work, and ultimately secured a job in January. This desire to live independently from family was also shared by Renee. When her mother offered that she could move home when her lease ended, Renee was resolved that she would not allow that to happen:

> I had this conversation later on, like when I was having a hard time getting a job after graduating where my mom said, if you need to come home for some months, like, you know that you can. But for me my pride was like, nope, I'm not going back home. I'm gonna make sure that before my lease is up here, I'm gonna have a job secured.

While she acknowledged upon hindsight that taking her mom up on her offer would have made her transition to starting her career a little easier, she was very committed to her independence at that time.

Relatedly, Tasha recalled that her mom would regularly send her job listings that were close to her mom's work or residence. Tasha admitted that she had the mindset that she was not going back home. Tasha also sought to be true to herself as she navigated work settings after graduation:

I got a job at a bank and there was not a lot of training and I realized I don't want to be responsible for other people's money. They kind of put me out there without training me which was a very bad decision. And I hate to feel like I'm not doing what I'm supposed to or I'm not well prepared. I just knew I can't be put in that situation again.

Tasha walked into the bank and on the spot decided to quit and resolved that she would never be placed in that type of situation again.

This same self-sufficiency that informed decisions after graduation also was instrumental for many of the women during college. For example, Antoinette gave herself credit for her success in college and acknowledged that it was her personal will that pushed her through the most. She counted on herself to achieve her goal of completing her undergraduate degree. Similarly, Alicia also found she had to rely on herself and believe in her abilities. She reflected on her first undergraduate degree in media studies when she recognized that she had potential in the field even though she never received external validation from the faculty. She used situations like this to bolster her resolve when she returned to complete her second undergraduate degree at UW:

If people ask me if I was prepared, I would be like, I was ill equipped, you know, hands down. And I will almost say the second time had I not realized all the things where I went wrong, I would have been ill equipped again.

Alicia credited her self-reliance as a primary way that she navigated to successful completion of her sociology degree. Her lived experience bolstered her confidence to be authentic and take the necessary steps. Confidence, self-reliance, and self-determination were also important to Renee:

But I also feel, even though I haven't had a blueprint necessarily for my life and I

still don't, I know who I am, and I've always had a really strong sense of who I am. I just

had to continue gaining that self-confidence within myself to go after things that not only

I want, but that I do deserve.

This self-sufficiency was also echoed by Tasha who described her commitment to always

do her absolute best and to never allow herself to be in a position where she did not know what

to do. She knew from experience that in cases where she faced uncertainty in the past, it would

cause her to be hesitant and would delay her actions. She was committed to honoring her true

nature while driving outcomes for herself. Self-reliance helped participants to experience growth

and maturity as they embraced authenticity in their decision making.

Initiating Actions Facilitated Personal Advancements

The women in the study also exhibited a personal attribute toward hard work and taking

initiative. Their ability to engage in these habits and behaviors contributed to their persistence to

degree completion as well as attainment of career outcomes. Possessing not only a commitment

to achieving goals, but also a willingness to act enabled participants to chart their own paths even

when resources and information were not readily shared with them. For Bria and Bella pursuing

careers in the medical profession, these commitments were essential to their success. Bria

described her mindset:

I feel like I came into college smart. I was a lover of learning. I came in wanting

to learn more and to grow in that aspect. I came in determined and persistent, and I knew

what I wanted to do. And so that's what helped me get through school.

Although she came from a low-income family, Bria did not want to use that as an excuse

or let it be a limitation on her life. There were many times during her undergraduate studies

where she was not informed about the steps she needed to take for med school, or to become a doctor, and instead of using that as an excuse she took it upon herself to network and to search for resources. Bria recognized that there were others in her same situation, so she did the necessary legwork to be prepared and found academic success through sheer determination. Bella similarly described how hard she worked in pursuit of her biology degree at UW:

> I would say I demonstrated dedication as the biology major wasn't easy. There were times where I had to pull all-nighters, take an exam, and then go to sleep. It wasn't just memorization and regurgitation – UW really tested our ability to apply the knowledge we learned.

Approaching her studies with discipline and dedication made the difference for Bella.

Renee also credited her commitment to action as instrumental to attaining her goals. She recalled not having a job immediately after graduation and how it weighed on her. Unlike most graduates, she did not take a vacation or set aside specific time to celebrate her degree completion. She felt like she did not deserve it because she had not yet obtained employment. She described that the planner in her was having a hard time. She continued to work on her internship immediately following graduation while focusing on her job search. Although she had the option to continue her internship for the rest of the year, she was determined to find a job quickly. She recalled having to get in the right mindset for her job search. She admitted that many opportunities came to her easily during her time at UW and so she needed to get back into the mode of taking all the necessary steps. In hindsight she believed it was her preparation that helped her to secure her job. She made sure to engage in research before her interviews and ensured she was well prepared. Renee also reflected with pride on her inherent nature and willingness to take on the necessary work:

No matter what situations I'm put in, knowing myself and knowing my heart and

how genuine I am is kind of what pushes me. And I'm also just used to doing a lot. Even

growing up, I always was doing a lot.

Bella similarly recounted how taking initiative played a role in her academic success. She

took her classes seriously, earning good grades and maintaining a high GPA, and she believed

that helped her chances for future career success. She also took initiative to build relationships

with her teachers which made it easier for her to secure the recommendations she needed for

medical school and her research internship. While some examples of initiative were focused on

achieving a particular outcome, others reflected a mindset shift where the alumnae made a

conscious choice to take a specific action. Alicia recounted a moment where she knew she would

have to shift her approach:

I went into the sociology department realizing that I did want to get a master's

degree, and the hardest thing was knowing I would have to establish some type of

connection with professors to get recommendation letters. So, I begrudgingly, because I

am like a really shy, reserved person, made the decision to reach out. I was like just do

the whole thing they tell you to do – establish a relationship, go to their office hours, and

like try to talk to them.

Alicia had already completed a prior undergraduate degree at UW, so when she decided

to get a second degree in sociology, she only needed to take sociology credits to earn the degree.

This means that she did not have years to develop the relationships with her faculty as she had

very few classes with them. However, she took the initiative because she knew they would be

important relationships for her as she pursued her master's degree.

Bria also recalled how she often faced challenges because she was shy:

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I have definitely grown more confident by trying to put myself in positions where I would have more opportunities to be outside of my comfort zone. I am definitely more confident and less shy than I was before.

By taking initiative to overcome their inherently introverted natures, both Alicia and Bria experienced growth and advanced their goals. Tasha also recognized an opportunity she had for growth in cultivating new relationships:

In my sophomore year, that was kind of the year where I was like, okay, you need to branch out, you know, just make some new friends, just try some things. So, I feel like that's kind of when it took off and it, it hit me like, I'm in college.

