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First-generation and low-income (FGLI) college student enrollment numbers are steadily increasing among American colleges and universities. The nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) continue to enroll and educate the largest number of African American first-generation and low-income students. As greater access to a college education becomes available, first-generation and low-income students from minoritized backgrounds are taking the opportunity to shift the trajectory of their lives and become the first persons in their families to attend and graduate from college. However, the experiences of these students as they matriculate through college are highly variable as compared to non-first-generation and low-income students. African American FGLI HBCU students require additional targeted student support services and depend heavily on their enrolling institution for basic needs. When basic needs are unmet, this increases the students' chances of facing challenges and barriers that impede their success, achievement, and college completion. *Life After College* is a qualitative study that examines how ten former first-generation and low-income students from six North Carolina HBCUs navigated college, their college experience as FGLI students, and which challenges they faced in college while striving to reach success. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework was used to understand how participants navigated their undergraduate academic progress from a strengths-based perspective. Findings from this study suggest that some African American FGLI HBCU students are *extremely* dependent on their HBCUs to provide basic needs as they attend college due to their families' inability to do so. In addition, they rely more heavily, than *previously* thought, on campus and student support services to help them matriculate through college. Findings also reveal that FGLI students can be low-income or very-low-income with very-low-income students being

“extremely impoverished”. It is recommended that colleges and universities acknowledge these two very different levels of financial constraints and hardship and consider how to provide extra supports for very-low-income students.

# AN EXPLORATION OF HBCU FIRST-GENERATION AND LOW-INCOME STUDENTEXPERIENCE THROUGH THE EYES OF YOUNG ALUMNI

by

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# DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of work to my parents and brother, Sefield and Patricia Macfoy and Sefield Macfoy, Jr. Thank you for your love, support, and for always believing in me.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Stephanie J.C. Macfoy 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 TO THE STUDY

Becoming the first person in your family to graduate from college is an honorable and historic venture in the life of a first-generation college student. Imagine being 18 years old, or possibly younger, and thrust into adulthood with the responsibility of applying to college, securing financial aid, arranging housing, and completing health forms. Then, you have to do your best to understand the verbiage and terms used on forms that must be completed correctly and by a specific deadline, or you may not be accepted and enrolled in school. Fortunate students may have parents or a mentor as a support system that can understand and guide them through this process, but for many students who are the first in their family to have a chance at becoming college graduates, this responsibility is left up to them. In my experience and observation as a higher education scholar-practitioner, it appears that for many of these students, much rides on their potential for success and achievement in college; from the students' achievement, both the student and their family may have the chance for a better trajectory and quality of life. In turn, personal goals combined with family expectations, hope, and pride can weigh heavy on a young adult whose goal is to carry the figurative baton across the finish line, which is the literal graduation stage.

In this study, I explore how African American first-generation low-income (FGLI) graduates believe their lives were impacted, including post-graduation, by attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Participants in this study were selected from five of the 11 HBCUs located in North Carolina. Through stories of their undergraduate experience, I wanted to discover how FGLI HBCU alumni experienced challenges and triumphs while enrolled at their HBCU. I wanted to know if the data would reveal challenges that occurred as a direct result of structures, systems, and policies that affected students.

"Joy and pain, sunshine, and rain," lyrics sung by Frankie Beverly and performed by Maze, a musical group who undoubtedly provide several of the top quintessential soundtracks for HBCU culture, also speak to how some HBCU FGLI students describe their college experience. First-generation college students face challenges as they navigate the college experience (Astin & Astin, 2015). FGLI HBCU students who I have taught and supported at different HBCUs taught me a great deal about perseverance, intrinsic motivation, privilege, and the uniqueness that comes with being the first in your family to graduate. As the years pass, I have been privileged to witness many of the FGLI students I advised go on to travel the world, become leaders in their field and community, build homes of their own, get married, have children, and provide for themselves financially. As a proud HBCU graduate of the classes of 2006 and 2009, I can trace my career path, interests, views, and perspectives on life, friendship, community, and the world back to defining moments at my HBCU. Likewise, there are connections I made at my HBCU that have turned into lasting friendships I pray will be lifelong, including faculty members who I've kept in contact with that have supported me through every degree I've sought since completing my undergraduate degree. Because I believe that I've been fortunate to have this HBCU experience, I looked forward to a dialogue with HBCU graduate young alumni that would provide further insight from a recent graduate perspective.

There are "101 HBCUs that collectively enroll nearly 300,000 undergraduate and graduate students, over 10% of all African Americans enrolled in higher education" (Strayhorn, 2020, p. 3). HBCUs not only serve as a center of academic and scholastic inquiry, but as an incubator for young adult learners who depart from these campuses to serve, lead, and transform any space they enter after graduation. Nichols and Evans-Bell (2017) wrote, "The Black undergraduate experience isn't monolithic, many Black students encounter a unique combination

of financial, academic, and social challenges that make the path to degree completion rugged" (p.1). Just as each HBCU has its history, culture, spirit, and uniqueness, each student who attended an HBCU may have a distinct experience. HBCUs, which have historically enrolled and educated students from historically marginalized or underrepresented low-income or low-wealth backgrounds, continue to meet the challenge of fostering and building Black college success and producing scholars, creatives, leaders, scientists, and more. This study was specifically and thoughtfully designed to tell the stories of FGLI African American young alumni who graduated from HBCUs from 2015 to 2019. These young men and women persevered through college, many without a blueprint on navigation that could be provided by family and became the first in their family to successfully be conferred a degree. This study brings forth conversation about the college environment, campus culture, and climate as experienced by former students. Within this study is the opportunity to learn from each participant's recollection of their time spent on their respective campus, and how they feel their HBCU contributed to their personal development and prepared them for life after graduation.

In order to maintain and increase student achievement and institutional success, accurately identifying the challenges, needs, and solutions to barriers FGLI students face has become increasingly imperative. Former students serve as "key informants" in this study as they are graduates who've had time to experience life after college and "may provide, the researcher [me], with access to cultural knowledge through activities that otherwise may not be available for study" (Kawulich, 2011, p. 59).

In this study, I was interested in identifying what actions HBCU FGLI graduates took to persist through college and obtain degree completion, despite challenges they may have faced by being African American and FGLI, outside of academic study. Challenges outside of the

classroom can be defined as any issues the students face that are not academic and do not include learning ability or comprehension;: some examples include lack of support from home, homelessness, food insecurity, work responsibilities (financial), untreated and undocumented mental health issues (psychological), and more. I hope that this narrative inquiry will help inform best practices on ways to support and engage first-generation college students at HBCUs and other institution types that seek to support and retain African American FGLI students.

## Statement of the Problem

In the higher education space, “Student affairs scholars and practitioners examine the changing context of the student experience in higher education, the evolution of the role of student affairs professionals, and the philosophies, ethics, and theories that guide the practice of student affairs work" (Schuh et al., 2011 p. 579). The examination of these changing concepts is what helps colleges and universities ensure that students can perform academically at their best, contribute to the growth and development of young adult learners, and contribute to overall student success. Because of these concepts and varying individual student needs, contemporary information concerning student needs becomes principal.

Often, the information known about student support services, persistence, and retention is derived from quantitative assessment and evaluation and is mostly mandated by the university to report the findings to the United States Department of Education and other education accreditation agencies. Data extracted from these assessments, which can be used to gather information about progress, satisfaction, usage, needs, and other factors, if quantitative in design, yield numerical values. Thus, by design, they are void of the story, language, description, and characteristics of the students the numbers represent. Correspondingly, it has become increasingly important to analyze the effect, and to what extent, non-academic problems or

personal crises have on college students today in addition to academic barriers they might experience. Students who are the first in their families to attend college are more likely to experience a high financial need or come from a low-income background than their peers (Davenport & Siegel, 2016). Non-academic burdens affect the overall performance of students who would be less academically challenged if these burdens did not exist. Low-income, first-generation college students are “more than five times as likely to leave in the first year [of college] than their most advantaged peers in private, not-for-profit four-year institutions" (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 2). As a result, colleges and universities that can identify what most hinders first-generation students from achieving and performing at their absolute best can make strides to improve overall student success.

## Purpose of Study

In this study, I aimed to gather stories of what most hinders first-generation college students, making sure to create space for them to share non-academic barriers to success. The second goal of this study was to glean from study participants how they persisted through college and what strengths they drew upon to do so. In this study, I gathered the narratives of HBCU FGLI alumni to investigate what they can offer to the current literature on the African American FGLI HBCU student population. The intended outcome of this study was to intentionally bring the unique experiences of those who identify as African American FGLI students at HBCUs into regular conversation. According to Strayhorn (2010), "The presence and experiences of Blacks at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) has been well documented in the research literature. For example, studies suggest that African American undergraduates at PWIs perform less well and drop out more frequently than do their White counterparts" (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 7). Specifically examining experiences of African Americans who identify as low-income, first-

generation, or both at HBCUs helps fill in missing or lacking information on student success and outcomes of African American HBCU students specifically, in addition to understanding the overall life experiences of students today.

For HBCUs, alumni attitudes and interest in supporting their alma mater is crucial to university sustainability and praxis. There is a benefit to gathering stories of barriers and resilience from recent HBCU graduates. Harnessing the power that HBCU graduates have in influencing the actions of their alma mater may influence institutional change for the betterment of FGLI students. In the HBCU community, alumni voices are particularly influential because HBCUs need the support of alumni to maintain sustainability. In addition, the universities and practitioners can use the results from this study to better understand how students cope with stressors, including how these stress factors might affect overall college performance. From this, we can learn what concentrated efforts colleges and universities can implement to better develop and prepare students for life pre-and-post-graduation.

## Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do African American first-generation and low-income graduates from HBCUs identify as the greatest hindrances to their achieving and performing at their absolute best?
    1. What barriers did they face related to the college or university? (e.g., academic, policy, campus services, etc.)
    2. What non-academic barriers did they face?
    3. How do they define success?

2. What do African American first-generation-low income HBCU graduates credit as being their source(s) of motivation for graduating?
3. What are African American FGLI HBCU undergraduate alumni's perceptions of the impact attending an HBCU had on their lives post-graduation?

## Defining First-Generation and Low-Income

The National Center for Education Statistics defines first-generation college students as "undergraduate students whose parents have not participated in postsecondary education" (Cataldi et al., 2018, p. 2). Researchers often use a widely accepted definition of first-generation initially created for the federally funded program, TRIO, which has seven programs to support FGLI students and defines the term as "All students whose parents have not obtained a postsecondary degree" (Davenport & Siegel, 2012, p. 4). Correspondingly, Gofen (2009) states that first-generation college students are defined as "Individuals who attain higher education, whereas both their parents did not" (p. 104). In this study, a first-generation college student will be defined as any student whose parents did not graduate from college.

A low-income college student who comes from a low-income family will need significant financial assistance to attend college. Oftentimes, low-income students are deemed "Pell-eligible" meaning the students' estimated family contribution (EFC) is below the poverty level or have an unmet financial need as defined by the United States Department of Education (DOE) Federal Pell Grant Program. According to the DOE, financial need is determined by the U.S. Department of Education using a standard formula, established by Congress, to evaluate the financial information reported on the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid* (FAFSA) and to determine the potential family contribution.

It is important to note that participants selected in this study can be FGLI, which includes a combination of first-generation and low-income, or first-generation only and not low-income, or low-income and not first-generation. Either of these designations or a combination of the two designations can qualify a student for federally funded programs for FGLI students. Students must meet at least one of the preceding criteria.

## Defining Academic and Student Success

How do we define and differentiate academic and student success? Student success and academic success are oftentimes used interchangeably. In this study, I refrain from using these terms interchangeably as academic success is directly related to learning and cognition, grades, and test scores. Student success can encompass anything outside of academics which can include student leadership, excelling in sports or any part of student life outside of academic studies.

York, Gibson, and Rankin (2015) encourage future practitioners and researchers to expand their definition of academic success beyond that of academic achievement by considering participants' aspirations or educational goals and increasing research on the relationship between grades and academic achievement, especially among under-served groups of students (such as low-income students and first-generation students). They contend, "These added measures will provide a more robust assessment of students' academic success" (p. 11).

Defining success in general terms may vary depending on several perspectives. Cuseo (2007) wrote, "Student success is a term that appears frequently married in higher education discourse and the term leads logically to the question, what constitutes student success?" (p. 1). Cuseo suggests student retention (persistence), educational attainment, academic achievement, student advancement (mobility), and holistic development equate to student success (p. 1-3). The way Cuseo defines the success of students makes room for a conglomerate of factors that can be

attributed to desirable outcomes of success without suggesting that there is one singular definition. Other determining factors for what someone deems as successful, can be influenced by factors such as family, productivity, awards and accolades, social status, or wealth. Success can also be defined by criteria set by a school, company, or organization which has been placed as the standard. In addition to how Cuseo makes sense of success, I define success as a combination of personal meaning, validation, and growth as seen in the eyes of an individual. This may also be seen as a form of holistic self-fulfillment. Achievement, development, and advancement can also mark success. During the interview portion of this study, participants were asked to define or describe what success means to them. Because success can be defined by more than just degree completion, there is a need for researchers to conduct research intended to draw attention to the various definitions and identities of success.

## Historical & Contemporary Context of HBCUs

> The American ethos idealizes education and personal achievement over birthright as the sole basis for one's place in society-except for African Americans. We (African Americans) have always been judged by the color of our skin, denied equal educational opportunity, and told the educational gap between Blacks and Whites was the reason for our subjugated status in society. (Allen et al., 2007, p. 263)

The HBCU, the mecca for Black scholarship, excellence, and culture, created for and by descendants of enslaved Africans to be formally educated and introduced into society, is a place where African Americans are not judged for the color of their skin nor denied equal education opportunity; rather, it is a place where excellence is the standard. HBCUs play an important role in the preservation and endurance of Black culture, the improvement of Black community life, and the preparation of the next generation of Black leadership (Allen et al., 2007). Increased enrollment rates at HBCUs have been attributed to graduates of HBCUs making great advancements in areas of government and leadership, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering

and Mathematics), and the arts, and students seeking to continue or to establish a family legacy of being educated at an HBCU. HBCUs continue to play an integral role in current times for both the African American community and broader U.S. growth.

These strides toward the advancement of African Americans have helped to trigger a resurgence of African American pride and a renaissance at HBCUs. Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics shows that nearly 38 percent of HBCUs reported a 10 percent increase in undergraduate student enrollment between the fall semesters of 2013 and 2014. Washington and Gasman (2016) explain "HBCUs cultivate young minds and empower African American activism while reminding students that these safe spaces were built specifically for them" (para. 3). There are currently 107 public and private HBCUs in the United States. HBCUs serve as solid foundations for support and encouragement, centers for African American culture and history, and a surrogate family for students.

## Significance of Study

The results of this study could help HBCUs and other institution types~~,~~ identify specific barriers and challenges their FGLI students face and provide ideas to eliminate or reduce them. In addition, research findings could be used to develop support to reduce drop-out and stop-out rates, increase retention, and implement institution-wide student assistance and intervention strategies for FGLI students. Moreover, there is a limited amount of literature, current or otherwise, that exists on African American FGLI students who attend HBCUs, and reports on ~~the~~ outcomes post-graduation are severely limited. Gaps in existing literature demonstrate a need for research specifically focused on the experiences of students attending HBCUs, more specifically on the subpopulation of students who identify as FGLI and African American.

## Researcher Positionality and Subjectivity

Peshkin (1988) writes that researchers should systematically seek out their subjectivity, not retrospectively after the data have been collected and the analysis is complete, but while their research is actively in progress. Everything I share with you here has been influential in shaping my views, understanding, inquiry, and research interests. I have spent a great portion of my life in self-examination, learning about who I am, who I want to be, how I appear, and now, how my presence or absence affects the lives of others. Both internal and outside factors cause me to adjust or conform to various situations and spaces. As time progresses, I am constantly reminded of how my values, attitude, and interests help to shape how I move about the world we live in.