When Tasha reflected on her experiences at UW, the highlight of her four years was the friendships she made. Her friends were deeply influential on her college experience so taking steps to try new things and meet new people paid off for her.

Renee also asserted herself and found it made a difference when she was pursuing and engaging in her internship. She was required by one her arts administration classes to secure an internship and she was having difficulty identifying posted opportunities. She knew she needed to secure something local and decided she would reach out to a business near campus that she regularly passed by. Renee took initiative to reach out to the owner to express her interest in working as an intern and to provide her resume and cover letter. The owner liked her resume and for the interview, Renee took a very specific approach:

I did bring a mock event planned out already, but it was a personal project that I was actually working on for myself. I'm just kind of used to doing that. And I think most of the time, going back to the imposter syndrome, it's kind of like me saying, I don't

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necessarily have what you're looking for on paper, but I'm gonna show you that I still

have something to bring to the table.

The owner was really impressed, and Renee was hired as their first intern. The additional

steps she took to showcase her abilities made a difference. Her unexpected visit to the business

and bringing sample work to the interview were ideas Renee came up with on her own.

Renee followed a similar approach when she participated in the interview process for the

job she ultimately accepted after graduation:

I brought a presentation in to present to the directors and VPs of the company

because I didn't have that marketing background, and I was like, I need to still let them

know that I'm insightful. I wanted to show that even though I don't have these skills, I'm

willing to learn them. By just doing more than what was required. I mean, they were all

pretty impressed with me doing that.

For Renee, this approach to taking the extra steps was just part of what she felt was

necessary for her to fully communicate her value to a prospective employer. She also learned that

taking initiative within the work setting was equally important:

Sometimes I would just feel like, well, I'm a student, so I don't know some of

these things and some of it I didn't, but I learned that I had to take initiative with things in

order to get more opportunities. So once I started opening my mouth more, then my

manager also naturally started ask me to do more.

Renee had realized that she was not getting called to meetings and in some instance did

not have as many work projects, so she started asking to shadow her manager and to take on new

projects to help optimize her experience. This innate ability to take initiative opened doors for

Renee that would not have otherwise been available. While she is self-described as reserved, she

also acknowledged that she is someone who seeks to get things done "by any means necessary" and these collective experiences increased her confidence.

In every example, the personal attributes of the women toward independent thinking, self-reliance, and taking initiative yielded results they would not have otherwise attained. New friendships, new connections, and new opportunities directly resulted from their ability to leverage personal qualities to overcome adversity.

The collective reflections of study participants made visible the value of the relationships and experiences they had during their time at UW. As illustrated by their stories and interactions at UW, access to meaningful relationships and resources made their time in college a richer developmental experience and aided in their transition from campus to career. The women gave substantial credit to family and friends as well as faculty and staff for their influence and support, yet they also discussed and modeled ways they individually contributed to their own college experiences. In Chapter 6, I will present recommendations and outline the implications of this study for higher education and future research.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss my findings in relation to the extant literature. From my review and analysis of the perceptions and experiences of Black alumnae at Woodington University (UW), three themes emerged related to the role of navigational barriers, the role of supportive and influential relationships, and the role of personal attributes to overcome adversity. Following my discussion of how these themes relate to the literature, I will reflect on what UW, as a minority serving institution, is doing to meet the needs of their minority students. I will conclude the chapter by discussing implications and recommendations for the institution, for application of theoretical frameworks, for higher education policy and practice, and for future research.

Discussion Theme One: The Role of Navigational Barriers

As previously discussed, participants faced a unique set of circumstances during their time at UW as they were thrust into a worldwide pandemic. Yet, this was not the only barrier they had to navigate. The women faced difficulties at UW navigating their career pathways, in particular: gaining access to knowledge about the steps they needed to take, acquiring relevant skills and experiences, and adequately preparing for their career pursuits. Alicia did not have access to the "rule book", the set of unwritten rules that would ensure her successful transition from campus to career. Bria and Bella, as biology majors, lacked the necessary information for navigating the steps they should be taking to prepare for medical school. This finding reaches a similar conclusion as Urbaniviciute et al.'s (2016) study on perceived career barriers among university undergraduates which revealed that students faced more external barriers than internal

barriers. The authors described internal barriers as factors including lack of ability, motivation, or interest in pursuing career goals. Internal barriers were not a factor for the participants who were all highly motivated and committed to achieving their post-graduation goals. They sought help, they were willing to embrace necessary changes, and they took every step they knew to take.

The barriers the women collectively faced were external. This finding supports scholarship that examined the contextual factors including skill levels, learning styles, interests, and developmental needs which can foster inequitable career outcomes (Hu et al., 2020; Shauman, 2016; Urbanaviciute et al., 2016). Several of the participants found they were not fully qualified to pursue the types of career roles that interested them. This aligns with Urbanaviciute et al.'s (2016) findings regarding the importance of competency development and Silva et al.'s (2016) emphasis on network connections to support attainment of vocational outcomes. Tasha recounted her struggle with making network connections and the absence of this resource within her academic program. Beyond the external barriers the alumnae navigated on campus, they also faced the conditions of the job market. This is consistent with Tiessen, Grantham, and Cameron's (2017) finding that the conditions of the job market play a significant role in determining career outcomes and career success. Melissa, Bria, and Bella delayed their start to graduate school and it took substantially longer for Renee, Tasha, and Amanda to secure employment after graduation because of the pandemic impact on the job market. While the pandemic played a role in the timing of goals attainment, navigational barriers at UW limited the access of the women to career knowledge, skills, and connections, making it more difficult to achieve their career goals.

Discussion Theme Two: The Role of Supportive and Influential Relationships

While navigational barriers contributed negatively to the experience of Black alumnae at UW, the relationships the women encountered during college were supportive and influential, not only for their degree pursuits, but also their transition from campus to career. Participants experienced various forms of support from their families, friends, institutional agents, and through campus engagement.

The Role of Family

The family structures varied, with some women raised by a single mom, while others lived in a two-parent household, yet every participant described connectedness to their families. Families provided emotional support and advice which helped the women persist when facing any difficulties. Renee valued the prayers of her mother and Bria and Bella appreciated the regular phone calls with their mom and extended family. Families also provided aspirational career support and accountability. Tasha's mom pushed her to take steps to find a job and regularly shared job postings with her. Antoinette's parents were very supportive of her trying new things like pursuing an internship. Families were a source of encouragement and provided a steady base of support the women could rely on during their time at UW, and in the transition after graduation. My study reaches a similar conclusion as Whiston and Keller's (2004) systematic review of 32 studies that the career development of college students is influenced by family via emotional support, autonomy support, and encouragement. Tasha appreciated that a pivotal aspect of her time at UW was growing into her own, and she appreciated the space her mom gave her. Amanda, Bria, and Bella had the shared experience with Tasha of being raised by a single mom, with little to no involvement from their fathers. They all touted the important roles their mothers played through the support they provided during college. My finding is consistent

with the literature that mothers were integral to college success (Banks, 2009; Barnett, 2004; Porter and Dean, 2015). Although Melissa and Renee were raised in two-parent households, they also highlighted the emotional support and encouragement they received from their mothers.

While families were a source of support for participants, the forms of support were largely intangible. The families represented in my study were not affluent. They ranged from low to middle income, and all had financial challenges at different points. Except for Melissa, the career paths of the parents differed from the alumnae, so families did not have network connections or other insights to provide. This conclusion is similar to the finding in Hamilton et al.'s (2018) study on parental involvement in the college experience. The authors found that affluent parents could use their class resources to provide their daughters academic, social and career support as well as exclusive access within the university environment. Like the less affluent families in Hamilton et al.'s (2018) study, the UW alumnae did not have this type of support, and they had to largely rely on the resources of the institution and their own efforts to achieve academic and career success. This may also explain why I found a different conclusion from Roksa and Silver's (2019) study on students preparing to transition out of college in which the assistance of parents was greatly favored by students over university resources. Most of the women in my study proactively accessed resources provided through the university and they did not always feel that their parents had the knowledge or experience to help them. Antoinette did not discuss career preparation with her family and Tasha described how her mom could not relate because she never lived on campus when she went to college. Participants valued the support of their family, but it was the collective support of family, friends, and institutional agents that contributed to their degree attainment and career steps.

The Role of Friends

Friends were viewed by the participants as instrumental to their success at UW. While some of the women enjoyed friendships that continued from high school, others found that building new friendships was made easier in the UW setting. Many of the participants lived or worked with their friends, and they often engaged in campus activities or services together. Alicia met one of her close friends through a group counseling session on campus. Antoinette made friends through intramural volleyball, and they were a primary source of support for her. These shared experiences and common interests deepened the relationships the women had with their friends and filled an emotional gap that could not be satisfied by family. For example, Amanda was very close with her mom, yet she distinguished the emotional support she received from her friends and how much it meant because they were having a shared experience at UW. She also appreciated that her friends were a source of accountability academically. Tasha commended her friends for pushing her outside of her comfort zone to try new things.

The participants also valued the diversity of their friends. Bria and Bella have great pride in their Nigerian heritage, and they formed friendships with other Nigerians while also enjoying close relationships with African Americans and friends of other races. They both felt the diversity of their friendships was a valuable part of their time at UW. My finding regarding the role of peers – encouragement, accountability, career contacts, resources – is consistent with studies in which college students identified peers as agents who supported their success (Dowd et al., 2013; Garriott & Nisle, 2018; McCallen & Johnson, 2019; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Museus & Neville, 2012). It was clear in my review of literature that peers are very influential for Black women in college. To focus the scope of my study, I chose to concentrate on the role of parents

and families as well as institutions, so an in-depth review of studies on peer relationships was not part of my literature review.

The Role of Institutional Agents and Campus Engagement

Within the campus setting, peers and institutional agents were valuable sources of support for the women. Participants appreciated the sense of care from faculty as well as how their teaching styles facilitated learning. My study found a different interpretation than Bensimon et al. (2019) who concluded that having a shared culture, language, and life experience can help faculty know how to assist students. Only a few women in the study had access to Faculty of Color, and when they did, they appreciated it, but it is not something they described as missing in their experience at UW. They received support from many Caucasian faculty and they felt connected and supported. The assistance was not diminished because they lacked a shared cultural experience. Regardless of race, the women viewed some of their professors as sources of inspiration and they valued their areas of expertise. Renee, an aspiring entrepreneur, appreciated the valuable tips she received from a female faculty member who owned her own business. Faculty, and some staff, served as institutional agents by providing advocacy. They endorsed and encouraged skills development, supported academic projects, and wrote letters of recommendations for graduate school. Alicia was encouraged by her faculty member to pursue her master's degree and he also provided a recommendation to accompany her application. Agents also supported women in their job search by providing job listings and connections to resources. Antoinette's campus manager recruited her to fill a full-time position in the department after graduation which was a welcome outcome amid the pandemic.

While Antoinette's manager, a member of the UW staff, was an agent, my study findings align with the literature indicating that faculty are most commonly cited by college students as

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agents who supported their success (Dowd et al., 2013; Garriott & Nisle, 2018; McCallen & Johnson, 2019; Museus & Mueller, 2018; Museus & Neville, 2012). Apart from campus supervisors, participants described faculty as the individuals within UW who provided the most support. My findings concur with Grabowski and Miller (2015), reflecting the beneficial networking relationships students had with faculty including mentoring, career path guidance, and networking connections. My study also reached a similar conclusion as McCallen and Johnson (2019) that institutional agents provide intellectual capital and access to institutional resources. Bella shared examples of how faculty connected her to their colleagues which in one instance led to her securing a fellowship, and on another occasion, she was the recipient of a scholarship. These outcomes for Bella are examples of external assets, defined by Commodore et al. (2018) as the support systems available to Black women in college. The authors underscore the importance of external assets to make up for shortages of non-college supports. My findings confirm the importance of external assets through the examples participants shared of how these assets made a difference, and how the absence of these assets created challenges for them.

While institutional agents at UW provided access to external assets, there were other aspects of the student-agent relationship, as described in the extant literature, that were not present. My study found a different conclusion from Dowd et al. (2013)'s discovery that institutional agents taught students to navigate collegiate cultures. At UW, resources and connections were provided to support career aspirations and academic interests, but the faculty did not help participants navigate barriers or better understand the culture within the institution. My findings also differed from Carraso-Nunguray and Pena (2012) whose study participants characterized agents as developing personal connections with students as well as Museus and Neville (2012) who found institutional agents transcended their professional roles to be involved

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in multiple aspects of students' lives. This was not the experience of the women in my study. The support from faculty was impactful, but for most participants it was provided transactionally as compared to the meaningful relationships described in the literature between faculty and students. For Bria, Tasha, and Amanda, they had not even considered that a mentoring relationship with faculty could exist. They admitted that they viewed the teacher-student relationship as isolated to the classroom. However, for most of the participants, faculty and staff at UW were institutional agents who provided access to assets the women could not have marshaled on their own.

In addition to the role of the agents, participants positively viewed the role of campus engagement as influential to their experience at UW and their career aspirations. Campus engagement provided connections, resources, and skills development for many of the women. Melissa chose to work on campus as a resident assistant and she credits the experience for helping her to grow and develop new skills. Involvements on campus also provided connections to other Students of Color. Antoinette initiated two student clubs with the goal of creating spaces of shared interest where People of Color could thrive. Campus engagement also facilitated career readiness by providing network connections and professional development. Bella developed confidence and her communications skills through her participation in a leadership program. Renee benefitted from interview preparation and network connections through her business fraternity. Many of the women felt that their involvement on campus positioned them for greater success in their transition from campus to career.