My HBCU will forever be a part of my life. I am a 3rd generation HBCU graduate and come from a working-class background. I spent many summers on the campus of Bennett College for Women and at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University (NC A&T SU), where I attended summer camp and summer math and science enrichment programs. My HBCU undergraduate student experience began in 2002 and ended in 2006, but the love I have for my HBCU remains and runs deep. The love and reverence I have for my HBCU experience far exceeds any of the negatives I've encountered. The impact the HBCU experience, specifically my HBCU experience, has had on my life, is the reason I chose to research this subject matter. Back when I was an undergraduate student, I did not have the knowledge we have today of FGLI students, but I know now that I had many friends and classmates that were a part of this community of students.

I had a lot of FGLI friends; in fact, most of my friends in college were FGLI. Looking back, I recall old memories and thoughts about some of my FGLI friends and their college experiences. I remember observing them and thinking to myself how some of my friends didn't

have the financial means to get everything they needed for college or for necessities in general, but many of them did have family that was proud of them. Many of them worked hard to become student leaders, and all of them were fiercely dedicated and driven to finish college. I admired the drive of my FGLI student friends; sometimes, I felt like they were outworking me and somehow always doing more with less. Although there were times when I felt bad for them because of how hard they had to work, I was greatly humbled and inspired by them, and I still feel the same sentiment to this day. As a higher education professional, I see this same drive and passion in the HBCU FGLI students I work with currently. These students can be identified by the same aforementioned characteristics I described my classmates as having. This is what inspired me to do the work of sharing the HBCU FGLI student and graduate experience with as many people as I can.

I firmly believe that my culture, educational and life experiences, successes, and failures, have helped to shape who I am. I am a forever student, a lover of learning and exploration, daughter of an African American mother and Sierra Leonean father, a sister, teacher, supporter, and advocate for many. My reason for studying clinical counseling, higher education, social justice, and cultural foundations came from my experiences as a student and higher education professional, who saw a great need for more higher education professionals who not only wanted to provide quality academic education for students, but teach students about life, and preparation for adulthood. In my work, I take on a multitude of roles. I am a professional staff member who also serves as an advisor. But some of my students have referred to me as a big sister, mama, role model, mentor, friend, and confidant. In all, my goal is to be seen as a source of support, which encompasses all the aforementioned in HBCU culture.

Helping students who attend HBCUs and come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds as I did, has been the focus of my work and career for the past 14 years. I am excited about this research which is driven by the need for increasing knowledge of the experiences of FGLI students who are HBCU graduates. Upon deciding to study and choose a career in clinical mental health counseling, academic advising, and higher education, I made a personal commitment to take moral, ethical, and personal responsibility for the service and work I provided to students and the institutions I served. To this sentiment, Labaree (2003) states that "Like teachers, researchers take moral responsibility for the consequences of education, and their work in trying to understand this institution is in large part motivated by their desire to rectify the harm done by dysfunctional education" (p. 14). Developing ways to better understand the needs of students to create a better student experience, as well as improve academic outcomes, has been a major part of my work responsibility. I have a special affection and appreciation for HBCUs because I am a two-time HBCU graduate and began my career in higher education working at an HBCU. The last 15 years of my professional career in higher education have been as a teaching faculty and staff member at two HBCUs and one community college. As a researcher, I understand that many students are currently in the process of learning how to effectively navigate academic rigor and collegiate life.

As a researcher, I consider ethics to be my responsibility regardless of the paradigm I operate within (Lincoln & Cannella, 2009). The steps I took to ensure I was an ethical researcher were: talking with research participants about informed consent to ensure they were not placed in uncomfortable positions,; detailing the purpose of the study,; and protecting their identity to the absolute best of my ability. I also let research participants know that if there was any time that

they became uncomfortable during the interview or at any time during the study, they could refrain from answering specific questions or discontinue participation.

My motivation for researching this topic was the hundreds of students I have academically advised that persisted and excelled when challenged with academic rigor, although some struggled greatly with non-academic challenges that affected their academics. As a researcher and higher education professional, I am highly concerned with student experiences and challenges stemming from non-cognitive issues that impact academics, which many colleges and universities state is a part of their student success plan. My goal is to assist students with all challenges.

## Overview of Chapters

Chapter One introduces the study and explains the problem and purpose of the study, background context and information, research questions, brief history and background of HBCUs, the theoretical framework guiding the study, the significance of the study, subjectivity and positionality. Chapter Two provides a review and examination of existing relevant literature about first-generation and low-income college students. I also will provide a formal inquiry to examine the participant population, general and commonly known challenges to student success, retention, and attrition, and the impact of non-academic challenges on student success. In Chapter Three, I introduce the study research design, participant and study population, interview protocol, data analysis, data collection, and limitations.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to learn from recent HBCU college graduates, who were first-generation low-income college students, what factors presented challenges to their college success and experience and what factors contributed positively to their

success. Through interviewing FGLI college grads, I learned how each of them defines success, and, through the storytelling and recollection of their experiences, how they experienced college life. The final goal of this research was to combine information obtained from study participants, the review of literature, and the findings of my study to develop implications for future studies on HBCUs, African American FGLI students, and overall student experience. This study adds to the body of literature that specifically focuses on the African American and HBCU student experience while detailing the college experience. I hope that the results and recommendations developed from this study will influence institutional policy and practice concerning African American first-generation college students at HBCUs.

# CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to learn how African American first-generation and low-income (FGLI) graduates (alumni) of HBCUs believe attending their respective HBCU impacted their lives pre- and post-graduation, in addition to what their college experience was like as an FGLI college student. Information derived from this study adds to the current literature on FGLI students in general, African American FGLI students, student success, and HBCU alumni perspectives on the college experience.

In this chapter, I review existing literature on first-generation and low-income college students, with an emphasis on African American first-generation low-income (FGLI) students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and African American FGLI students at other institutions not at HBCUs; these include Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), Historically White Institutions (HWIs), and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). The review is organized into four main sections: (1) defining first-generation and low-income college students, (2) the historical context of the first African Americans on college campuses, (3) the foundation and impact of HBCUs, and (4) research on FGLI student success. This literature provides important context to understand how the study participants make meaning of their experiences.

## Who are First-Generation and Low-Income College Students?

An array of research exists on first-generation (FG) students; followed by research focused on low-income (LI) students. However, literature that specifically focuses on African American FGLI students at HBCUs was very challenging to find. Specifically, literature that presented data and findings on students belonging to both subpopulations of students simultaneously at some point during the time of their undergraduate studies proved difficult to

find. Sometimes, first-generation and low-income students are swept into literature on "underserved" or "underrepresented" students. Literature from studies stating that underserved populations or underrepresented students were included could not be automatically included in this review. This was due to the uncertainty of how the researchers defined underserved populations or underrepresented students or what constituted those designations. Unless it was explicitly stated or expressed that FGLI students were included in the study as a part of the underserved or underrepresented population, I could not conclude or assume that they were.

I attempted to make a knowledgeable determination by searching each of the studies participant demographic sections to determine how many or what percentage of the study participants identified as Black or African American and FGLI. Inherently, if I was unable to categorically conclude that underserved or underrepresented populations in a study included Black or African American students or the number of African Americans included in the study was critically disproportionate in comparison to other ethnicities, I moved to exclude that literature. This contributed to the pool of available articles that could be selected for inclusion in this review.

In this study, I use the most common definition of FG and LI. Within the intersection of research on students who are FG and students who are LI, literature on students who present with a combination of both factors exists. For clarity and a greater understanding of the unique circumstances some students face, it is necessary to reiterate that there are students who are first-generation and not low-income, students who are low-income but not first-generation, and then there are students who are both FG and LI who face a different set of challenges due to various compounding issues, such as lack of financial capital and lack of collegiate guidance from family support systems.

## First Generation College Student Term Defined

The term first-generation has evolved throughout the years, within the literature, and for varying educational purposes. Peabody (2013) references Billson and Terry (1982) who state that the term ”first generation” was originally coined by Fuji F. Adachi (1979) and intended to identify students who would be eligible for the Upward Bound Program, the first of seven federally funded programs under the TRIO umbrella. TRIO specifically refers to the three original programs that were funded under Title IV of the Higher Education Act.

> Collectively, the TRIO programs are designed to identify qualified individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, prepare them for a program of postsecondary education, provide support services for postsecondary students, motivate and prepare students for doctoral programs, and train individuals serving or preparing for service in the TRIO programs. (Dorch, 2012, p. 1)

First-generation college students (FGCS), also referred to as “First Gen”, according to the Higher Education Research Institute, are defined as any student from a family in which both parents have no education beyond high school (Demetriou et. al., 2017. p.19). The Higher Education Act of 1965 and 1998 defines this category of students as “a student both of whose parents did not complete a bachelor’s degree, or in the case of students who live with and are supported by only one parent, a student whose only such parent did not complete a bachelor’s degree” (Romanelli, 2020, p.1049). Upon graduating, some FG students continue to call themselves first-generation as the term is referenced as a designation of pride and honor of being the first in their family to graduate from college. Lastly, Hébert (2017) makes explicit the distinctions in defining FG students by sharing:

> Some researchers define this population of students as those for whom both parents or guardians have a high school education or less and did not begin a postsecondary degree while others incorporate a more inclusive definition: Students whose parents have not completed a bachelor’s degree. (pg. 97)

While these definitions of first-generation college students represent the most widely accepted definition across literature, first-generation college students do have intersecting identities. Varying experiences and characteristics of a population influence and broaden the definitions of people associated with the terms used to identify them. This may offer a further understanding of the diversity within FGCS and prompt further discourse analysis.

The Center for First-Generation Student Success, whose "mission is to be the premier source of evidence-based practices, professional development, and knowledge creation for the higher education community to advance the success of first-generation students" (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2020, para. 2), provides context for better understanding FGCS intersecting identities. According to The Center, "It can be argued that first-generation identity is inextricably linked to the myriad other identities a student may have. Intersectionality is a hallmark of first-generation student status" (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017, para. 2). Intersectionality is what makes each individual unique. The diverse makeup of African American FG students and how these students from various backgrounds achieve student success in various ways warrants investigation into their methods of degree attainment by persistence. One of the intersections with FG students that receives significant attention is socioeconomic status, specifically low-income.

## Low-Income College Student Term Defined

Researchers have engaged in numerous studies on low-income college students. These studies typically begin by clarifying how the term low-income will be defined in their study and what financial threshold or numerical value was used to constitute low-income status. According to the United States Department of Education (DOE), the current year household income threshold, which is based on family size for a family of four, is $39,750, and became effective

January 13, 2021; it will remain until further notice. The DOE uses the term “low-income individual” and states “this means an individual whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount” (US Department of Education, 2021). The “poverty threshold" or low-income level amounts can be found on the DOE website and are listed as Federal TRIO Programs Current-Year Low-Income Levels (Federal TRIO Programs Current-Year Low-Income Levels).

This generally accepted definition from the DOE is also used to determine financial assistance eligibility. The DOE classifies a LI student to be one who comes from a family whose estimated family contribution (EFC) is below the federal poverty level for their family size.
In addition to the term low-income, the U.S. DOE Department of Statistics defines “lowest-income” students. According to the report, poverty thresholds are generated annually by the Census Bureau and are used primarily for statistical reporting purposes. In their report for the U.S. DOE Department of Statistics, on extreme poverty on college campuses, Chen and Nunnery (2019), per the Census Bureau’s definition of extreme or deep poverty, state that lowest-income students (referred to as very low-income students) are those whose family incomes fell below 50 percent of the federally established poverty guideline for their family size (p. 2). Simply, very low-income students represent another tier of poverty beneath that of what is generally considered low-income. It should be noted that literature in general widely reflects the term “low-income” and includes those individuals who are “very-low-income”.
One question Chen and Nunnery’s profile of low and very low-income undergraduate college students sought to answer is how the demographic characteristics of very low- and low-income students differ from those of students with family incomes above the federal poverty level. The key findings from their profile concluded the following:

1. Compared with above-poverty-level dependent students, higher percentages of very low- and low-income dependent students were female, and were Black, Hispanic, or Asian.
2. Among independent students, a higher percentage of low-income students than their above-poverty-level peers were female. In addition, a higher percentage of very low and low-income independent students than their above-poverty-level peers were Black (p. 6).

Across the literature, scholars, and practitioners present several characteristics and demographics of LI college students, including scholarship that further substantiates the claims of the aforementioned scholars. Creating distinctions between "low" and "very low" income students, essentially students who are poorer than poor or what Chen and Nunnery call "extremely impoverished," acknowledges that there are levels of student poverty and makes a further distinction between low-income students.

This distinction is important when determining students who have the greatest financial need. As the participants in this study began to share their experiences, the narrative they told made the distinction between low-income and very low-income. When needed, I asked a clear and concise follow-up question, specifically defining the terms "low" and "very-low-income", to allow the participant to make the distinction as to which category they most identified with. I chose to include this information on "low" and "very-low-income" students in this literature review because I have encountered FGLI students of both distinctions while working with FGLI HBCU students. For seven years, I coordinated student residence hall move-in day for a group of 25-40 freshman FGLI students. During this time, I saw FGLI students dropped off at school by church members, foster parents, guardian ad litems (GAL), and some who came to school alone with no one else to help move them in. Some of these students came to campus with all of their belongings in a small amount of trash bags. For these students, there was no moving in with

trunks and racks of clothes, snacks and food for their rooms, TVs, game systems, decorative comforter sets, and room decor that rivaled the pages of Better Homes & Gardens like some of their peers.

These students did not have many of the resources their peers had. When it was discovered that some students didn't have commonly needed necessities, the student affairs staff would work to fill that need for students on an individual basis. Oftentimes, there was no parent to call on behalf of these students to ask if they could send money to assist their student. Some students came to campus with very limited resources. I also learned that if it had not been for the mandatory meal plan freshmen who stayed on campus were required to have, some students wouldn't have had food to eat because the meal plan was their only source of food. As I worked with upperclassmen FGLI students who lived off-campus, food insecurity and lack of financial resources became more evident as they did not have a meal plan. At some schools, you are not required to have a meal plan if you do not live on campus. For these reasons and others, I think it is important to acknowledge the low-income and very low-income distinction. In my study there were FGLI students who were very low income, and they described distinct experiences from those who were not "very" low income.

In summary, the terms low-income and first-generation have different meanings. Provided in this section are the definitions of a first-generation college student and a low-income college student. These two populations of students who are commonly grouped have different characteristics unless the student has a combination of both factors, low-income, and first-generation. Further discussion and characteristics of both populations of students will be provided throughout the upcoming sections. The literature reflects that both populations of

students may have intersecting identities; however, there are distinct requirements as prescribed by the Department of Education to claim each distinction.

## The Historical Context of the First African Americans on College Campuses

> The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as:
>
> Any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation. (White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity through Historically Black Colleges and Universities. (n.d.) U.S. Department of Education. https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/one-hundred-and-five-historically-black-colleges-and-universities/ )

When asked, "What is an HBCU?", Fiore and Hill share that HBCUs are "cultural institutions in which students from all walks of life and varying cultural backgrounds can and do receive a high-quality education. The student body of HBCUs reflects a melting pot of cultures, with the predominant demographic obviously being African American" (Hill & Fiore, 2012, p. 2). Throughout this research study, different definitions of what defines an HBCU may emerge based on a participant's college experience. Different years of enrollment, choice of academic major of study, campus involvement, campus culture, and various other factors may yield different reflections on how HBCUs can be defined by individuals. "Primarily, HBCUs are located in the southeastern states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands. These are the primary locations, although HBCUs are found outside of those regions" (Hill & Fiore, 2012, p. 2).

For 185 years, HBCUs have served as a critical center of hope, scholarship, community, research, cultural tradition, and more for African Americans.

HBCUs were created and designed to train and educate descendants of freed slaves at a time when African Americans were not accepted or admitted into institutions that educated white men and later, white women and children. Beginning with the founding of Cheyney University in 1837, America's first HBCU, HBCUs continue to serve as a catalyst that changes the trajectory of the lives of generations of African American scholars, including FGLI students.