A surprising finding was that participants to a great extent had to seek out their campus engagements. There were no pathways or processes in place at this minority serving institution for Students of Color, or Black women specifically, to ease their transition to campus, navigation

on campus, or transition to post-college life. This contrasts with Bensimon et al.'s (2019) advocacy for institutional capacity building where institutions are intentional with providing equal experiences and outcomes across all racial and ethnic groups. My study aligns with the extant literature, finding that institutions fail Black women by not providing information and resources to help them navigate the institution (Miller, 2017; White et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020). While agents and the institution itself provided assets, there was an absence of navigational guidance at UW which compelled participants to leverage their personal attributes to overcome adversity.

Discussion Theme Three: The Role of Personal Attributes to Overcome Adversity

Unlike the themes previously discussed which recount relationships of influence and meaning for the participants, this theme focuses on the personal qualities they leveraged to overcome adversities and to achieve success. Denton et al. (2020) cautioned researchers to not focus exclusively on the role of institutional agents and to ensure that the individual actions of participants are also made visible. My findings align with the literature which underscores the importance of student consciousness of the community cultural wealth, or assets, they possess. Participants easily and proudly articulated their assets. For many of the women, they ascribe their independent thinking as a personal attribute that motivated their career aspirations. Both Antoinette and Bella independently selected their majors based on their interests and did not consult with family to seek their opinions. Tasha and Amanda both decided that securing a good job by graduation was important. Another personal attribute that served as a resource for participants was authenticity and the willingness to be self-reliant. Tasha described the transformational experience of being on her own during college for the first time and how it allowed her to become more self-reliant when making career decisions independent from her

mother. When Renee was looking for a job after graduation, her mother offered that she could come home to live, but Renee was determined to land a job before her lease ended, and she did.

Participants also found that their willingness to take initiative was an attribute that aided in their personal advancement. Alicia took it upon herself to figure out the steps she needed to take to persist to graduation. She gave the example of reaching out to network with her faculty even though it required her to overcome her introversion to do so. Bria shared her frustration that resources and information were not provided through the biology department to help her understand the steps to take to pursue medical school, so she did the research and charted her own path. Renee was able to overcome the challenges in the job market by taking initiative to deliver a customized presentation in an interview. The managers were so impressed that they hired her. The women leveraged their personal attributes to help them navigate in situations of uncertainty and to overcome challenges they faced during their time at UW. Yet, an interesting finding was that even though the participants could describe their assets and how they utilized them, they did not recognize these assets as college and career readiness strengths. McWhirter et al. (2021) stressed that self-awareness of cultural wealth can help students recognize career readiness qualities. The attributes possessed by participants – independent thinking, authenticity, and initiative – predominantly correspond to two forms of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth: *aspirational capital*, the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future in the face of barriers, and *navigational capital*, skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Although there was no road map at UW to help the women navigate the institution, their personal attributes played a vital role in helping them to overcome obstacles during, and following, their college studies.

Summary: The Role of the Institution – Actions and Inactions of UW

The purpose of this case study was to understand what the minority serving institution (MSI) is currently doing to meet the needs of minority students, to understand the experience of Black alumnae at the MSI, and to explore how the perceptions held by Black alumnae regarding access to certain knowledge, information, and relationships during college may have helped them attain post-graduate career outcomes.

Participants valued the diversity of campus programs and resources offered at UW. Many opted to engage in student organizations or to work on campus, and these experiences helped them to cultivate friendships as well as develop skills that contributed to their preparation for their future careers. Over half of the women in the study commented on the mental health services offered by UW. Several women utilized these services throughout their time on campus and it really helped them with processing their experiences and navigating any challenges they faced. Some of the alumnae also gained access to career readiness resources through classes, student clubs, and by utilizing online resources offered by the career center. These resources helped with resume and interview preparation, as well as networking connections.

Notably, in most cases, participants had to seek out these resources. Several of the women were not involved on campus at all and did not see the value of doing so. For those who were involved, they found activities that interested them, and they decided to engage. UW, as a minority serving institution, lacks intentionality in offering resources that support the personal development of Black women and help them to navigate the campus environment. UW boasts over 200 campus organizations, but there is no "orientation" to the campus experience to help students learn what is available and to understand how they should make choices about what they pursue. Although several women discovered how to engage on their own and gained

relationships and skills, the involvements did not serve as a resource for how to navigate the campus environment. Many of the challenges the participants faced were navigational and they often could not find the help they needed. UW did not provide roadmaps to help students navigate the institution, academic majors, or preparation for specific careers. Only a few of the women engaged with the campus career center. Some felt it was helpful, but others found no value in it. In some cases, participants acknowledged that they did not really know how they were supposed to utilize the center and its resources. While the participants were supported in different ways by institutional agents, UW did not cultivate intentional networks of agents or external contacts, like alumni, to support Students of Color.

This study made visible the barriers that Black women face on campus, underscoring the importance of access to contacts and support services. The women applauded UW for offering mental health services, not only through the counseling center, but also through a low-cost program provided by the psychology department to engage with PhD students in training. Yet, they found it difficult to access the frequency of appointments they felt they needed based on the high demand for services. While UW offered many helpful resources, these findings reflect several implications for changes they should make to holistically support historically minoritized students.

<center>**Implications and Recommendations**</center>

Implications for Woodington University (UW)

Minority serving institutions are granted funding from the U.S. Department of Education with the expectation that they will demonstrate progress toward achieving more equitable outcomes for their students. UW has been recognized for the gains they have made in advancing social mobility for their students. This is a notable achievement; however, my findings show that

Black women navigated the campus experience by leveraging their personal attributes and with the support of a few agents. UW should provide a roadmap to help students navigate campus, major requirements, career aspirations, and resources. Participants expressed frustration with the challenge of knowing what was going on and they described how they had to seek out resources and information at UW. Also, many of the women did not know they could build mentoring relationships with faculty. UW needs to help students understand who serves as a resource on campus, and in what ways they can provide support.

By investing in institutional capacity building to intentionally create a network of faculty and staff to proactively serve as resources to students, UW can better equip students with what they need to better navigate barriers they may face. Participants received support from agents, but they often had to seek it out, or it only came because of their association with a particular major. Institutional capacity building will make this support more widespread and accessible for all students. Having the network in place is a first step, but UW also needs to be mindful about the forms of support that should be provided. Collecting robust career outcomes, corresponding with socioeconomic data, can inform institutional leaders about critical resources and programs they can put in place to aid students in navigating internal and external barriers. UW captures its outcomes data by gender and race so that data should be aligned with student experience surveys to uncover the career preparation resources that aided students. Another form of support that was valued by the alumnae was mental health counseling. UW should evaluate ways they can expand these offerings or provide additional opportunities to support the mental health of students.