## The First Emergence of African Americans on College Campuses

This section presents an overview of how, when, and why enslaved Africans and African Americans came to be on the first college campuses in the United States. Along with providing period and era information from the antebellum era to the 1960s. This section provides readers with a historical account, not Eurocentric in nature, which reflects the voices of those who are descendants of enslaved people. It is my intent that, after reading this section, readers will have the opportunity to get a better sense of how, throughout history, the same dominant groups and classes use(d) other human beings to maintain their affluent, wealthy, and privileged lifestyles. This often-unspoken documented history details the background of how a group of people become "disenfranchised as a result of fiscal, cultural, and mental discrimination" (Hill & Fiore, 2012, p. 5), the effects of which still affect African Americans today. Hopefully, this early history helps to convey why the struggle for equality through access to education is so important to African Americans and other marginalized groups, why there is a continued need for HBCU spaces, and the source of the pride in these institutions. To begin putting things into perspective, it is significant to know there was a 201-year gap between the establishment of Harvard University, the first university in America which was founded in 1636, and the founding in 1837 of a formally established institution of higher learning for African Americans - the first HBCU, Cheyney University. The first African American student to graduate from Harvard was Richard

Theodore Greener in 1870 (Sollors et. al, 1993, p. 37-58). In retrospect, this is significant for me as a researcher when I think of the fact that my maternal great-grandmother, who I remember very affectionately, was born just 36 years after Richard Greener graduated from Harvard. It may seem like much time has passed, but it hasn't, as those of us living today are only about two generations removed from those times.

Before the establishment of HBCUs, African Americans had a pivotal role in "Raising a college" (building colleges and universities) for their oppressors: the French, Dutch, Scottish, Portuguese, and British royals, the sons of the wealthy, sons of slave traders, various monarchs, and nations during the mid-16th century (Wilder, 2013, p. 18-21). Of the many gains that their oppressors made, financial gain was one of the most significant and enabled many to establish a legacy of wealth, power, and elitism that spans generations within their families. For this reason, it is important to acknowledge in some detail the contributions enslaved Africans and African Americans have made to the literal upbuilding of the first and earliest American institutions (among other countries) of higher learning and the suffering they endured there by white college presidents, faculty, and students (Wilder, 2013, p. 10).

These early institutions which still stand today and are still considered the most prestigious and elite universities are referred to as Ivy League schools. The establishment and founding of some Ivy League schools date back to the 1600s. From the 1600s to the Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation (1877- mid-1960s) to the current "color-blind" racist ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2022), African Americans and other people of color have felt the effects of structural and systemic oppression and racism, which greatly impacted access to education and sparks continued debate on critical race and conflict race theory.

Craig Wilder (2013), in his book entitled, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's University*, provides an account of the history of slavery and racism, and their influence on higher education in America. Wilder extensively explored the connection between the Ivy Leagues and slavery. According to Wilder (2013), "African Slavery and the slave trade subsidized the college (Harvard University) and the colony (New England). The birth of slavery in New England was also the dawn of slavery at Harvard" (p. 29). Wilder further conveys that slavery is deeply rooted in the founding and funding of most, if not all, Ivy League institutions that we know today. The growth of the slave trade coincided with the growth of many elite institutions in New England throughout the 1600s and the 1700s (Wilder, 2013, p. 9-10). Consequently, it is important to state, depending on what account of American history you read regarding the establishment of the first colleges and universities in the United States, it may or may not include any focus or acknowledgment of how African Americans first arrived on the campuses of America's first colleges and universities and why.

Importantly, further research on enslaved people on Ivy League campuses draws emphasis on the fact that "human slavery was the precondition for the rise of higher education in the Americas" (Wilder, 2013, p.114), and how selling slaves contributed to the establishment of white wealth, elitism, and legacy building for beneficiaries of the financial capital obtained from the sale of humans, many of whom served as college presidents (Wilder, 2013, p.77), campus leadership, governors and religious leaders who all had connections to the colleges. For example, "A succession of eight slave owners presided over the college of New Jersey during its first seventy-five years" (Wilder, 2013, p.122), and enslaved Black people built Thomas Jefferson's intellectual monument: the University of Virginia (Wilder, 2013, p.137). The subjugation of the enslaved and indigenous people was the foundation upon which these universities were built and

maintained, and slave labor provided the means for white male students to pay for their education. Wilder includes an account detailing a family who sold two slaves to pay for their son's tuition and fees at Yale. Washington College (now Washington and Lee) put out advertisements for slaves in 1856 (Wilder, 2013, p.115). On these early campuses, "enslaved people often performed the most labor-intensive tasks. Slaves served as housekeepers, facility maintenance, and cooks for the college" and human subjects for medical colleges, experiments, and science, unwillingly and forcibly (Wilder, 2013, p. 134). This also included the dead bodies or corpses of slaves for the benefit of establishing advanced scientific and medical research (Wilder, 2013, p.134, 192, 193-204). In summation, and as illustrated by Rickets (2019):

> There were three main ways early universities held connections to slavery: intellectual, financial, and social. The intellectual connection comes from proslavery thought that was passed from faculty to students, who then took it into the world where they worked in newspapers, courtrooms, and legislation, perpetuating the ideals of slavery. Additionally, the highly educated people in these universities were looked up to and their ideas valued, thus people mimicked their ideas and opinions. The economic connection is the largest and most obvious of the three, for most universities' funding came from money gained from plantations and slave labor, donations were received from wealthy slaveholders, and students even paid tuition with slavery-acquired money. The final connection is social ties. It takes into account the lives of those enslaved on campus, those who were owned by the university, and how their dreams and minds were impacted, not to mention all of their descendants. (p. 3).

Acknowledging and sharing documented history that for centuries has been purposely quieted and hidden by the descendants and benefactors of slavery until recently, specifically the contribution to scholarship and knowledge of enslaved African and African Americans, is imperative because this historical complicity is often elided. Understanding the dark history of the earliest formal institutions of higher learning, how, and for what purpose enslaved Africans and other minorities were forcibly used to build and maintain these institutions, helps to frame why HBCUs were created.

## The Foundation & Impact of HBCUs

African Americans in the United States have lived through the monstrosity of the transatlantic slave trade, not being considered human, being forbidden to learn how to read and write under the penalty of death, fines, imprisonment, beating, and other severe punishments such as having limbs cut off. According to the President's Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (2005), many HBCUs were formed to eliminate the adverse residual effects of slavery, plus a century of legally sanctioned discrimination against American citizens of African descent (Humphreys, 2017, p. 6). African Americans have endured being excluded from just about every place imaginable in the United States, including in Congress, at one time only being considered three-fifths of a man for state representation in Congress (Article I, Section 2, of the U.S. Constitution of 1787).

African Americans survived the Jim Crow south laws, segregation, and continue to fight against injustice, systematic racism, oppressive structures, and inequality in the justice system, and unequal treatment under the law. When speaking on the impact of HBCUs, Hill & Fiore (2012) explain:

> Even amid the tragedy of slavery in the United States, there arose the most unusual, mission-driven institutions of higher learning founded to empower newly emancipated African slaves to live out the American dream: *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.* Through the residue of slavery, Jim Crow Laws, institutionalized racism and discrimination, and sheer hatred, these institutions established educational methods, cultural norms, and traditions which remain important nearly two centuries later. (p. 3)

Since the inception of the first HBCUs, HBCUs have historically taught, trained, and equipped their students to fight for equality, civil rights, and other freedoms. HBCU students have run for President, led civil rights movements, and become world-renowned civil rights leaders and attorneys, along with becoming leaders in the highest ranks of the US military. Hammond et. al. (2021) highlight:

> HBCUs represent “3% of higher education institutions in the United States, educate 10% of all Black college students, account for 19% of degrees earned by Black students in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), 80% of Black judges, 50% of Black doctors, and 50% of Black lawyers. (p. 4)

This assertion by Hammond et. al is important to include not only because it shows the positive outcomes of HBCU graduates, but it shows how HBCU graduates show up and contribute to the greater society. HBCUs have forever served as a place where African Americans of all cultures and backgrounds could be nurtured, educated, appreciated, and seen. At a time when some question if there is still a need for HBCUs today, findings such as this presented by Hammond suggest that African American students and other students from minority backgrounds, tend to reach higher levels of personal, academic, and overall success due to attending HBCUs (p. 4). One key research aim of this study was to determine from research participants to what extent they believed attendance at their HBCU, along with opportunities provided by, through, or because of their school, helped them to reach higher levels of success. This section provides a general summary of literature discussing the impact HBCUs have on student success. Included for reference and context are HBCU student success statistics, a brief synopsis of HBCU success data, and demographics.

## HBCU Impact on Income Mobility

FGLI students, regardless of institution type, are particularly Pell-eligible students. Federal Student Aid, an office of the U.S. Department of Education, defines a Pell-eligible student as one who displays exceptional financial need and has not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree (the United States, 2003). This funding is not a loan and does not have to be repaid. These students come from low-income backgrounds where a lack of resources greatly impacts a student's ability for college access, retention, and degree completion. Essentially, if a

student does not see that they will have enough money to go to college, they may refrain from applying; if they are accepted into college and do not have the money to pay tuition and fees, they may drop out of school and not complete their degree.

> Although many students work during their college years, first-generation students work because of their obligations to support other responsibilities they may have outside of college. Consequently, first-generation students spend more time working and less time studying, unlike their classmates. (Petty, 2014, p. 2)

These students must learn to balance school and work if they want to be able to stay in school. Oftentimes the parents of FGLI students don't have much money to contribute to their student's schooling, and FGLI students depend heavily on financial aid and the income they receive from working. This makes working to support themselves financially more of a priority over studying and going to school. This struggle to balance school and work often leads to stress and burnout for many students. Students can become overwhelmed and decide they cannot balance both at the same time. Subsequently, their grades begin to falter and they withdraw from school.

Nathenson, Samayoa, and Gasman (2013) conducted a study on income mobility at HBCUs with the research aim of examining the intergenerational income mobility experienced by students who recently attended HBCUs and PWIs to examine variation across HBCUs. Their key findings showed:

> HBCUs enroll a greater number of low-income students than PWIs and students experience more upward mobility at HBCUs than at PWIs, nearly 70% of students at HBCUs attain at least middle-class incomes and ⅔ of low-income students at HBCUs end up in at least the middle class. Children of affluent parents who attended PWIs were 50% more likely to stay affluent than children of affluent parents who attended HBCUs. These findings specifically name the impact on earning potential for an HBCU graduate and how the financial capital and intergenerational income mobility of African American parents of HBCU students can be considered more volatile than their white counterparts. This study also suggested that upward mobility is 50% higher at HBCUs than at PWIs because PWIs enroll far fewer lower-income students. (Nathenson, et. al, 2013, p. 3-5)

Studies such as this are a testament to the work of HBCUs and how HBCUs, despite having to do more with fewer resources and financial backing, is a good choice for African American FGLI students and students from marginalized backgrounds. Essentially, this study found that even being born into a relatively wealthy African American family doesn't provide the same financial capital cushion that being born into a wealthy white family does, and it's more likely that African American families can slip from this affluent status.

## HBCU Impact on Social Mobility

*"It's not always what you know but who you know" - Author Unknown*

As an HBCU graduate, I affirm that the greatest resource an HBCU has is its students. The above quote originally was stated about lesser qualified people in society gaining an advantage over those who might be more knowledgeable than them or perhaps more deserving. Although this quote can be perceived as having a negative connotation, some have learned there are benefits from having a good balance of smarts and connectedness to others; this is where academic excellence and equity meet. "Ample research suggests that HBCUs as a group contribute to the success of black students in special ways, and scholars even routinely champion them as exemplars that all institutions should follow when educating that population" (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014, p. 63). Establishing connections leads to social capital and social capital can lead to increased social mobility (Yosso, 2005). Social mobility, through access and attainment of higher education for students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, offers the chance for improving one's position in society. A goal for many FGLI students and alumni is to leverage the education, skills, and training they receive in college, monetize it through adequate employment post-graduation, and compound financial capital to move from a low socioeconomic level to a higher socioeconomic level.

In a time of rising inequality and low social mobility, improving the quality of and access to education has the potential to increase equality of opportunity for all Americans. Literature on social mobility within higher education, suggests that colleges and universities measure how they foster social mobility, equity, and access (Milburn, 2012, p.11-14; Nathenson, Samayoa, & Gasman, 2019; Hammonds, Owens & Gulko, 2021). Attending college essentially poses a financial risk, especially for FGLI students whose families have an income gap, but it is a risk many students are willing to take for the chance of improvement in various aspects of their lives and their future.

Based on their study, *HBCUs Transforming Generations: Social Mobility Outcomes for HBCU Alumni,* Hammond et. al concluded:

1. Understanding the social mobility of students attending HBCUs is particularly important since a significant proportion of the student body at the institutions is economically disenfranchised, Black and Pell-grant eligible, and nearly 40% are first-generation college students.
2. The mobility rate used to measure the social mobility of HBCU alumni plays a significant role in the story that is presented about the success of HBCUs. A more inclusive mobility rate accounts for the compounding effects of racism on Black Americans by acknowledging the impact that such oppression has on the income level students are in when they enter college (p.11-14).

HBCUs, with an established history of intentional work centered around increasing economic and educational opportunities for African Americans and others who come from historically marginalized backgrounds, must continue to find ways to best support the students they serve.

Greater support for institutions that serve marginalized groups can help to improve society overall by creating more equitable and just communities.

## Connectedness and Sense of Belonging in College

*"I get by with a little help from my friends" - Written by McCartney-Lennon.*

Typically, when students are dropped off at college, parents and university staff tell incoming freshmen to consider their college a home away from home. HBCUs, being a center for Black culture, are not only referred to as a home away from home, and the students are encouraged to regard the people at the HBCU as a family or the student's new family. Typical new student orientation at many colleges and universities consists of orientation leaders or guides leading activities for new freshmen to become familiar with their new school; these are also considered student engagement activities for students. Freshman jitters are comforted by new student programming centered around school history, which includes the new student becoming a part of the school's history, academic support, making new friends, student life, campus policies, and connecting to campus resources.

For FGLI students, opportunities to connect and find a sense of belonging on campus, greatly impact their productivity in the classroom and on campus, and have been attributed to attrition, retention, and overall success. Attrition and retention rates are leading measures of student and institutional success in higher education. Several definitions of retention exist which is why Adusei-Asante & Doh (2016) refer to retention and attrition as "simple dichotomous terms" (p.1). Mason and Matas (2015) define attrition as the continuation of the education of students in the subsequent year until completion (p. 49-50). Hagedorn (2006) defines retention as "retention is staying in school until completion of a degree". Hagedorn's definition of retention aligns with Reason's (2009) definition of retention which I previously mentioned.

Feeling connected and finding a sense of belonging within the campus community, has been attributed to retention and persistence among college students. Means and Pyne (2017) define “belonging as a student’s perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (campus community) or others on campus (faculty/staff)” (p. 908). For FGLI students and students in general, special programs specifically geared toward supporting their needs and interests and developing relationships with other students with whom they have commonalities can help foster this sense of belonging and connectedness. In addition to these reasons, HBCU students may find that attending an institution of higher learning with others who share the same or closely related cultural, ethnic, and racial identity is a major draw to choosing their school.

Several factors are weighed when students make their college choice. These factors can be numerous, and they vary by each individual when deciding on what college meets the needs of the student. Location to home, institutional support systems, cost of attendance, and financial aid are basic examples of what some students may consider when they select a college. Cultural and personal fit, the ability to imagine themselves being happy and having fun on campus, the potential to see themselves successfully graduating in four years, and the possibility of creating life-lasting friendships they’ll share with the other students that attend the university, seem to be of great importance to today's student.

Although different colleges and universities may have similar missions, what makes each school unique is the great variety of campus culture and history that make each school distinguishable. Arguably the biggest influencers and determinants of campus culture are the students. Students have the power to set the tone and the trends on campus.

## Research on FGLI Student Success and Retention

Examining FGLI student success and retention is essential to understanding best practices and effective strategies for student persistence toward graduation. A considerable portion of the literature related to students at HBCUs focused on demographic specific student sub-populations such as African American men's and women's achievement programs and STEM programs at HBCUs. With research focused on the achievement and student success of HBCU students who are a part of these special populations, this pointed to an opportunity to advance the literature on African American HBCU students by including research on African American HBCU FGLI students. While conducting this literature review, I found that a majority of the research related to FGLI student barriers tended to name commonly known factors that inhibit the academic success of students in college (financial literacy, lack of financial resources, college readiness, lack of support, food insecurity and homelessness, etc.) in addition to also stating that the known factors were too many to name them all.