Understanding the forms of support needed by students, evaluating the equity of career outcomes across race and ethnicity, and cultivating intentional networks will help UW to realize their commitments more fully as a minority serving institution.

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Implications for Theory

  This study sought to understand the aspects of cultural and social capital that are most readily utilized to advance career prospects for Black undergraduate women. Applying theoretical frameworks yields greater understanding and I utilized the lenses of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), Stanton-Salazar's (1997) Institutional Agents Social Capital (IASC), and Black Feminist Theory (BFT) to explain the findings.

Community Cultural Wealth (CCW)

  Not all forms of cultural wealth were reflected through the perceptions and experiences of the participants. Most prominent were examples of aspirational capital cited by the women that helped them to persist toward their career goals despite facing barriers. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams in the face of real and perceived barriers (Yosso, 2005).

  Alicia found she had to rely on herself and believe in her abilities. When pursuing her first undergraduate degree in media studies, she recognized that she had potential in the field even though she never received external validation from the faculty. She used situations like this to bolster her resolve when she returned to complete her second undergraduate degree at UW. Her self-reliance was a form of aspirational capital she utilized to navigate to successful degree completion. Renee's initiative was a form of navigational capital, skills of maneuvering through social institutions (Yosso, 2005), that in many instances opened doors for her that would not have otherwise been available. Renee secured an internship in the apparel industry, an area of interest related to the business she planned to launch. It was important to her to learn as much as she could to support her future career goal to be an entrepreneur. When her work projects slowed down at her internship, Renee asked to shadow her manager and to take on new projects to

optimize her experience. Renee self-described as someone who worked hard, and she credited her mom for modeling that work ethic for her. These examples of Alicia and Renee reflect their personal attributes, capital they possess as opposed to capital transmitted by others. There were, however, many examples of capital transmitted by others, predominantly in the form of social capital and navigational capital.

Social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources (Yosso, 2005). Amanda's friends were a big part of her experience at UW. Her friends provided social capital by giving her advice and resources about the interview and job search process. Bria also obtained social capital from her friends who introduced her to contacts in the medical field. These conversations provided insights about the medical school process that she could not access through the biology department. Institutional agents were also a source of capital for participants. After Alicia was encouraged by a faculty member to apply for grad school, she became concerned about the process and sought advice from her faculty. These agents gave her advice on how to present her application and provided detailed instructions on what was most important. They also informed her that she could waive her GRE score which had been an area of stress for Alicia. She leveraged the navigational capital they provided and was accepted into the program. Melissa's dad was a source of navigational capital for her. He encouraged her to pursue a master's degree in social work and once she made the decision, he advised her on pursuing advanced standing, a one-year degree that would save her time and money. He also provided guidance as she completed her grad school applications. Leveraging the navigational capital passed down from her dad, Melissa was admitted to every program she applied for and ultimately enrolled at her dad's alma mater, Fordham University. These examples reflect how participants acquired these forms of capital from others. The women primarily possessed

aspirational and some navigational capital, so the support from others to acquire additional forms of capital was important during their time at UW.

There were no experiences or perceptions shared by the participants that evoked linguistic capital, the cognitive and social skills gained from communicating in more than one language, or resistant capital, the knowledge and skills cultivated through challenging inequality (Yosso, 2005). However, familial capital, cultural knowledge nurtured between family (Yosso, 2005), was an asset possessed by the twins, Bria and Bella. Both young women felt a deep connectedness to their Nigerian roots. These cultural connections influenced the frequency of family contact and support, motivated them to seek out others on campus who were a part of the Nigerian community, and yielded connections to other Nigerians who supported their career aspirations. Yosso (2005) asserts that the forms of wealth are obtained through families and communities, yet my findings differ and align with the extant literature which demonstrated the ways in which forms of capital are also transmitted by others like peers and institutional agents. Future research should continue to learn more about the impacts of CCW on career outcomes by studying its acquisition from sources beyond the family and community. There are very few studies that explore CCW related to career aspirations and more needs to be understood. Future research should also explore how to help students recognize the CCW they possess. Although the participants in my study possessed forms of CCW, they did not always recognize them as assets to their degree or career pursuits.

Institutional Agents Social Capital (IASC)

Unlike the forms of CCW that were already possessed or newly acquired, an assessment of the IASC framework shows that across the board the participants were operating at a deficit when it came to forms of institutional support. They shared example after example of the ways

they were lacking the necessary funds of knowledge. Academic knowledge, as a form of capital, refers to subject-area knowledge (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Bria acknowledged that early on in her biology major she struggled, and she received a C- in one of her science courses. It took this learning moment for her to recognize the gap in her academic knowledge. After that point, she worked to get to know her professors and to seek out all help and resources, but she did not arrive at UW with the fund of knowledge and had to figure it out on her own. Technical knowledge, one of the funds of knowledge, refers to test-taking, study skills, and decision-making skills (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). At one point, Amanda had considered getting a master's degree. She knew she needed to take the GRE as an entrance exam, but beyond that, she knew nothing about how to prepare for the exam or what type of score she should try to attain. She felt like she should have prepared more, and she did not know that there were special courses offered to help with GRE preparation.

Stanton-Salazar's (1997) framework also includes network development, knowledge that supports skillful networking behavior, and labor and educational markets which includes knowledge of how to overcome barriers to job opportunities. Tasha did not know the steps to take to network and she felt it was difficult to access resources at UW that could help her gain this knowledge. Some of her classmates had access to networking contacts through their academic departments, but that was not her experience. As a result, she did not have access to networks when seeking employment. Renee was able to leverage her campus engagements to create networking contacts, but she did not possess funds of knowledge to navigate labor and educational markets. She remembered a moment early in her senior year when she observed her classmates were already actively looking for full-time employment. She was not aware of the recruiting timeframes, nor was she aware that companies often hire students well ahead of

graduation. Once she started applying for jobs, she realized that one of the barriers she faced was a lack of experience, so she had to modify her approach and look for lower-level roles. Renee did not possess knowledge about navigating labor and educational markets and had to learn through observation and experience.

Another fund of knowledge is institutional discourse which refers to socially acceptable ways of communicating (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Amanda faced a difficult situation when her mother had to undergo brain surgery and perhaps due to the stress of the situation, she waited until the last minute to tell her professors. In this moment of crisis, it did not naturally occur to her to engage in discourse in a way that would align with institutional standards. Although this was not an area of knowledge she possessed at that time, she was fortunate that her professors all worked with her to complete her class assignments. Examples reflecting possession of the final two funds of knowledge, organizational/bureaucratic, which deals with chains of command, and problem-solving, which involves integrating the funds of knowledge to reach goals (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), were not visible through my conversations with participants. As previously stated, they faced many barriers when trying to navigate the institution, so they were not knowledgeable of how bureaucracies operate.