The combination of academic persistence and retention is a major construct within studies on student success. These terms, while often used interchangeably, have different meanings. Reason (2009) defines retention as an organizational phenomenon that focuses attention on the institutional goal of keeping students enrolled for consecutive semesters until degree completion. Persistence is defined as an individual phenomenon that focuses attention on the individual goal of a student reaching his or her specific educational goal attainment (p. 660). Persistence is an important variable in student enrollment and overall student success because the greatest outcome of persistence is graduation. Aljohani (2016) completed a comprehensive review of the major studies and theoretical models of student retention in higher education. The purpose of this review was to provide researchers, educators, and policymakers with a

background and the latest strategies and techniques that can help them find common patterns and themes of commonly reported student attrition factors. This review "presented an extensive and analytical review of the major conceptual and theoretical models and empirical studies in the student retention field over the last four decades" (p.13) and found:

> The focus of the student retention theoretical models was not on the specific reasons that students withdraw from their study programs, but rather on why some students react to these specific factors by withdrawing. This is because these factors, while constituting challenges are not necessarily the actual causes of withdrawal. (p.14)

Significant to the study I conducted and a statement that I stand in agreeance with is Aljohani's assertion that factors which cause students to withdraw are too many to name, may not apply to all students, are a conglomerate of attributes related to individual students themselves, and the impact of social and institutional factors. This statement leaves one to question, what could be the factors that constitute challenge but aren't necessarily the cause of student withdrawal? So, what are the "actual" causes of withdrawal or what would make students contemplate withdrawing from school? Essentially, naming the actual factor that caused students to withdraw from the beginning, and getting in front of the challenge before the student feels they need to withdraw, may contribute to increased student success and retention.

## African American FGLI Student Success Across Institution Types

In this section, I provide a brief snapshot of what some researchers have concluded about African American FGLI student success at HBCUs versus evidence of success at other institution types such as minority serving, predominantly white, and Hispanic serving institutions.

> Some studies (Bohr et al. 1995, Cokley 2002; Kim 2002; Kim and Conrad 2006; Perna 2001; Wenglinsky 1996) have found that Black students evidence the same level of academic achievement whether they attend an HBCU or not. This finding of no

> difference by institutional type is significant given the reduced resources of HBCUs combined with a greater number of underrepresented students'. (Hinton & Woods, 2019, p. 4)

However, these findings contradict studies that state “other findings indicate that HBCUs produce higher levels of academic achievement among Black students than those at HWIs” (p. 4). McCoy (2014) conducted a phenological study on the transition experience of first-generation college students of color to one “extreme” PWI or extreme predominately white institution (EPWI). “Eight students of color who identified racially and ethnically as African American or Black were included in this study.” (p.155).

According to McCoy, the students of color on this campus were “grossly underrepresented in the campus and local communities" whereas they previously came from “urban” communities. Study participants “highlighted” the importance of multicultural student centers on EPWI’s because they “viewed the multicultural student center as a safe space and a place where they could be authentic and not have to straddle their culture of origin and the campus culture” (p.163).

The findings of this study concluded with four prominent themes: 1) high familial expectations/influences; (2) lack of knowledge about FGLI students; (3) challenging transition; and (4) “culture shock in a sea of Whiteness” (p.182). McCoy states that “Participants indicated peers and advisors supported them, encouraged them, displayed a willingness to create supportive relationships, and were empathetic during failures”, and this contributed to the success of these students of color (p. 156).

McCoy’s finding that “All students encounter challenges during their transition into higher education, but students of color often encounter additional challenges” (p.156), aligns with findings from other scholars included in this work (Yosso, 2005; Arroyo & Gasman, 2014;

and Engle & Tinto 2008). Consistent with the finding of Cuseo (2007) and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model, McCoy found that "Familial expectations/influence weighed heavily in the respondents' decisions to attend college" (p. 155). This finding adds to the substantial claim that family connection, relationship, or lack of relationship, directly impacts African American FGLI student success, regardless of institution type. To further examine the experiences of students of color on the campuses of extremely white institutions, McCoy suggested that future research "examine first-generation students' of color experiences at an EPWI based on the intersectionality of their numerous identities (gender, sexual orientation, etc.). A quantitative approach may allow for the broader generalization of the study's findings" (p. 182).

The findings from literature on African American FGLI students at HBCUs and that of the literature from the same demographic at non-HBCUs suggest that African American FGLI students have similar or closely related challenges that impede their academic success. African American FGLI students at both institution types acknowledged high family expectations and influences, their institutions lack of knowledge regarding FGLI students, and challenges transitioning to college. The major difference that stuck out between the various institution types is where HBCU students felt a sense of family, community, and belonging within any space they were in at their HBCU, African American FGLI students at this EPWI had to specifically find or identify where they could go on campus to find belonging and community. They also identified this place as a "safe space". The major challenge that presents itself here is a glaring one. It is also one of the exact reasons many African American FGLI students choose to attend HBCUs from the beginning. Unlike their African American FGLI peers at PWIs or EPWIs, one of the challenges HBCU students are less likely to have to combat are the feelings associated with

being the minority on campus, the inability to be their authentic selves, and "straddling their culture".

## A Closer Look at Retention Studies

Much of the literature on FGLI and marginalized students points to student engagement, culturally responsive teaching, and learning practices, and addressing barriers to academic success through understanding how non-academic factors threaten student scholarship and positive outcomes. Some of the literature suggests that the best way to uplift African American HBCU students and African American students in general, who typically come from marginalized backgrounds, is to focus on their specific and cultural needs rather than using a one size fits all approach.

In a qualitative study to gain a better understanding of the factors influencing student engagement and success among Black/African American and African-identified college students, McDougal et. al., (2018) conducted nine focus groups consisting of 41 students and focused on their institutional support, barriers to success, and their individual and collective efforts to reach success despite barriers. The results of this study indicate "how widespread barriers to student engagement are for the participants of the study" (p. 213). At the university where this study was conducted, "thirty-four percent (14/41) of the participants indicated that some of the biggest challenges they faced at the university were financial…and they identified financial concerns as a major distraction from their student lives in several ways" (p. 213).

Institutional support of students through fostering opportunities for student engagement has been attributed to student success and achievement. A study conducted by Shappie and Debb (2017) on the impact of student engagement on African American student achievement at HBCUs, found that a supportive campus environment is the most significant factor leading to

African American student satisfaction at HBCUs. Shappie & Debb linked the impact of HBCU student success to the students' environment. Shappie & Debb cite Allen's (1992) report that "HBCUs provided a more positive social and psychological environment for African Americans and as a result of the conducive environment at HBCUs, African American students were able to achieve better grades and also have higher occupational aspirations" (Sharpie & Debb, p. 566). Williams et. al. (2022) also conducted a study on the link to culturally affirming spaces for African American students and the correlation with student success. This study was centered around the HBCU underserved student population, especially low-income and first-generation college students. The purpose of this study was to "examine the ways HBCUs employ culturally affirming practices to meet the needs of students whose marginalization extends beyond their racial/ethnic backgrounds" (p. 2). Williams et. al. stated that although much literature in the United States has focused on student outcomes, with emphasis on learning improvement, "much of this research concerning practices to promote student success is centered within predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and offer a one-size-fits-all approach that does not attend to students' cultural backgrounds" (Williams et. al., 2022, p. 2.). In summation, this study concluded that culturally responsive approaches to student development led to positive success outcomes for African American students at HBCUs.

## Chapter Summary

Because "more low-income students and first-generation students are attending college, there is a need for increased institutional attention to the experiences of these demographics to ensure their equitable success" (Williams et. al., 2022, p. 16). Williams suggests here that more needs to be done by colleges and universities to provide an equitable college experience for all students. As a student affairs and higher education practitioner, I have come to learn through my

students that lack of academic preparedness, lack of financial resources, and difficulty adjusting to college are large cracks in the foundation of their education. But I have also seen what happens at HBCUs when African American students, FGLI students, and students of marginalized backgrounds adopt culturally affirming HBCUs as their home and the respective college or university intentionally works to reduce and eliminate these aforementioned factors. Certainly, there are several other challenges to student success that threaten achievement on the personal and academic level that I have not named here since the challenges are numerous. Students also may experience challenges beyond the scope of our knowledge or challenges college personnel may not fully understand. In summation, the literature shown here confirms that colleges and universities that provide support to meet the needs of traditionally marginalized groups, like low-income, low-socioeconomic backgrounds, working-class, and first-generation college students, significantly improve students' chances of personal and academic success.

At the beginning of the literature, I defined the terms first-generation and low-income students, including the definition of FG and LI that will be used in this study, and provided background context on both groups of students. I provided literature on the historical context of the emergence and purpose of enslaved African Americans on the first college campuses in America. This section provided this historical background to show the major impact African Americans have had throughout the history of American education from its inception. In addition, the historical account provided in this review of the literature shows how past conditions led to disadvantages, marginalization, systematic exclusion, and oppression that African Americans are still experiencing today. From that point, I moved into a discussion on how the aforementioned factors caused the need for the creation and establishment of HBCUs and ended with how HBCUs impact the students they educate.

Results from studies on FGLI student success in general and recent studies of FGLI HBCU students named widely known factors and barriers to FGLI student success such as lack of financial resources and academic preparedness, difficulty navigating the collegiate space, not having an adequate support system, and fears and anxiety stemming from being the first in a family to go to college. The factors that negatively affect student success were frequently referred to as complex in literature and too many to name. These studies also explored the lived experiences of FGLI students to determine best practices for supporting FGLI students, how institutions can apply these practices to result in positive student outcomes, and provided study results that the campus environment has a major effect on student outcomes.

In this study, I discuss named factors that HBCU FGLI alumni study participants identified as having both positive and negative impacts on their student experience. Then, from the narratives provided, I used this information to determine the most commonly named factors, deduce the top factors, and traced the origin of these factors to try and understand how these former students persisted, despite the challenges they faced. In addition, alumni who share positive experiences from their respective HBCUs, and those who specifically attribute their success to their HBCUs, serve as a positive testament to the positive impact of HBCUs and the upward mobility they provide FGLI students. Current research on FGLI HBCU students is limited and, where available, frequently focuses on specific subsets of FGLI students such as STEM majors. A new study on the experiences of FGLI HBCU students through the eyes of FGLI HBCU graduates, which takes a culturally relevant approach, can help tell the story of FGLI and HBCU student perseverance in addition to adding to contemporary knowledge in education.

# CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the research methodology, participant selection, data collection, data management, analysis, trustworthiness, and provides a chapter summary of the study. As discussed in Chapter One, the purpose of this study is to learn from African American HBCU alums who were FGLI students in undergrad, how their experience at their respective HBCU impacted their life post-graduation, and to discover through stories of their undergraduate experience, how FGLI HBCU students may experience college. HBCU student success can be a struggle for college students of every race and ethnicity across the spectrum of institutions; however, the struggle for success is particularly acute for a larger percentage of black American students (Arroyo & Gasman, p. 59, 2014). The research questions in this study were carefully crafted with FGLI student experiences in mind. Specifically, this study asked: (a) What do first-generation and low-income graduates from HBCUs identify as what most hindered them from achieving and performing at their absolute best?; (b) What do first-generation-low income HBCU graduates credit as being their source(s) of motivation for graduating?; and (c) What impact did attending an HBCU have on the lives of African American FGLI graduates post-graduation?

In addition, I wanted to know to what and who did participants credit their collegiate success; was it a single person, academic department, club or organization, family, intrinsic motivation, or a collective of factors that perhaps we haven't thought about? With much conversation and literature on FGLI students' challenges, barriers, and struggles for success, I sought to provide a space for study participants to holistically reflect on both the challenges and the accomplishments they may have encountered.

## Research Methodology: Basic Qualitative Methods

This study was conducted using a basic interview-based qualitative research method. Basic qualitative methodology is grounded in the constructivist belief that "knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23). Qualitative research allows the researcher to look at a complex problem from various viewpoints and critically study it. Simply explained, "basic qualitative methodology is a type of qualitative research that involves the collection of data via interviews, observation, and the analysis of documents" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that basic qualitative research is the most common type of research in education. I have selected this type of research because it provides accessible strategies that will help to understand the lived experiences of participants.

Included in the appendices are a recruitment script and a list of sample interview questions. Included in the appendices are a recruitment script and a list of sample interview questions. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do first-generation and low-income graduates from HBCUs identify as what most hindered them from achieving and performing at their absolute best?
    a. What barriers did they face related to the college and university institutions? (e.g. academic, policy, campus services, etc.)
    b. What non-academic barriers did they face?
    c. How do they define success?
2. What do first-generation-low income HBCU graduates credit as being their source(s) of motivation for graduating?

3. What impact did attending an HBCU have on the lives of African American FGLI graduates post-graduation?

Qualitative researchers Clandinin and Connelly suggest that the lived experiences of humans are stories and “personal experience is understood most effectively through narrative” or storytelling (as cited in Costantino, 2001, p. 107). This proposed research derives from having “A problem or issue that you [I] need to explore, need [for] a better and/or detailed understanding of an issue or phenomenon, [need] to empower individuals" (Creswell, 2013, p.68). This study becomes unique due to HBCUs serving as the institution type, with former HBCU students providing a context of lived experience post-graduation as opposed to a study with currently enrolled students as study participants; this allows a look at the possibility of greatly varying student and post-graduate experiences encountered, despite all participants having a shared commonality of being former FGLI HBCU students. This is important because research findings could reveal much that is unknown about FGLI HBCU student culture, methods of achieving success, and how differently success can be defined. Also, the reflection of what HBCU graduates state about their expectations and needs as FGLI students, in comparison to what the institutions provided to support this special population of students, could help institutions learn ways they can better support prospective and currently enrolled FGLI students. In addition, prospective FGLI students and their parents can use this information to learn what campus supports are or are not available at specific institutions, as they make their college selection, and determine what college or university best fits their needs. Furthermore, FGLI graduate narratives may yield possible strategies that current FGLI students can use to successfully navigate college.

In this study, additional points of interest are reflections on the FGLI HBCU collegiate achievement and the impact of the HBCU experience post-degree completion. First, I collected and analyzed qualitative data that detailed each participant's past and current experiences. This will include documenting participants' narratives of their college experiences and listening to what occurred in their personal life post-college.

## Participant Selection Criteria

For this study to be granted Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, before data collection, I followed the procedures outlined by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Cayuse Human Ethics Application. The IRB seeks to ensure that human subjects involved in research are adequately protected and that the institution acts under federal regulations regarding research with human subjects. I previously completed the CITI training needed to apply for IRB approval. I provided information regarding my study which included the purpose of the study, research participant criteria, the study recruitment flier, the consent form, and other study details required for IRB approval.

To qualify for this study, participants must have met the following criteria:

- Study participants must also be graduates of five purposely selected four-year public HBCUs located in North Carolina. The state of North Carolina was chosen because North Carolina educates the greatest number of HBCU students in the nation based on student enrollment numbers (Indicated by Fall 2021 enrollment numbers published by each university (public and private institutions), per their enrollment data page).
- Participants must identify as African American or of African descent.

- Participants must have graduated from college (undergraduate) in the last four years pre-pandemic 2020 (graduates of 2019, 2018, 2017, and 2016 classes)

The reason for excluding the graduating class of 2020 through the current pandemic years is that Covid may have altered the collegiate experience of these students greatly and may become too much of the focus of the data. Additionally, the rationale for selecting these four years allows participants who are new graduates a chance to reflect on settling into life changes, careers, graduate school, family, and other developmental changes. I cross-checked the information participants provided on their demographics form with them verbally to verify they qualified for the study and provided accurate documentation.

## Participant Recruitment and Selection

To recruit study participants, I distributed a study recruitment flier on social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and HBCU Alumni groups) and through direct messages to my HBCU higher education colleagues with ties or connection to HBCUs included in this study, and through former students. I asked all these groups to share the flier as well, especially the research participants who may have friends that graduated from other HBCUs at around the same time they did. The recruitment process for this study began and concluded quickly, having received almost five times the number of potential participants needed for the study. Study participants represented various years between the 2015-2019 span, various disciplines of study, socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, and dependency statuses (independent and dependent student) as reported by the participant to the federal student aid department (an Office of the U.S. Department of Education). Dependent students are students whom someone else, typically a parent, claims on their taxes and financially contributes to the student's school expenses.