The women were not without some contacts and information, as evidenced by forms of CCW provided by institutional agents, friends, and family. However, it was a problematic finding that the IASC forms of institutional support, which Stanton-Salazar (1997) asserts specifically come through institutional agents, were absent. Participants felt they were on their own to figure out how to access these funds of knowledge. Future research should consider how institutional agents transmit IASC in ways that advance career outcomes for students. Across Denton et al.'s (2020) review of 33 studies, they noted "many of the primary studies reviewed

show that institutional agents such as faculty and staff can have a substantial role in encouraging student success and recognizing student capital" (p.576). But there are very few studies that specifically seek to understand the influence of IASC on career outcomes. My study gives examples of how that can occur, but more needs to be understood. Also, future research should explore how institutional capacity building can be utilized for the explicit purpose of facilitating career outcomes for students. UW lacked intentional networks for Black women and more needs to be understood about how other institutions are influencing these outcomes.

Black Feminist Theory (BFT)

As a researcher, I appreciate the uniqueness of the lived experience for Black women based on their intersectional identities. When considering the findings of this study, it is important to explore them through the lens of Black Feminist Theory which illuminates the intersections of race, class, and gender. The use of this framework in my cross-case study allowed me to consider the individual and collective experiences of the Black alumnae. Chapter Four made visible the individual stories and experiences, while Chapter Five illuminated shared experiences and perceptions of UW. Collins (1986) underscored the importance of Black women validating their power by defining themselves, and my findings made prominent the role the personal attributes of participants played to aid them in overcoming adversity. These attributes were synonymous with how the women defined themselves as independent thinkers, authentic communicators, and initiators of action. Based on their self-described actions, these attributes were a source of power for them, however, none of the participants articulated that these were assets. There was a gap in the pride they felt about their possession of these attributes and their perceptions of the role these attributes served to advance their degree pursuits and career outcomes.

Another important facet of BFT is honoring the individuality of women. Crenshaw (1989) advocated for embracing intersectionality to capture the individualized experiences of each woman based on her unique identities. The importance of intersectionality was echoed by Winkle-Wagner (2015) and Winkle-Wagner et al.'s (2019) focus on within-group differences. The in-depth case profiles illuminate the uniqueness of the Black alumnae and how they experience their intersectionalities differently. Tasha, who was self-described as a Black woman, had a perspective different from everyone else in the study when it came to identity. Growing up she was constantly questioned about her ethnicity and the texture of her hair. Her parents are Black and when she recently found out her maternal grandfather was white, it was a lot for her to process. She is still reconciling this aspect of her identity but acknowledged that this discovery answered some questions about how she had been feeling. A compelling example of the within-group differences are the twins, Bella and Bria, who identified with their Nigerian heritage. Bria described herself as African American which she defines as "an African in America" while Bella identified as a Nigerian American woman. While the twins were born and raised in America, Bella acknowledges she always felt different from African Americans. These self-descriptions by the twins provide a granular view of the individuality of women and an appreciation that even sisters who grew up in the same household can view their identities differently. Melissa has always identified as a Black woman, but she described it taking time for her to grow into her identity. When she was a young girl, she was ashamed of being Black, but as she grew older her race was an aspect of her identity she valued. She described herself as "lighter-skinned" and so she often gets mistaken for being identified with other races.

These examples clearly illustrate that these racialized and gendered experiences were deeply personalized and influenced the ways the women experienced UW. Future research will

benefit from exploring how Black women experience their intersectionalities differently and identifying how those insights can inform the resources campuses provide to Black women to support their campus to career transitions.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study also imply the need to make changes in our higher education policies and practices. The participants in this study lacked the social capital and cultural wealth needed to address navigational barriers and to chart clear pathways to achieve their career objectives. Universities can adopt policies and practices to combat these issues by helping students understand their skills and assets, by integrating career readiness into the curriculum, by creating intentional networks, and by reporting first-destination data by race and gender.

Universities need to embed formal programs within the academic experience to help students understand the skills and experiences they already possess that are valuable for their career pursuits. The study revealed a tension between participants who did not have access to the resources needed and what the university purported to provide. While the women in this study all exhibited personal attributes enabling them to persist and ultimately attain their career goals, some students may not possess the same fortitude. To ensure equitable access to information and resources, universities should offer required first-year courses that make visible the career pathways connected to majors, expand student knowledge of the competencies that are taught in the classroom, and illuminate the skills employers are seeking. If students are engaged in self-assessment to understand their unique strengths, skills, motivations, and interests, and they understand the competencies gained in the classroom and required in industry, they can more easily recognize the skills they already possess.

Most universities lack a market-informed approach to their classroom teaching, creating a gap in the college-to-career transition for students. Curriculum within disciplines is naturally designed by faculty based on their expertise of the subject matter; however, if the instructors are not also actively engaged in market spaces through research or consulting work, they may not be abreast of the skills prospective employers are seeking and where early talent fits into the needs of industry. This approach to learning would require universities to engage in partnerships with industry and to reframe learning objectives to include a focus on market readiness for students. My literature review featured examples of programs that aided students in further development and acquisition of community cultural wealth for Students of Color. Incorporating these academic experiences in the curriculum could have a similarly positive impact. However, market orientation should not supersede academic aims and learning commitments to help students become global citizens, to embrace a community orientation, and to inspire social justice should remain at the forefront. These aims can be achieved while also being mindful of shifts in the needs of the market as they concurrently inform student preparation.

Universities also need to integrate the career center into the academic experience. Higher education faces many challenges, including shifts in the recruitment landscape. The industry is grappling with anticipated population decreases in high school students who can enroll in college. Additionally, prospective college students are being lured to industry by companies offering competitive salaries, along with training and certifications, in lieu of requiring a college degree. Necessarily, senior administrators prioritize enrollment, retention, and graduation rates; however, career outcomes do not receive the same level of prioritization at many universities. Focusing on the outcomes of graduates can uniquely influence positive interest for prospective students and their parents by showcasing the return on investment of attaining a degree.

Specifically, communicating career outcomes can directly contribute to achieving enrollment goals.

In many universities, faculty impart knowledge to students focused on their academic discipline, but students are rarely invited to think about how the knowledge they have gained will better prepare them for the job market or how it translates to particular roles. While some faculty have industry experience, the vast majority have developed their careers within the academy, so they are not abreast of the latest industry trends. Career center professionals are not academicians and are not experts in specific disciplines, yet they are deeply knowledgeable of market trends, the competencies sought across industries, and how to prepare students to communicate the unique skills and experiences they can bring to an employer. By integrating the career center into the academic experience, faculty can support student understanding of how the classroom content applies to industry, how students can talk about the skills and knowledge gained through the major and educate students about what they can offer to a prospective employer or graduate program. Inviting career coaches into the classroom to co-facilitate these sessions, as well as inviting guests from industry, will aid in bridging the connection between academic learning and future career paths for students. Whether making career outcomes a university strategic priority, or integrating the career center into the academic experience, these strategies can be advanced by the placement of a career services officer at the cabinet level to advance these priorities.