Independent students are those who are certified as receiving no financial support or assistance from a parent or guardian.

## Participant Selection Considerations and Detail

Before beginning the study and after being selected, participants received a Participant Invitation Letter (Appendix A). Participant selection for this study began in the summer of 2022. Participation in this study was voluntary. The participant demographic form specifically asked respondents to identify if they were low-income, first-generation, or a combination of both factors. It was important to me that this study include a mixture of participants who represented all three categories (FG/LI/FGLI) to see if there might be noticeable differences between the three student designations. In addition, low-income students are more likely to be Pell-eligible and qualify for scholarships and grants based on financial need (US Department of Education). I considered that some participants may potentially report that finances or lack of funds significantly impacted their college experience and success. I also took care to select students who weren't all from the same graduation years in case differences in university experience could have been affected by specific graduation years. I interviewed a total of 10 participants which consisted of five persons identifying as male and five identifying as female.

Social media was the primary method of participant recruitment, providing an efficient way to reach the greatest number of potential participants. According to Facebook share analytics, the flier was shared more than 50 times in 73 hours. Within one week of my initial research flier post, 44 people had completed the preliminary participant screening form. Of those 44 responses, two people did not meet the study criteria of identifying as African American, and therefore could not be selected to participate. They were immediately removed from my list of possible participants. To select the final participants for this study, I did the following:

1. Eliminate all that did not meet the basic study participation requirements and did not complete the participation data form in totality.
2. Participants that responded first to express interest in the study were sent consent forms. I sent consent forms to the first three potential participants who represented each of the five HBCUs. I randomly selected a mix of male and female FG, LI, and FGLI students.
3. I moved forward with the potential participants who completed the consent form in totality promptly. Then, those persons were considered participants and sent a link to schedule interviews.

While in the participant selection period for this study, I kept a record of responses/emails sent to participants which included the time and date the email was sent. The Google form I used also kept form activity analytics that allowed me to document the order in which forms were received. So, I was able to distinguish which participants responded first for each college or university and referred back to their form by their interest form order of receipt number. If potential participants did not respond to my email request to complete the consent form, I emailed them again to ask if they were still interested in participating in this study. Because I had so many interest forms from other interested people, I gave potential participants a maximum of one calendar week to respond. The recruitment, selection, and notification of acceptance for this study occurred simultaneously as some alumni from certain schools responded more quickly than others. Three out of the five included schools had alumni who completed all documents within 24-72 hours of receiving the email, and I had the needed number of participants from those schools. It took me two weeks to secure participants from one school and three weeks to secure participants from another university due to participants not responding

to phone or email in the time frame I set. Those potential participants were removed from the list of participants. I then moved to the next alum representing the respective school and went through the selection process with them from the beginning. They received a study interest email followed by a consent form if they expressed continued interest. Consent forms were sent to the first round of selected participants on June 19, 2022, and all were collected by June 26, 2022. It took me three weeks to find two alums from one school. One of those participants did not follow through with completing all required forms, so they were removed from the study and I decided to move forward with one participant representing one HBCU. This was the case with three of the schools in this study (schools 1, 3, and 4; see Table 1) so due to time constraints, I moved forward with one alum representing those schools.

## Introduction to Participants

This section provides readers with additional background information on each study participant. Each participant is individually represented here with the intended purpose of allowing each person's story to stand alone and still come together through the commonalities they shared as either FG, LI, or FGLI students. Each participant profile gives the reader an in-depth glimpse into the biographical background, college access, collegiate, post-college, and overall HBCU experience of each alum in this study.

## Participant Profiles

The HBCU alumni research participants in this study represent five North Carolina HBCUs. I spent time engaging with each participant to learn about who they once were as undergraduate college students and how they experienced college during that time. As time passed, I was able to build rapport and kinship with them as I listened and dialogued in connection with them about their campus culture, community, and the revelation of their post-

graduate life. From our dialogue, I brought together a detailed synopsis of each participant's HBCU experience from the early beginning to current. The corresponding university they represented is indicated here along with a brief profile summary of their family background, pre-college experience, college experience, and how they are experiencing life after graduation, as told by them during their one-on-one interviews.

**Josh (University 1):** Josh is a 2016 graduate of his HBCU and identified himself as a low-income student only. Josh was raised by his mom and stepfather and has a blended family of step-siblings, and half-siblings. He grew up in rural N.C., describing his town as "the country," and said that this motivated him to want to go to college so that he could "get out of the country" and be "free". Josh applied to multiple colleges during the College Foundation of North Carolina (CFNC) free College Application Week. When asked about his life post-graduation, Josh shared that he realized he wanted to become a college professor and teach. Since he graduated, he has become a mentor for young men, and he prides himself on being who he needed as a student when he was in college by setting a good example for students. After completing undergraduate studies, Josh went on to earn a master's degree before finishing his college education with a Ph.D.

**Jaleel (University 2):** Jaleel is a 2018 graduate of his HBCU and identified himself as a first-generation low-income student. Jaleel, the first male in his family to graduate from college, was raised by a single mother and has two siblings. Jaleel was born and raised in a rural town in North Carolina. Jaleel applied for college during the CFNC Free College Application Week. Jaleel's biggest motivation to go to college was the marching band. Jaleel originally entered college as a freshman in 2010, ended up dropping out of college in 2014, re-enrolled in college during the fall of 2016, and finally graduated in the fall of 2018. Since graduating from

undergrad Jaleel has gone on to complete his MBA and is considering beginning a Ph.D. program. Since completing his MBA, he has become the owner and operator of his own trucking business. For Jaleel, success is people seeing his positive outcome. As an HBCU graduate, Jaleel takes pride in being able to run his business and tell people he meets from all over the world that he went to an HBCU.

**JD (University 2):** JD is a 2016 graduate of her HBCU and identified herself as a first-generation, low-income, independent student. JD described her childhood as "crazy". Her mother, who suffered from various addictions, was unable to keep JD and her siblings, so JD went into foster care at 6 years old. Before this time, JD was raised off and on by her grandmother who also had a drug addiction and was a domestic violence victim. Before coming to college, JD had been in 29 different foster and group homes from the age of six to 18 years old. Being an independent student was hard for JD. Post-graduation from undergrad, JD has gone on to complete her Master of Social Work from another NC HBCU. JD has become a mother and she has completed her doctorate in social work.

**Darian (University 2):** Darian is a 2016 graduate of his HBCU and identified himself as a first-generation, low-income, independent student. Darian's parents raised him until the age of 14 years old. Darian was disowned because his parents did not approve of his sexual orientation. Darian became homeless and stayed from place to place with friends in high school all the way up until he went to college. Darian was motivated to go to college because of his own intrinsic motivation, plus support and encouragement from a high school teacher. He also credits the music of one of his favorite music artists, Nicki Minaj, for uplifting and motivating him to persist. Darian went to law school after graduating from undergrad and now has a Juris Doctorate degree.

**Chris (University 2):** Chris is a 2017 graduate of his HBCU and identified himself as first-generation only. Chris is from a small town in North Carolina, has four siblings, and was raised by a single mom. Hopes of playing college football and getting out of his small town were Chris' motivation for going away to college. Chris had a good experience applying to college and credited his high school counselors for helping him with his college applications and essays. Chris applied for college during the CFNC Free College Application Week. While in college, Chris was able to develop lasting friendships and leveraged the connections that he made with friends who had "connections" and family support. He positively used these connections, or "social capital" as Yosso (2005) refers to it in connection to community cultural wealth, to his advantage to further his personal, professional, and academic success through networking. On life post-graduation, Chris recognizes his growth stating, "I'm not that kid anymore". For Chris, success is, "Doing something you enjoy doing, no matter if it doesn't mean anything to someone else. My family is what makes me successful and drives me. Success is the family I've created, peace and good mental health, positively impacting others, and creating a legacy.

**Deja (University 2):** Deja is a 2019 graduate of her HBCU and identified herself as a first-generation low-income student. Deja comes from a two-parent household and has three siblings - two sisters and an older brother/cousin her parents raised. Deja's motivation to go to college and specifically an HBCU was the family legacy of attending the HBCU she attended. Deja said that after attending a Turkish charter school, where she was one of the only African American girls, she wanted to go to a Black school. She emphasized that she did not want to go to another school where she felt like just a number. She also felt like it was important for her to go to college because she had younger sisters that looked up to her and she wanted them to know that "it is possible for black girls not to become another statistic." Deja applied for college during

the CFNC Free College Application Week. Since graduation, Deja has become a mother and a school teacher.

**Daja (University 3):** Daja is a 2019 graduate of her HBCU and identified herself as a first-generation low-income student. Daja was raised by her mother; her father passed away when she was a young child. Daja grew up in low-income housing, which she referred to as "the projects". Deja's family educational history includes her mom going to college for about 2 years at an HBCU and dropping out due to family issues; her father had a 7th-grade education. Deja has a family legacy through her grandmother and other family members who all went to the same North Carolina HBCU, but Daja decided she didn't want to attend that school because all of her family attended that school. Daja decided that she would attend a different HBCU. Daja received a full scholarship to one NC HBCU and declined it. She received a chancellor's scholarship from the HBCU she attended and chose that school because of its smaller size. Daja went to college and excelled. Post-graduation, Daja went on to complete her master's degree, moved to a place she loves in the mountains, got married, and works in higher education.

**Ray (University 4):** Ray is a 2018 graduate of his HBCU and identified himself as first-generation only. Ray was raised by his parents and has two younger siblings. His motivation to go to an HBCU was to attend a college that supported Black students. Ray says his experience applying to college was "awesome," and he was happy to find a college where he could conduct research in his field of interest and try out new ideas. Since graduating from college, Ray has found a career that allows him to use his college degree, and he feels that he is successful.

**Bria (University 5):** Bria is a 2019 graduate of her HBCU and identifies herself as a first-generation low-income student. Bria grew up in eastern North Carolina with her parents and four older brothers and sisters who helped to raise her. There is a 15–20-year age difference

between Bria and her siblings. Bria's parents encouraged her to go to school because they realized the importance of a college education, although they didn't have a lot of knowledge about college access. Bria was positively impacted by a high school guidance counselor who attended Delaware State University and talked to her a lot about how awesome her HBCU experience. Excited and eager to have an HBCU experience of her own, Bria applied to an HBCU and was accepted on-site during a college fair night being hosted by her future alma mater. Bria made friends in college by running for student government and other leadership positions. Since college, Bria has come to appreciate her college experience more and she is much more confident post-college. Her college experience exceeded her expectations, and she feels successful.

**Shaq (University 5):** Shaq is a 2016 graduate of her HBCU and identified herself as a first-generation and low-income student. Shaq was raised by a single mother and has three brothers. She is the only one in her family that has gone to college. Originally planning to go to the Army, Shaq made a last-minute decision to go to college after being motivated by a family member. She applied late to go to college due to deciding to go at the last minute and was helped with her applications by a school guidance counselor. Looking back, Shaq feels that her college experience helped her to "push myself [herself] beyond limits". College challenged her to become more open and build relationships. Although Shaq changed her major several times, she emphasized that she graduated on time. After attending her HBCU, Shaq feels like she can go anywhere and for her it's a point of pride to be an HBCU student. Life post-graduation has been good for Shaq. She's gotten married and become a mother of two.

## Data Collection

Data collected for this study was derived from five sources: (1) the participant demographic data form; (2) in-depth one-on-one participant interviews via Zoom video conferencing platform with transcription; (3) analytic memos; (4) researcher reflexivity journal; and (5) coding. Interviews began and concluded in July 2022.

## Participant Demographic Form

Typically, universities and federally funded programs designed to support FGLI students, such as TRIO Student Support Services, identify students who are FGLI by federal tax filings, student aid, and admissions documents submitted by the student or parent. Because the participants in this study are graduates, I only needed them to attest that they were classified as FGLI, while enrolled in college by their university. Any interested person was informed of the criteria, and if they believed they met the criteria, they were asked to complete a participant demographic form. The participant demographic form link was emailed to study participants and created using Google Forms. This form was used to determine eligibility. The form included demographic data questions such as the year the participant entered college, what college or university they attended, graduation year, sex or gender, designation as first-generation, low-income, or a combination of both while in college, and if they currently hold any degrees. Participants gained access to the form (See Appendix B) through a google form link (survey administration software) that was emailed to them.

## Participant Demographic Data Form Results

In addition to specifically looking at the respondent's FGLI designation, I set a goal to recruit at least two participants from each university included in the study. This proved to be quite challenging. One week after the post-launch of the study recruitment flier, one university

had only one respondent whereas the other schools had a minimum of five respondents. To try and reach more eligible participants to represent that one university, I returned to social media (Facebook and Instagram) and specifically asked for respondents from that particular university. People I am connected to on Facebook began to share the flier again and specifically posted on their social media accounts that I was looking for participants from this one specific university.

This second search reached a former colleague who is currently employed at the university I needed additional respondents for and resulted in them emailing me the contact information for the respective university's Director of Alumni Relations. I emailed the director and after three weeks, still had no response, and have not received a response to date. I also used Facebook to contact the president of this respective university's Facebook account as I noticed regular activity on the page. In the message, I shared my recruitment flier and explained the purpose of my study. I did not take into consideration that the college president's Facebook page was a public figure page, that they may not be running the page themselves, and that a social media manager was running the page. Two weeks after sending a message to this universities' college president, my message was responded to by the chancellor's social media coordinator who informed me that they managed the account and that I should contact their Vice Chancellor for University Advancement and that alumni relations reported to this person.

Under the pressure of time, I made the decision to advance the study with one respondent from this university who had expressed interest in the study, met the criteria, and closed the search for study participants through means of social media. Later when I interviewed one respondent, I asked them if they would be willing to share the recruitment flier with classmates that met the criteria. They agreed, and I emailed them to follow up but received no additional respondents. It is important to note here that I believe the connection between myself, former and

current HBCU colleagues, former and current students, and the connectedness of the HBCU alumni base, positively contributed to getting information about the study and securing participants.

## Participant Interviews

As Roulston (2010) suggests researchers do, I asked the chosen interview questions based on an assortment of key problems. From the key problems identified by FGLI HBCU students, the faculty and staff that work with this population of students, and researchers who study FGLI students, several potential interview questions were developed. To develop these questions, I reflected on stories of triumph and challenges shared with me by former HBCU FGLI students and found inspiration as they shared their testaments of overcoming challenges. Over the years, I listened intently each semester as new and continuing students detailed the steps they took to find success. Interview questions in this study also evolved from years of serving HBCU FGLI students who detailed the same or similar problems, used various or needed various support systems to overcome these challenges and students who took numerous pathways that led to graduation. Interview questions were also formed by reading reviews of literature and essays presented by established researchers, in addition to the recommendations for further research they published on FGLI student success. While it was easy to identify problems, it proved challenging to find solutions to problems, especially when the needs of students can be specific, compounded, and layered, creating complexity.

For this study, I recruited graduates from all five public 4-year NC HBCUs. I collected data by conducting two one-hour semi-structured interviews. Once study participants were selected from the participant demographic data form, they were contacted individually via email to notify them of their “pre-selection” and my interest in having them participate in the study.

Pre-selection, for this study, was the time before participants confirmed their continued interest in participating in this study. The "pre-selection" email sent to potential participants detailed who I was as a researcher, the goal and purpose of this study, and how each phase of the study would be conducted. Participants were instructed to confirm their interest in participating in the study by submitting a research-informed consent form via an electronic link to the form.

Once the study participants' signed consent form was received, participants received an email thanking them for submitting the consent form, and a link to schedule their one-on-one Zoom interview. The Google calendar appointment slot tool was used to schedule interview appointments. Participants were sent a link to a private Google calendar used only for this study. Pre-selected available days and times were made visible to study participants. Study participants were not able to view appointment times taken by other study participants. Study participants could only view available days and times. After study participants scheduled their interview day and time, they were again sent an email thanking them for their continued participation, along with a personal Zoom link containing a private passcode to enter their interview session. Participants were also asked to notify me if they were unable to keep their scheduled interview appointment or no longer wished to participate in the study. If a study participant needed to cancel their appointment, they could cancel the appointment and reschedule for another day and time. The Google calendar appointment slot tool notified me via e-mail of all canceled and rescheduled appointments. Anytime I received notification of appointment cancellation or re-booking, I sent the study participant an updated Zoom link and calendar invite for the interview appointment.

At the beginning of all initial interviews, I gave a formal introduction, shared information about my research interests and personal connection to HBCUs and FGLI students and answered

any preliminary questions participants may have to build trust and rapport with the study participants. I also asked participants how they were currently feeling and made sure they still had time to dedicate to the interview on that day and time. I informed the participant that if at any time during the interview they felt uncomfortable, needed to stop, or take a break, they could feel free to do so.

A semi-structured interview method, which included open-ended questions and allowed participants to openly share and elaborate on their life experiences, was used for this study. The interview questions were divided into three sections: (1) Pre-college; (2) College/University Experience; and (3) Life Post-Graduation (See Appendix C: Interview Guide). My experience working with FGLI HBCU college students in the past helped me to form intentional and specific interview questions I believed would apply to most FGLI college students; the literature and research on the needs of this special population also helped guide the interview questions. Individual interviews were used as the primary form of data collection because I wanted study data to be derived from genuine authentic engagement. I wanted study participants to feel empowered, important and appreciated, and to understand that their stories mattered. Follow-up questions that developed from the primary questions asked, helped to confirm if the study participant had understood the questions and that I had understood their answers.

I concluded each interview by asking participants if they would like to provide any thoughts or feedback on the interview and if there were any questions that they thought I should have asked but did not. Participants were also given the option to send me any afterthoughts they wanted included in their stories. Some participants requested a copy of the interview questions to send additional information if they thought of something else to add.

The major goals of these interviews were to:

1. Provide a space for graduates to share their collegiate experience through storytelling instead of responding to surveys and questionnaires which may not gather all the details of a personal experience and the essence of a life lived.
2. Document post-graduate life experience to measure and compare what alumni say their college experience was versus what society thinks we know about HBCU FGLI students.
3. Allow FGLI HBCU graduates a place to name their experiences fully, both their challenges and accomplishments since, according to The Center for First-Generation Student Success, nationally, 89 percent of low-income first-generation students leave college within six years without a degree. More than a quarter leave after their first year, four times the dropout rate of higher-income second-generation students (RTI International, 2019). By graduating and being conferred a degree, these graduates have refrained from becoming a part of this statistic.
4. Contribute to research and literature on FGLI HBCU graduates, which will expand the limited body of literature on HBCUs as institutions of higher learning and the experiences of HBCU students.

Due to health and safety concerns related to COVID-19 in addition to the various locations of the participants, I conducted all study interviews via Zoom. I used the Zoom transcription feature service to automatically transcribe the interview, then I checked and corrected the transcription for accuracy. Participants were provided with my contact information to use in all communications sent to them (email and consent form) in case they had questions about the study, needed to provide the researcher with information regarding their participation, or needed to withdraw from the study for any reason.

For their participation in the study, I used the "Pay It Forward Fund" (PIFF), a new research fund provided by the UNCG Educational Leadership Cultural Foundations Department for doctoral students. For my research project, I was granted the maximum amount of $300.00. I had a total of 10 research participants, and this allowed for each participant to receive $30.00. Study participants were offered a $30.00 VISA gift card and had the option to have the card delivered to them by their preferred method of receipt, which could be by mail or email. Two of the ten participants declined the gift card and stated that they were happy to participate in the study without an incentive being provided.

## Analytic Memo

Analytic memos were written and collected in a journal during data collection to help capture non-verbal cues, behavioral observations, and any thoughts that may be beneficial to record during the interviews. I used the memos to help me remember my thoughts on where and how I wanted to incorporate them into my findings chapters. I listed some of the memos as key terms and important contexts to include later in my write-up. As I began to move through interviews and hear study participants use the same or similar phrases, share stories about experiences that were unique in comparison to other participants, or explain experiences that seemed to be also experienced by other participants, I noted this.

For example, I interviewed Darian first. When we talked about his family's impact on his motivation and success, he talked about how it felt when his parents didn't check up on him saying, "I didn't get not even a phone call sometimes". After Darian's interview, I interviewed JD. On the same subject of family support she said, "Nobody called to check on me." After that interview, I interviewed Shaq and she shared the same experience saying, "Family didn't call to see how I was doing." I heard one more participant after that bring up not receiving phone calls.

Then Chris and Deja remarked that their parents did call and check up on them. At this point, I knew that these study participants valued any small form of contact, displays of interest in them and their academic studies, especially and specifically a phone call. I learned here that while some may view a phone call as a small gesture, some people think very much of a phone call because someone taking the time to pick up the phone and ask, "How are you?" shows care and concern. So, in my analytic memos I noted "phone calls" and wrote about the significance of them in my reflective notes.

## Researcher's Reflective Notes

Interview notes were taken during and after each interview. Follow-up notes were also recorded and added to each participant's file. Concurrent note documentation occurred during each interview. With active input from each participant, I documented moving, touching, and striking statements, as well as information that prompted follow-up questions. Any follow-up question or statement that prompted a clarifying explanation was recorded. I specifically marked or noted the questions that required me to reword or clarify the question so that the participant could better understand the question. This also helped to determine whether the question might need to be reworded for the next participant and thus I would be prepared for this in advance. While taking notes concurrently, I maintained active engagement with the participant, making sure to keep consistent contact with the participant.

Concurrent notes helped me to gather data such as nonverbal cues, pauses, and body language. I documented questions that made participants laugh, cry, ponder, or rephrase their initial responses. I asked what caused any physical responses I saw and documented them. I documented the responses that participants gave that made me cry, feel sad or upset about hardships they detailed experiencing, and responses that inspired me. In addition, I documented

the timestamp for several moments in the interviews I wanted to ensure were included in the participant profiles. Before ending the interview, I identified one striking sentiment from each participant that I refer to as “their quote” because it left a lasting impression. I read the quote to the participant, shared with them how and why those words impacted me so, and how I felt their words could uplift, motivate, or influence the reader. After each interview, I reflected on the time spent with each participant and documented my final thoughts as I reviewed my notes for each question.

## Theoretical Framework

Research starts with philosophical assumptions and investigators’ worldviews, paradigms, or sets of beliefs that inform the way studies are carried out. The research paradigm for this study is interpretivist because the “research goal is to interpret the social world from the perspectives of those who are actors in the world” and “interact with people in their social contexts and talk with them about their perceptions" (Glesne, 2015, p. 9). Understanding how the participants made meaning of their college experience is important because it helps to answer the question of how they believe their HBCU contributed to their overall success. This also helps to identify ways in which they found value in their college experience.

Research grounded in learning from the lived experiences of others helps researchers “gain a deeper meaning of everyday (“obvious”) phenomena” (Vagale, 2018, p. 11). I sought to understand the individual and collective college experiences of participants because although all study participants attended a North Carolina HBCU, I was eager to possibly learn about the uniqueness of each HBCUs’ campus culture. I was also excited to learn if study participants who attended the same HBCU would report noticeably different college experiences knowing that variables such as the student's years of attendance, graduation year, college major, and usage of

various campus resources could make a difference in experience. Ultimately, the phenomenon in these stories included the differences or similarities these alums experienced on their journey to college completion. The goal here was to discover if there was information or circumstances that we are not currently aware of, and to what instinct they impact student success, other than what has been previously written about. Educational leaders and researchers who question or study these phenomena (at this level, higher education professionals) "must enter into a questioning mindset, where we try to become curious about things we have otherwise treated as obvious" (Vagle, 2018, p. 13). Essentially, literature and past studies will guide us through what is already known. To stay current, develop culturally responsive, and competent practices that will assist African American HBCU FGLI students on their path to graduation, making a strong concerted effort to remove as many challenges and barriers as possible is mandatory. This is just one way that we can foster an inclusive and socially just campus culture and environment. Considering student or, in the case of this study, alumni perspectives and past experiences as former students can assist HBCUs with creating strategic and sustainable organizational change that benefits current FGLI students.

## Cultural Capital

The concept of cultural capital was introduced by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s to explain how power in society was established, exchanged, and maintained by the social classes, and sequentially, this power transferred into social mobility. Yosso (2005) explains that "according to Bourdieu, cultural capital refers to an accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills and abilities possessed and inherited by privileged groups in society." Bourdieu maintained that capital existed in three forms:

> Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural

> goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. (Bourdieu, 1976, p. 17)

In essence, parents from middle to high-class families who possessed these forms of capital passed these privileges down to their children. Those children can incorporate those forms of capital into their education, thus increasing their social mobility and setting themselves apart from their school peers. The ability of these parents and their children to do so creates an inequitable educational playing field. In response to Bourdieu's explanation and ideas on cultural capital, Yosso, using a critical race theory (CRT) lens, states that she challenges traditional interpretations of Bourdieuean cultural capital theory and introduces an alternative concept called community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005, pg. 70). To examine how alumni reported matriculating through college with the resources available to them, for this study, I used Yosso's community cultural wealth (CCW) model as an analytical framework. This framework is important and has been chosen for this study because it examines the various forms of capital students from communities of color use to navigate educational spaces.

## The Selection of Community Cultural Wealth as a Framework

When I thought about how I have seen African American FGLI students on HBCU campuses use these forms of capital when financial capital was not an option, I could envision examples from Yosso's CCW model. As I began to better understand her model, I thought back to actual instances and specific scenarios where I saw HBCU students use all six forms of capital or even assisted students with securing many of the forms of capital. In addition, I believed that the data collected in this study would help to determine which forms of capital these HBCU graduates relied on the most to help them navigate the challenges and barriers they faced as they worked to earn their degrees.

Because emphasizing personal and family challenges African American students face have been sometimes portrayed from a deficit mindset, intentionally or unintentionally, Yosso "conceptualizes CCW as a CRT" because:

> CRT shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. (Yosso, 2006, p. 69)

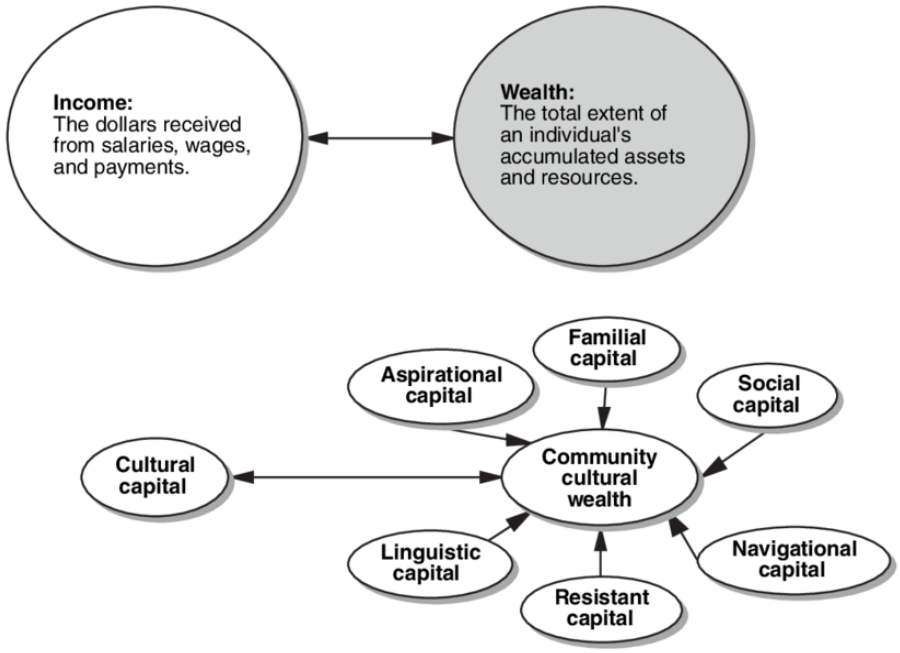
Essentially, the CCW model challenges the deficit thinking mindset which places fault on students from communities of color for having less than satisfactory academic performance. Concerning deficit thinking, it is important to understand that, "Deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child's education" (Yosso, 2006, p. 75). CRT gives a grounding for examining voices of color within our community from a strengths-based perspective. "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, 2006, pg. 70). CRT also considers the effects of society on communities of color, centers the voices of people of color, and reframes deficit perspectives.

### Yosso's Six Forms of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) Model

To examine the ways in which the alumni in this study used forms of capital to navigate through college, I discuss each of the six forms of capital within Yosso's CCW theoretical framework. Yosso's CCW model maintains that students of color do have talents, skills, abilities, and strengths they bring with them to college, regardless of class or status in society, and that possessing a formal education is not the only way people from outside privileged groups can have their knowledge seen as valid. Yosso's CCW model displays several ways students of color

draw upon resources from outside their institution to combat inequities. To substantiate Yosso's model, and establish its relationship to this study, within each section on each of the six forms of capital, I provide an example of ways I have seen African American HBCU FGLI students use that particular form of capital. To provide a concept visual of the CCW model, Yosso uses a contemporary model of cultural wealth which expands into CCW. I provide the model here for reference.

**Figure 1. A Model of Community Cultural Wealth. Adapted from: Oliver & Shapiro, 1995**




The expansion of cultural capital into CCW includes aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance capital. Yosso (2005) illustrates:

> *Aspirational capital* refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals. (p. 77)

Aspirational capital for first-generation and low-income students is often what inspires them to dream bigger and push toward their goals, despite current or future circumstances that

may challenge their dreams. For some African American students whose families may not have the financial resources needed to directly support their college student, aspirational capital stands in that place through direct and indirect support and encouragement. Possessing aspirational capital can also provide a sense of intrinsic motivation. For example, a student who saw how hard their parent(s) worked to provide for them and their siblings might be inspired by their parent's hard work and determination, despite the challenges they faced, and be encouraged to work harder to pursue their dreams. Likewise, students who perhaps have heard stories of triumph from grandparents where the elder describes what life was like for them growing up, or where they started in life, and how far they have come, inspires the student to have aspirational goals. Storytelling is a major component of linguistic capital.

Yosso (2005) identifies language as a component of community cultural wealth for students of color like African American students:

> *Linguistic capital* includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style. This aspect of cultural wealth emphasizes the connections between racialized cultural history and language. Linguistic capital reflects the idea that Students of Color arrive at school with multiple language and communication skills. In addition, these children most often have been engaged participants in a storytelling tradition, that may include listening to and recounting oral histories. (p. 78)

Storytelling has long been an important staple in African American culture. Storytelling is a major way in which religion, customs, practices, and traditions have been passed down through generations of African American people. When enslaved Africans were not allowed to read, write, or have access to formal education, storytelling through art and song was one way history, culture, traditions, customs, and more were preserved and maintained. In many instances, linguistic capital as Yosso explains through "storytelling tradition", is the only way a piece of information is passed down, as it may never be written down. An example of this may

be when a parent or grandparent tells their child or grandchild, “Always remember this”, as they proceed to impart knowledge or wisdom as it is often referred to. Yosso also brings forth how multiple language and communication skills are attributed to linguistic capital. Yosso uses an example of a Spanish-speaking child translating English to Spanish for a parent. In many instances, although African American students and parents may both speak English, the student may have to explain in a different way or in a way the parent can understand what is being said by college administrators and teachers at school. This can also work in reverse where a parent must explain in another way or break down certain words for students to better understand what is being said by college personnel as well. In many instances, the parents, grandparents, or guardians of first-generation college students might not have never heard certain terms and words that are used in higher education, thus, some of the used vocabulary and terms used by the student and university personnel may sound foreign to the parent. For example, the FGLI student may have to explain official university forms and documents to their parent, assist, or even complete the form or documents on their parent's behalf. The linguistic capital and skills that the student possesses, help the parent make meaning in communication, and therefore the parent can gain a better understanding.