These classroom integration efforts would be further strengthened through the creation of intentional networks on university campuses that students can access to support their career decision making, career readiness, and to open doors into industry. The Black alumnae at UW received some support for career readiness through participation in campus organizations and some of their faculty provided connections, but this campus culture resulted in inequitable

outcomes for women across the study. There were several women who did not realize the need to get involved on campus, or to develop relationships with their faculty, and they had to forge their own paths to market - this delayed their ability to secure employment. Universities need to foster a network orientation such that students across all racial and ethnic identities have equitable access to contacts and information. This orientation will embed the importance of networking into the university culture, and it will make visible the individuals who can serve as resources for students to provide support as they navigate the institution. One way to approach these efforts is to create network communities of employers, alumni, faculty, and career centers. Employers can invest in the student career preparation by hosting mock interviews and resume reviews or offering job shadowing or site visits. Similarly, alumni can share insights into job functions, networking, and how to make the transition from campus to career. These relationships, combined with a collaborative academic experience with the career center, can provide students with access to a robust network of individuals. This holistic approach to the intentional cultivation of institutional agents would provide a plethora of resources to help students navigate collegiate cultures, acquire the forms of institutional support to persist to graduation, and successfully launch their careers.

Embedding approaches to support skills development, career readiness, and market knowledge can help to foster acquisition of forms of capital and help students clarify their paths to market, but the outcomes of these efforts must also be measured. Most universities provide first-destination data to inform the campus community and prospective students of the paths that graduates have taken, but job function, industry, geographic location, and compensation data does not provide a comprehensive picture. Universities also need to be intentional about sharing the stories behind the numbers. By including demographic variables like race and gender in the

analysis of career outcomes data, more can be understood about the student experience and how it prepared graduates for future careers. This is particularly critical for Students of Color and for accountability of minority serving institutions who assert to provide focused resources for this population. Universities need to invest more deeply in collecting robust outcomes data - not only at graduation, but also at later increments such as 1-year, 3-years, and 5-years out - to understand how the stories, experiences, and impact of the degree has evolved over time.

These practices and policies can help students harness the assets they already possess, cultivate new forms of capital, and be effectively prepared to make the transition from campus to career. These recommendations require a shift in how educators view their roles and how universities measure their effectiveness in training students. Senior administrators must be committed not only to degree completion, but also to equitable career outcomes for all students. By implementing practices to integrate curricular and co-curricular experiences, students will engage in holistic development that supports academic and career success.

Implications for Future Research

This study revealed opportunities for future research focused on peers, access to external assets, career support after graduation, and a broader understanding of the experience of Black female college students.

Future studies should look more deeply at the specific role of peers in influencing and facilitating career outcomes. Participants in the study accessed forms of capital through their peers that directly influenced their career outcomes. Peers were also highlighted as the most influential relationships for most women in the study. Scholars have considered peers as institutional agents, yet there are very few studies that explore the influence of agents on career outcomes. With the understanding of the uniquely impactful role of peers, future studies should

explore their specific impact on career decision making, career readiness, and career connections to determine the role they play in supporting career outcomes. Within higher education, peer networks are leveraged in many ways from peer tutors to peer career ambassadors, so studies that deeply focus on the role of peers in relation to career outcomes can offer insights into a domain where more needs to be understood.

In addition to understanding the specific influence of peers, future research should explore how Black female students can access external assets and support systems - that ultimately contribute to attainment of their career aspirations. The study revealed the inequities in access to external assets. Four of the eight participants – Bria, Bella, Antoinette, and Melissa – were the recipients of external assets from agents within the institution, while the other women in the study did not have these support systems. For the four who received external assets, they obtained tangible benefits ranging from scholarships to research and job opportunities, to gaining admission to a highly ranked grad school program. Those who did not have access to external assets navigated on their own and ultimately secured employment, but substantially later than they would have desired. Future studies should seek to understand the specific support systems that Black female students leverage to attain career outcomes. If more is understood about the assets that are difference makers, these approaches can be adopted more broadly across higher education to ensure equitable access and outcomes for all students.

In addition to understanding access to external assets, there is a need for future research to explore the role institutional agents play during the time period after graduation. Most of the accounts of the participants discussed assistance received from agents during school and leading up to graduation, yet many of the women did not land jobs for a period of months after graduation. While most universities continue to provide access to career services following

graduation, there are few programs that are structured to ensure recent grads achieve their career goals. Most university career centers are not staffed to provide high touch support and ensure all job seeking graduates are placed. Conducting research to understand the roles that agents play in the period following graduation can illuminate the ways that institutional agent networks can be deployed to support graduates during the pivotal time when they are seeking grad school admittance and full-time employment.

This study revealed the need to understand more about peers, external assets, and institutional agents support of career outcomes, but the study was limited by its focus on one institution. Future research should explore the experiences of Black female college students at minority serving institutions (MSI), predominantly white institutions (PWI), and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) to understand institutional resources and commitments in support of career outcomes. This study revealed that there were no resources designated for Black females, or Students of Color, even though UW is a minority serving institution. A cross-institutional study of MSIs, or across institutional types (MSI, HBCU, PWI), would yield increased understanding of best practices for career resources incorporated to support Black females during their undergraduate studies.

Conclusion

This study confirms the influence of parental, peer, and institutional relationships on Black female students during college. The findings align with the extant literature which captures the depth of parental emotional support and encouragement, and the support of peers. This study builds on the influence of institutional agents and extends understanding by illuminating the forms of capital, primarily social and navigational capital, transmitted by agents to support career aspirations. However, the study reached a different conclusion from the literature regarding the

nature of the relationships between the Black alumnae and faculty. While institutional agents transmitted capital to support career goals, the relationships lacked depth and did not reflect deep mentorship or assistance with navigating the institution itself. None of the participant families were affluent and so they had limited ability to provide resources or networks to aid the alumnae with navigating the institution, but some provided navigational support for career-related steps. Based on limited support from agents and family, the study confirms the important role the women played in their own academic and career success by leveraging personal attributes to overcome adversity and navigate barriers. These attributes correspond to forms of aspirational and navigational capital, yet the participants had no awareness the traits they possessed were assets to their college and career readiness goals. I am passionate about outcomes for Black women who often face difficulties when navigating career pathways and when seeking to advance in their careers. For this reason, Black alumnae were the exclusive focus of my study which revealed inequities related to career knowledge and access to capital for the eight women.