For many FGLI students, the role of their family and the connections they keep with their family as they enter and matriculate through college, directly influence college persistence and completion. Linguistic capital and the high regard placed for family, specifically the role of the family in the student’s life, connect to family capital. As Yosso (2005) explains:

> *Family Capital* refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition. This form of cultural wealth engages a commitment to community well-being and expands the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship. Acknowledging the racialized, classed and heterosexualized inferences that comprise traditional understandings of ‘family’, familial capital is nurtured by our ‘extended family’, which may include

> immediate family (living or long passed on) as well as aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends who we might consider part of our familia. From these kinship ties, we learn the importance of maintaining a healthy connection to our community and its resources. Familial capital is informed by the work of scholars who have addressed the communal bonds within African American communities. (p.79)

For many African American FGLI students, the bond held between them and their family, especially extended family, serves as one of the greatest sources of support and greatly contributes to their academic and personal success. Yosso explains that these communal connections which are formed before the student arrives at college (pre-college), can be leveraged by institutions to help students have a positive collegiate experience. Students can draw upon the wisdom, values, and knowledge they bring from home to assist them in navigating the college environment. Yosso's CCW model honors the value that extended family plays in a student's life and highlights its importance. For many African American students, extended family may consist of an athletic coach or sports team that the student has grown up with, the people and members within special programs that the student is a part of and has grown up through such as church groups, Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts, or even after school programs. The people in these communities make up the student's "network" and the knowledge, skills, social cues, values, and cultural norms that students acquire and learn in these spaces with others, help to build the student's social capital. Yosso (2005) suggests that *social capital* can be understood as the following:

> Networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions. For example, drawing on social contacts and community resources may help a student identify and attain a college scholarship. These networks may help a student in preparing the scholarship application itself, while also reassuring the student emotionally that she/he is not alone in the process of pursuing higher education. Scholars note that historically, People of Color have utilized their social capital to attain education, legal justice, employment, and health care. In turn, these Communities of Color gave the information and resources they gained through these institutions back to their social networks. (p. 80)

FGLI students utilize their peers and other social contacts to build relationships that help them navigate college, fill unmet needs, and gain access to social, career, and educational spaces, just to name a few benefits. As they acquire additional resources through their social networks, which may consist of classmates, faculty, and staff resources, they become beneficiaries of privileges that were not once available to them. These privileges and resources may include things such as selection for membership into organizations, selection for campus jobs that are limited in number, and knowledge about opportunities such as scholarships and financial aid assistance that may be limited across campus. Social capital is a very valuable form of capital for HBCU students because in many spaces, social capital is the needed currency to gain access to several opportunities where financial capital is of no use.

Once students begin acquiring social capital, learning how to move about campus to use it is key. This is action is referred to as navigational capital. According to Yosso (2005):

> *Navigational capital* refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind. Navigational capital thus acknowledges individual agency within institutional constraints, but it also connects to social networks that facilitate community navigation through places and spaces including schools, the job market, and the health care and judicial systems. (p. 80)

For many African American students, including HBCU FGLI students, one of the largest draws of attending an HBCU is the ability to learn and attend college in an educational space that was historically and intentionally designed to educate African American students and students from minoritized backgrounds. Still, navigational capital is required as all students, regardless of race, especially new incoming and transfer students, need to learn how to navigate the new educational space and campus community that they will be new members of for at least four years or more. Students will take the navigational skills they learn and use them beyond the classroom as they learn to navigate a greater society and community post-graduation.

By the time they graduate from college, FGLI HBCU students are likely to have faced challenges that affect the retention and attrition of this special population of students. When FGLI students face issues of inequality that compromise their college success, Yosso suggests that resistance capital can be used to empower them. *Resistance Capital* is referred to by Yosso (2005) as:

> Knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. This form of cultural wealth is grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by Communities of Color. Furthermore, maintaining and passing on the multiple dimensions of community cultural wealth is also part of the knowledge base of resistant capital. Resistance may include different forms of oppositional behavior, such as self-defeating or conformist strategies that feedback into the system of subordination. (p. 81)

This form of capital has historical origins in social justice and opposition to institutional and systemically oppressive and unjust structures in society. Resistance capital has to do with pushing back against systems that require them to assimilate into dominant cultures in order to be considered, included, or accepted. Yosso suggests that students can leverage their formal education and training to resist normative culture. In the HBCU space, students display resistance capital by using their voices and their collective power as a student body to express opposition to institutional policies, procedures, and practice when they deem necessary.

In summation, CCW provided the framework and informed the analysis of this study. CCW provided a different lens to examine complicated issues and challenges African American FGLI HBCU students face. These theories also helped to illustrate the various forms of capital African American FGLI HBCU students possessed and acquired through their attendance at HBCUs. In turn, CCW promotes anti-deficit thinking of African American HBCU FGLI students and focuses attention on the strengths of these students.

## Coding and Data Analysis

Coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining scraps of collected data (e.g., observation notes, interview transcripts, memos, documents, and notes from relevant literature) that apply to your research purpose (Glesne, 2016, p. 195-196). I engaged in a process of inductive coding. Inductive coding refers to a "data analysis process where the researcher reads and interprets raw textual data to develop concepts, themes or a process model through interpretations based on data" (Chandra & Shang, 2019, p. 91). Generally, a code as defined by Saldaña is "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2005, p. 4).

In preparation for the coding process, as I conducted each study interview, I noted interview questions that study participants reacted to and spoke the most passionately about. I reviewed and edited the interview transcripts for accuracy. I listened to each interview and followed along with the video recording, correcting words that the transcription tool had incorrect. During this time, I also added to the short memos I'd written, adding additional context for what was occurring on the video. I then organized the data by research question and corresponding interview question. Next, I marked the data, noting words and phrases that were frequently used, deemed special, or important to the participant. Because I enabled the live transcript feature on Zoom, I was able to document the time stamp on the interview recording. So, as I read the data transcript back for review, this made it easier for me to go directly to each question and response, which generally aided me in coding, determining themes, and more. Following this method for coding helped me to link together and understand the relationship between student experiences and HBCU culture.

The initial round of coding consisted of creating a set of initial codes that represented various meanings, commonly used phrases, and patterns. I created a codebook or list of codes, listing terms such as motivation, stress, and family for example. I then identified quotes associated with each code, assigned them to that code, then sorted the codes into categories so they could be placed into themes. Originally, I came up with 16 themes but, after I began to re-read passages and see how these codes correlated with each other, I was able to combine several codes, ensuring that I had enough data that supported and constituted my naming and choosing that specific theme.

The data analysis process for the study took the following direction and consisted of these steps: (1) Reading the interview transcripts and documenting keywords and phrases for each interview question – also reviewing journal notes and memos in this manner; (2) Recording keywords and phrases from each interview into a notebook section for each study participant; (3) Recording and charting common and uncommon experiences and statements; (4) Creating codes from a careful read of the transcripts; (5) Organizing the codes into categories; and (6) using categories to identify themes.

Thematic and content analysis were used to analyze the data in this study. The thematic analysis helped to identify and interpret the patterns seen in interview data, analytic memos, and journal notes. Content analysis was used to quantify and group-specific words, commonly used expressions, and phrases used among study participants across all of the interviews, memos, and within journal notes. The content analysis helped me to make meaning of patterns, shared experiences, and the variation of the meaning of text and phases between each of the study participants; this essentially established the findings of the study.

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is used to refer to a set of criteria for assessing the quality of a study (Glesne, 2016, p. 301). As researchers, we are taught to be cautious and thoughtful about how we represent our data and ourselves. Participants are sometimes equally cautious about how they represent themselves and are also invested in how they are represented by the researcher (Bettez, 2015, p. 943). One way I encouraged authentic engagement during the study was by taking measures to build trust and rapport. Through previous work with students in academic advising and clinical counseling settings, I've learned that others can understand when helping professionals and educators are coming from a place of genuine interest and are authentically seeking to understand their stories. The consequences of lacking authenticity and thoughtfulness, and of being cautious as to how I approach participants, may greatly affect study participation and data.

In qualitative research, one way to establish trustworthiness is to use member checking. Member checking, also known as participant or respondent verification, is a technique for exploring the credibility of results. Data findings are returned to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1). Member checking covers a range of activities including: returning the interview transcript to participants; a member checking the interview using the interview transcript data or interpreted data; a member checking focus group; or returning analyzed synthesized data (Birt et al., 2016, p. 5). In this study, participants had the opportunity to read their interview transcript and received a copy of their interview. This fosters agency and greater control of their shared narrative. During the process of member checking, participants will be offered the opportunity to review themes that emerge from the data when interview transcripts are provided to them.

Reflexivity, according to Glesne, is a critical reflection of how the researcher, research participants, setting, and research procedures interact and influence each other (Glesne, 2016, p. 145). Essentially, I must examine how my own set of values, attitudes, and beliefs impact the research participants, the questions I choose to ask, and the way I present subjective study findings. Reflexivity exposes the exercise of power throughout the entire research process. It questions the authority of knowledge and opens the possibility for negotiating knowledge claims as well as holds researchers accountable to those with whom they research (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 495). As a researcher, I aimed to "question" my understanding, confirm or dispel what I think I know about the HBCU FGLI college experience, and discover the similarities and differences in the experiences that HBCU FGLI graduates had. I am confident that this study will show how important it is to the growth of HBCUs to gather the stories of alumni to contribute to the upbuilding of their alma mater; they serve as an extension of their college or university, wherever they go.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the research methodology beginning with an overview of basic qualitative research methodology. I provided a brief description of basic qualitative methodology and detailed the procedure I followed to identify, recruit, and select study participants in addition to discussing data collection and developing interview questions. Concluding this chapter, I addressed the elements of trustworthiness and reflexivity. In the following chapters, I present the findings of this study, emerging themes, and outcomes. In those chapters, I connect findings to current literature and practices in higher education concerning student success initiatives for first-generation students and low-income students. The detailed narratives and experiences of study participants will guide these chapters. In the final chapter, I answer the provided research

questions, discuss their implications, and offer suggestions for future research, practice, and support.

# CHAPTER IV: PERSONAL AND FAMILY FACTORS THAT CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT FGLI HBCU STUDENTS

*"I worked for what I wanted. There was no time to think about being first-generation or low-income. I knew I had to go to work. It [college] was trial and error, go go go".* Shaq

As previously stated in chapters one and three, one primary purpose of this study is to advance the knowledge we have on the FGLI HBCU student college experience and provide the readers of this study with HBCU FGLI alumni reflections of perseverance, determination, and dedication to personal and academic excellence, which some may call success. I interviewed 10 alumni from five public North Carolina HBCUs who were FGLI students at the time of their undergraduate studies to better understand the challenges FGLI students face, how they persist, and graduate. This research from its inception aimed to critically examine the collegiate experience of FGLI HBCU students. The study interview questions were presented to participants in three successive categories: Pre-College, College/University Experience, and Life Post-Graduation; they are organized here as such. After analyzing the data from participant interviews and drawing from the FGLI alumni's recollection of their collegiate experience and developmental years, I discuss how and who specifically helped study participants prepare for college.

In this chapter, I use Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework, specifically family, social, and navigational capital, as a guide. I used this framework in the context of how participants said they learned to methodically navigate the higher education space, achieving navigational capital. I also directly correlated CCW to the system these alums drew upon to establish social capital and advance themselves personally and academically,

helping them fulfill unmet needs. This assisted them in developing a campus support system of peers and faculty advisors that could be of personal assistance to them.

Throughout the individual interviews, I asked the alumni about personal and non-academic challenges. When they named a challenge, I asked them to go into detail about each challenge they named, what they believed caused the challenge, and if or how they were able to overcome the challenge. I specifically wanted to understand the method or resources they used to work through the barrier. As I have previously written, a great portion of the challenges reported centered around lack of support and the disappointment felt from not receiving support in the ways participants needed. This lack of support made adjusting to college more challenging.

Although challenges arose, in hindsight, many participants believe that overcoming these barriers strengthened them, increased their determination, served as a catalyst for persistence toward graduation, and helped shape them as young adults. This chapter concludes by discussing in detail the ways participants felt they needed support as students, how they acquired and leveraged the support systems they found or created, and specific support needs, along with non-academic factors that contributed to or impacted their academic and personal success. In the following pages, I offer information on these challenges, detail the impact these circumstances had on study participants, and share their responses to these challenges.

## Individual Personal Challenges

While all study participants stated overall they had a positive college experience, participants' stories reveal how FGLI students come to campus with complex personal, family, financial, and other matters that challenge them greatly as they work to perform their best academically. Many of the challenges the alumni in this study reported having were ongoing issues from home and challenges that arose from compounding issues, exacerbated by trying to

cope with adjusting to college and balancing school, social life, lack of resources, mental and emotional health, and grief stemming from the loss of a primary support family member. The main personal challenges discussed by study participants were financial and family strain, emotional and mental health, unfulfilled expectations of college, and their families' response to their college attendance. When asked about academic challenges, participants often connected those challenges to personal challenges. Participants seemed to frequently find their way back to discussing support needs. Many of them felt that although they finished school, there was an ever-looming feeling of the need to have a survival plan in place to graduate. Participants' narratives showed that a significant number of this study's participants spent their college years in survival mode, balancing personal and financial challenges. I wanted to understand the effects of being in this state. In the following section, I detail how the lack of sufficient financial resources, and college attendance in general, affected the emotional and mental health of some of the study participants. I also discuss how being an FGLI independent student severely impacted participants who identified themselves as FGLI independent students. I then detail how images of the college experience in media influenced students' perceptions of college and expectations.

## Financial Strain

From students who had little to no support to those that had significant support, the common thread among all participants was financial challenges due to coming from low-wealth families with limited resources (capital). While some participants detailed battling poverty and financial challenges since grade school, some participants began discussing financial challenges from the point they arrived at college. Each participant explained how not having the money and resources they needed for school impacted them. I also received a lot of feedback from participants on what the experience is like of being an independent student who is also FGLI.

JD talked with me about how she'd survived being food insecure and poverty-stricken since a small child. She was alleviated from some financial stressors and burdens because she'd aged out of foster care so, when she went to college, the foster care system provided housing during the academic term, a small stipend for food, tuition, and books. However, JD still had an unmet financial need and when classes were not in session, she had to find means to financially support herself. She received a few scholarships due to her being a foster child, which provided funding for her rent which was $584 at the time. She began receiving this money during her junior year of college but before then, she said she would sometimes enroll in summer school just to have somewhere to stay for the summer (campus housing). The funding she received from foster care was limited. Financial burdens were still one of her biggest challenges and she shared:

> Again, other students have mom and dad, food, and academics (support). Like, where do I go on break with limited support? But, I've always been able to figure things out. I worked at a call center during college and a co-worker gave me somewhere to stay during the break. I made $10 an hour, about $500 every two weeks, and I stayed there (Call Center) for about two months.

JD worked from her freshman to senior year, taking call center and retail jobs. She worked an average of 20-40 hours per week while she went to college full-time. She said she was also homeless during some of her college years because she had no housing when campus residence halls were closed. She didn't share this information with many people. To solve her problem of housing insecurity, she reached out to friends who had apartments she could stay at during school breaks and the holidays.

Darian, who was also an independent student, went to school full-time and always kept two jobs during college. Although Darian and JD were deemed to be independent students by the Federal Student Aid office and their university, other participants indicated that they were also

independent or living independently without the financial assistance of a parent. I discuss more of what she and the other HBCU alumni who were independent students shared with me in the next chapter, which is centered around institutional factors and responses to student success.

Two participants, Jaleel and Daja, ended up working and providing financial support to their mothers to support them or a sibling at home. Some FGLI college students sent money back home to support their families to try to take some of the financial burdens off their parent(s). I observed noticeable changes in verbal and non-verbal cues during this portion of the interview when both participants talked about sending money they earned back home to their mothers. Jaleel and Daja both had facial expressions that showed emotional conflict such as shifting eye contact (casting down their eyes and looking away), audible changes in breathing rhythm, and long pauses in speech, which showed that there was strain and internal conflict coupled with the reverence and responsibility they felt towards their mothers. It was as if they were trying to show respect for their mothers and convey that, regardless of what happened between them, there is nothing they wouldn't do to help their moms in a time of need. When I saw these changes in behavior, I verified that this point of conversation regarding financially supporting their families was the cause of frustration and internal conflict by directly asking if it was because I could see it before the participants confirmed it.