I call on higher education to adopt policies and practices that can aid Black female students with understanding the assets they possess and acquiring new forms of capital to navigate the institution and to pursue career pathways. Institutions of higher education need to help Black female college students understand the value of the skills and experiences they possess and must create intentional networks to help students access institutional forms of support. I am also calling for integration of the career center into the academic experience, to bridge the knowledge gained in the classroom to connect to career paths and to strengthen the ability of Black women to articulate their knowledge. These practices will better equip Black female college students to prepare for and take steps toward career paths. However, close attention must be paid to the career outcomes of Black female graduates as well. While most

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universities collect first-destination data, it is rarely assessed by race, gender, and job source to understand the resources on campus that have played a role in preparation and timing of job acceptances.

More needs to be understand about how to support Black women in college with leveraging cultural wealth and social capital to achieve career outcomes. This study showed that of the six forms of Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth, some of the women possessed aspirational, navigational, and familial capital. Social capital and navigational capital were transmitted to some of the women by friends, family, and institutional agents, but there were no instances of resistant capital or linguistic capital. The women did not possess any of the seven forms of institutional support of Stanton-Salazar's (1997) social capital nor were any of those forms transmitted by institutional agents. In this study, access to forms of capital and institutional support were significantly lacking at UW for the participants. Additionally, the literature review reflected very few studies considering the impact of capital on career outcomes for Students of Color and my study addresses this gap. Future research can contribute by exploring how to help Black women to become aware of the forms of capital they possess. More also needs to be understood about how forms of institutional support and external assets are transmitted to advance career outcomes for Black women in college.

While institutional agents are positioned to play a significant role by creating access to resources and networks, this study offered a glimpse into the deeply impactful role of friends on all aspects of the college experience for Black women. Future research should explore the role of peers in the attainment of career outcomes. I also encourage future researchers to conduct cross-institutional studies to either evaluate experiences of Black women enrolled in different minority serving institutions or across different institution types to include predominately white

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institutions and historically black colleges and universities. The extant literature has shown that access to forms of capital have helped Students of Color broadly, and Black women specifically, with college enrollment, academic performance, and persistence to graduation. Higher education must have an equal level of commitment to career outcomes for all students. Committing to fostering cultural wealth and social capital for Black women in college offers a promising path toward equitable career outcomes.

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Community Cultural Wealth Forms of Capital Yosso (2005)		Citations
Aspirational Capital	refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams even in the face of real and perceived barriers.	Murillo et al. (2017)
Linguistic Capital	includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication in more than one language	Jayakumar et al. (2013)
Familial Capital	refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin)	Lane & Id-Deen (2020)
Social Capital	can be understood as networks of people and community resources.	Holland (2017)
Navigational Capital	refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions.	Garriott & Nisle (2018)
Resistant Capital	refers those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality	Sims & Ferrare (2021)
Forms of Institutional Support / Funds of Knowledge Stanton-Salazar (1997)		**Citations**
Institutional Discourse	i.e. socially acceptable ways of using language and communicating	McCallen & Johnson (2019)
Academic	e.g., subject-area knowledge	Museus & Mueller (2018)
Organizational/ Bureaucratic	e.g., knowledge of how bureaucracies operate – chains of command, resource competition	Bensimon et al. (2019)
Network Development	i.e., knowledge leading to skillful networking behavior	Carrasco-Nunguray & Pena (2012)

Technical Knowledge	e.g., computer literacy, study skills, test-taking skills, decision-making skills	Dowd et al. (2013)
Labor & Educational Markets	e.g., job and educational opportunities, requisites and barriers to entrée; knowledge of how to fulfill requisites and how to overcome barriers	Garcia & Ramirez (2018)
Problem-Solving	i.e., knowing how to integrate the funds of knowledge to solve problems, make sound decisions, and reach goals	Brown & Sacco-Bene (2018)

Note. Adapted from "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth," by T. J. Yosso, 2005, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *8*(1), 69–91. Adapted from "A social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youth," R. D. Stanton-Salazar, 1997, *Harvard Educational Review*, *67*, 1– 41. http://dx.doi.org/10.17763/haer.67.1.140676g74018u73k

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview #1 Protocol and Deductive Codes that Guide Them

Questions	Probes	Deductive Codes
Tell me about yourself.	How do you identify in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender?	SDP
What was your parent(s') occupations when you were growing up and transitioning to college?	Would you describe your family situation as low income, middle income, or wealthy?	SDP
Did your parents go to college?	If so, what did they study? Did they graduate? If not, why do you think that is?	SDP
When did you know you would go to college?	What influenced your decision to attend? Did anyone in your family or community relationships influence your decision? If so, in what ways?	SI FI-B/D
What made you decide to enroll in Woodington University?	Did anyone in your family or community relationships influence your decision? If so, in what ways?	CCE SI FI-B/D
What was your major and how did you select it?	Did anyone in your family or community relationships influence your decision? If so, in what ways?	CCE SI FI-B/D
Did you live on campus or commute?	Were you happy with this choice?	CCE

What was your relationship like with your family during college?	Did they influence your success during college? If so, how? What did they do?	CCE FI-B/D
Were you involved on campus?	If so, in what ways? If not, why not?	CCE
What did you enjoy most/least about your experiences at UW?	Why? What happened?	CCE II-B/D

Key:

SDP=Sociodemographic Profile

FI-B/D=Familial Influence Before/During College

CCE=College & Campus Community Experiences

II-B/D=Institutional Influence Before/During College

II-PG=Institutional Influence Post-Graduation Goals

FI-PG=Familial Influence Post-Graduation Goals

SI=Self-Influence

Interview #2 Protocol and Deductive Codes that Guide Them

Questions	Probes	Deductive Codes
Did you have any faculty or staff that you identified with?	Did you have a professor who was a woman of color?	CCE II-B/D
Who from the university had the most influence on your college experiences (positively or negatively)?	What did they do?	CCE II-B/D
What did you select as your post-graduation goal? (ex. Find a job, get	When did you solidify your decision? Before your senior year? First semester of	CCE FI-PG

admission to grad school, take a gap year, start a business, etc.?)	senior year? Last semester before graduation? After graduation? Did anyone from your family/influence your post-graduate goal? If so, in what ways?	
How did you figure out the steps to take to pursue your post-graduation goals?	Were there particular skills or strengths that you possessed that you believe helped you?	CCE SI
What was your status within 6 months of completing your undergraduate degree? Were you able to achieve your post-graduation goal?	-If yes, what are the things that you did that you believe made this possible? -If no, were there resources that you felt were lacking that could have been helpful toward attainment of your goals?	CCE SI
Did anyone in your family provide support while you were pursuing your post-graduation goal?	If so, what did they do?	FI-PG
Did anyone from the university provide support while you were pursuing your post-graduation goal?	If so, what did they do?	II-PG

Key:

SDP=Sociodemographic Profile

FI-B/D=Familial Influence Before/During College

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SI=Self-Influence