While talking about lack of financial resources, participants acknowledged finances were an issue, but that they understood that there wasn't much financial help most of them could receive from home. Several participants explained that this required them to have to work throughout school to support themselves. For Deja, this created a non-academic challenge because she was limited by location and reliable transportation. Finding year-round consistent work every semester was another challenge. Deja did not have transportation of her own. She

shared that it was hard for her to find on-campus employment and she said, “asking parents for money when I already knew their financial situation was (long pause), but my parents made a way”. The expression, “My parents made a way” means that although her parents didn’t really have the financial means or resources to provide all the needs Deja had, in ways unbeknownst to her, they somehow found the means and a way to supply her needs. In her sophomore year, Deja was able to find student employment on campus where she eventually went on to earn a promotion as a student manager. Overall, participants did not spend a lot of time talking about not having money. They spoke more of how they persisted past this challenge year after year, some saying and alluding to not having any choice but to figure out a way to help themselves because they knew no one else was coming to save them.

For these participants, the financial strain was a challenge, but not an unexpected one. All ten participants came to college aware of their families' financial challenges and their parents’ ability or inability to help them meet their financial needs in college. The majority of the participants in this study worked one or more jobs during college to support themselves. Some of them worked 20 or more hours a week in addition to being full-time students. The participants who came to college as independent students had to create several avenues to earn money to support themselves. In summation, all 10 participants reported experiencing some level of financial burden while in college which contributed to them feeling financially and emotionally strained.

### On My Own: The Impact of Strained Family Relationships

Josh, JD, Darian, Jaleel, Daja, and Shaq entered their college journey with the burden of strained parental and family relationships. Accounts of unhealthy relationships, abandonment, loss, and limited support due to the student’s sexual orientation, parents' drug and alcohol

addictions, and parent/step-parent conflicts were some of the main factors that impacted participants outside of the classroom. While talking with them, I noticed all of them were able to tell me their exact age or give me an account of the moment they realized their relationship with their parents/parents changed. Some participants like JD began experiencing parental and family relationship strain in elementary school and endured these challenges with their siblings. Others, such as Darian, Jaleel, and Shaq expressed feelings of being left out while the rest of their siblings were better supported. Then some felt that their already strained relationships became worse when they went to college with parents disengaging in a way that participants were not fully prepared for.

JD spoke to me in detail about her overall college experience and how strained family relationships affected her. Her personal story was especially riveting:

> College was fun but challenging. It was one of the darkest moments I've ever had. I didn't have a mom and dad to call on. I was independent. When school was closed, I didn't have anywhere to go (Christmas, Spring Break, Thanksgiving). Other students have a mom and dad, food, academics (academic needs taken care of), support, and education (educational knowledge/preparation). I was my only support. I don't feel like I had a childhood. I had to grow up fast. I didn't get a chance to really enjoy college life.

This story and the stories of some of the other study participants remind us why, for some, college will not be some of the best days of a person's life. JD would go on to share that she was not a student who struggled academically in school. She excelled, received academic honors, and was invited to join clubs and organizations, despite all the burdens she carried with her to college. Like JD, other participants would go on to tell me how they were faced with the reality of homelessness and food insecurity when the campus closed for holiday breaks. JD continued by sharing that there were times when she would "couch surf", sleep on friends' couches, or in an empty room in a friend's apartment.

Like JD, Darian also shared that he made it through college with the help of his friends. Darian did not receive assistance from his family or support as he graduated from high school and applied for college. He shared that he had been disowned, on his own since the age of 14, and didn't have a relationship with his parents while in high school and most of college. Darian said it was a high school teacher that told him he could apply to school as an independent student. Darian explained that college brought about constant reminders that he was on his own and didn't have family support. Remembering the day he moved on to campus and had to fill out paperwork, Darian shared:

> Watching someone (other students) get the love and care you wish you had kinda hurt. I remember on move-in day, watching the other kids move in all happy with their families, and I didn't have that. I remember just putting my stuff in the room and going to the cafeteria to sit so I didn't have to see all the other kids with their families.

As a higher education professional who works closely with FGLI students and participated in several new student move-in days, this was another captivating recollection to hear because this is another scenario that I know I, along with the staff I have worked with, haven't given great thought about. Typically, unless a student notifies you of a need or problem, you may not know that an issue exists or that you have a student currently battling feelings of abandonment and inadequacy. To further move the point, Darian shared how filling out paperwork for school isn't so simple for some and dredges up feelings of hurt and abandonment over and over. On this subject, Darian stated:

> Filling out forms was difficult because you have to relive everything you're going through; a constant reminder that you are alone. It's also rewarding because you are doing it by yourself but, explaining yourself, reliving over and over why you don't have support is exhausting and draining after years. When I did financial aid appeals, they felt that my story should have changed. I never got my parents tax or financial information. On forms, the picture you paint (of yourself) has to be sad. I had to prove how alone I was. No support. I had to prove to the government that I was doing everything by myself.

Darian acknowledges that aside from feeling empowered by persevering through these challenging times alone, doing so affected everything about him overall. He explained that he didn't sleep much in college, which affected his health. He wasn't eating healthily and always had to juggle several jobs. For Darian, having "zero percent family support in college" meant that he only had himself to rely on. Like JD, the friends he made in college became his surrogate support system and after college, his chosen family. Darian felt HBCU staff could help independent students by being more knowledgeable about independent students in general so they can be more understanding about what independent students go through alone. The challenges that Darian faced in these scenarios are an example of how a student's personal challenges can permeate through the entire college experience and present major challenges. As I learned from these former students, the fight to ensure that these personal challenges don't affect a student's academics is an ongoing struggle that could be alleviated with knowledge of the issues, followed by providing appropriate increased support.

Like Darian, Jaleel also came to college with personal family challenges. Some stemmed from his extended family's opposition to his sexual orientation, lack and loss of steady financial income for his mother, and grief stemming from the death of his grandmother who served as one of the only constant sources of support for him. Jaleel enjoyed his childhood. He recounted a time in his younger years when his mother was very supportive of him and his educational and extracurricular endeavors. Jaleel pinpoints the start of the family relationship strain that affected the support he received throughout college to the time when his mothers' siblings began to speculate about his sexual orientation and preference. Somehow, his extended family persuaded his mother to take a step back from him, thus limiting her overall support of him at the time.

On the changes he experienced, Jaleel stated:

> My sister and Grandma scraped up money for me. When my brother went to college in 2008, my mother took him to college, but I had to go on my own. This made me feel a way. I even had to drive myself to college. I had never driven that far alone before and I remember thinking wow, I really am on my own, I'm by myself. It was very emotional (pause). I remember this like yesterday, I never forget it, and I tell everyone.

Jaleel also stated that his mother would have been there to bring him to college but, financially she couldn't be there due to his brother being diagnosed with an illness that his mother "sacrificed" to buy medication for. During the interview, I found Jaleel to be seemingly torn between telling me exactly what happened and still not wanting to tell me things that completely uncovered his family situation, revealing his unfiltered feelings about the support he didn't receive from his family. I could sense that there was a great love for his mother and that he would do anything he could for his mother and family. However, there is still some resentment for the struggle he had to endure due to lack of support. Later when asked directly what the main non-academic challenges of his academic experience were, Jaleel responded:

> The first two years (of college), life was good. The third year, having to go home for the holidays was hard. I mean a quick phone call to say "hello, I love you, I'm praying for you, can I help you?" would have been nice. I started not wanting to go home.

Jaleel worked all through college to help support his family financially and explained that he felt the need to pay his mom back for raising him as a child. Jaleel expressed that the "built up" feelings of resentment are not just towards his mother, but towards his whole family; he held on to these feelings for several years. Jaleel said he hasn't told his mom how he feels because he "wouldn't want her to go through the feeling of feeling less than." He added, "Now I have an awesome bond with my mom."

Jaleel's relationship with his mother while he was a college student is reflective of the sentiment that many participants expressed during their interviews. Hearing these stories felt to

me like tales of a trauma survivor who shares stories of tragedy to triumph. In a subsequent chapter, I discuss findings on how lack of support, which can be deemed a challenge for students, caused increased extrinsic motivation, then developed into intrinsic motivation. Of the ten participants in this study, more than half experienced some kind of major family-related life event, dealt with strained relationships, or a lack of support from close familial relations. This caused many of the alums in this study to become determined to improve their life situation, which developed into intrinsic motivation.

Daja was very clear about how going away to her HBCU provided the freedom and escape she needed from family relationship strain. She went on to mention that her mother faced family issues as well when she attempted to go to college, which is why she did not finish college:

> A big part of college was getting away from home. I grew up in the projects. There were drugs, drug dealers…until high school. I remember when we moved to a better place and we had a doorbell. I thought having a doorbell was so cool. I had a strained relationship with my mom. My mom went to college for two years and dropped out due to family issues. My dad dropped out in the 7th grade. I'm the first on my dad's side (of the family) to go to high school or college. One of my biggest challenges was just being mentally and emotionally drained.

For Daja, there was a time in college when her mother became gravely ill and found herself in great need of Daja's help and support. There was a role reversal, as Daja became the parent and caregiver of her mother. During this time, Daja worked and paid her mother's car payment, rent, and utilities for two months, even though the relationship was strained, because as Deja stated, "She is my only mother." Like Jaleel, Daja felt some internal conflict that weighed heavy on her and impacted her emotionally while in school and after graduation. The internal conflict stemmed from feeling that they had to honor and uphold a sense of loyalty to family

members, specifically parents who may not have assisted them during their time of need during school.

The culmination of your college career is typically a time of great celebration, excitement, and joy. Families come together to celebrate the accomplishments of their graduates and for many FGLI students, their accomplishment feels like an accomplishment for the family as well. Shaq told a story of an opposite experience. She explained that while other students' parents came to their graduation, her family did not, and it is still hurtful to her today. I asked Shaq who or what were her greatest sources of support and she quickly proclaimed, "Me! I was by myself. No one came to see me, call, or check on me. It would have been nice to hear, 'How are you doing, do you need anything?' but that didn't happen." When I talked with her about what challenges she felt were the hardest to navigate and what made them challenging, Shaq explained that while completing college was difficult for her, not feeling support from home was beyond challenging. With a look of sadness and disappointment she explained, "College was a big accomplishment to me. But I wasn't celebrated, and I was overlooked." Shaq went on to share a story with me about how when the time came for her to graduate, her family did not mark the occasion with celebration or any kind of acknowledgment that she'd made it through college. She mentioned that they made excuses about not having the means to celebrate her, but when a cousin got released from prison, the family threw big parties, block parties, and family flew in for those occasions. I could see the hurt and clear astonishment on Shaq's face at this part of her story as she spoke in recollection of her life.

The stories in this section detail internal and external conflicts that could have seriously derailed their ability and drive to complete school. Reading the interview transcripts and replaying the recording of the interviews with these former students really revealed how many of

these participants still carry the hurt from their time as undergraduate students. Despite enduring major challenges, five of six study participants who indicated they experienced some sort of strained family relationship, went on to persist through a master's level degree. Three of the five also persisted through either a Ph.D. or J.D. (Juris Doctor) degree. For some of them, family strain was present as they persisted through their second college degree; however, they reported how they handled family relationships differently and communication with their family changed as they came into adulthood established boundaries.

Feelings of isolation, rejection, abandonment, and lack of support play a significant role in personal or non-academic challenges some FGLI face. This also impacts how they exist in the university community and helps to explain why these former students sought after these HBCUs for the "family feel" and atmosphere that they say their HBCUs provided. Through these responses, we come to understand just how critical having your university serve as a center of support is, especially when the university - consisting of supportive administration, faculty, staff, and students - is someone's only source of support.

### Emotional and Mental Health

Another common experience that these HBCU alumni shared was their emotional and mental response to common barriers FGLI students have traditionally been known to face. These barriers are not limited to, but include: college adjustment, financial challenges, limited or lack of family support, self-efficacy, and imposter syndrome. To try and provide a solution to the ever-looming challenge of finding ways to better support FGLI college students, staying current with the specific challenges they face, how these challenges impact them, and knowing what FGLI students go through to navigate these challenges is important.

When FGLI college students are spoken of, one may hear descriptors such as strong, resilient, multifaceted, and determined. As I talked with study participants, I saw all of this in them but, I also heard them say things like, “It was hard”, “I was lonely”, “It hurt”, “I did it by myself”, “It was hard to be strong all the time”, and “Sometimes you get tired of being strong”. JD made an impactful statement when she spoke about her hardest challenges and how going through college battling these challenges made her feel. She shared:

> It was hard being mentally strong all the time. It’s not always a good thing. Life experiences train your mind to be used to fight; your body learns that’s how you deal. You build emotional endurance and then things stop impacting you. It impacts every relationship in your life…you become desensitized to it because you start to feel like, “I’m used to fighting for my life.”

JD also said “being in foster care caused me to build a level of independence” because she knew there would be no one there she could rely on but herself, and she just figured college would be no different. JD was a foster child/ward of the state, independent, and an FGLI student. From what she shared, it appears she could have benefited from wrap-around support services; however, the amount of support and specific financial support JD needed is typically beyond the scope of what many colleges and universities can provide. JD’s recommendation to HBCUs and colleges in general is that they ensure there are FGLI and independent student knowledgeable staff in place when FGLI students and independent students arrive on campus. Furthermore, there should be staff in place during this time who are knowledgeable about the issues these demographics of students face.

When students come to college, they can reinvent themselves and figure out who they are, and how they want to move forward in the world. For Darian, moving through the challenges of being FGLI, adjusting to college with no support from home, and trying to figure

out who he was as a person was emotionally challenging to navigate. Darian shared with me the challenges that were hardest for him to navigate, he ranked them in order and explained why:

> Number one would be self-love, I walked into college not loving myself, I didn't know who I was, who do I identify as…looking in the mirror not liking what I saw. I started going to counseling and learned a lot through counseling. To get through, I started reading more, going to church, surrounding myself with positive people, and working out. I wasn't happy with my body. I gained the freshman 15. Number two was financial, paying bills, phone, car note, and working full-time. Three, 0% family support in college, I felt alone a lot of times.

Darian expressed that he thinks a lot of the feelings and emotions of sadness he had would have been lessened if he had regular support. He was grateful for the support of his friends but said he never wanted to put too much on them.

In conclusion, from our conversations, what caused the majority of the sadness, depression, and hurt faced by study participants was not having reliable family support, going to school full-time and working almost full-time to pay major bills, mental and emotional fatigue endured from having to be so independent at a young age, and simply feeling emotionally exhausted from the combination of all the mentioned factors. For some, the only support they received came from their HBCU. Through these narratives from NC HBCU FGLI alums, I identified the top personal challenges that some FGLI HBCU students encounter while trying to advance through college and graduate. Participants detailed how these personal challenges affected overall student success, who and what contributed to these challenges, and how carrying the burdens of these challenges made them feel. Of all the personal challenges faced by participants, financial and family strain, emotional, and mental health were identified as challenges that affected these alums throughout their undergraduate years and required a great amount of determination, intrinsic motivation, awareness, and application of available student

support services to overcome these challenges. In this next section, I discuss the systems and centers of support these former FGLI HBCU students found in college.

## As Seen on TV: Images of College Life

I asked participants if their college experience aligned with what they thought college would be or how it differed. In their answers, which surprisingly were consistent across participants in this study, they shared how images of "the college experience" tended to reflect students with their "Mom and Dad" (traditional nuclear families), happily moving them into their dorms (residence halls) and going to parties with a crew of friends. Josh referred to the students in these images as "perfect." I immediately connected with Josh, recalling how oftentimes, I also saw similar images portrayed of students on their graduation day, typically jumping for joy with their families in cap and gown photos. I also thought of those Folgers coffee commercials where the homesick student drives home unexpectedly and their proud, loving, family is ecstatic to see them walk through the door and all is well. In all these scenarios, all always ends up being well, and the viewer is shown a "perfect" family and a happy ending. As I listened to participants share their expectations, I could understand how images like these can spark expectations of family support, the idea that this is what going to college will be, and that their family would act in the same way.

As I listened to study participants discuss the unmet needs they had in college, I began to realize that in between the thoughts and ideas they had about college life versus what they experienced, was the hope and dream that somehow their college experience would turn out to be better than what it was. I believed it was important to bring into context some of the thoughts, ideas, and expectations participants of this study have about going to college. Before going to college, some participants thought college would look like images of college they saw in the

media. Some of them thought they would be receiving support from family that mirrored what the “kids” on TV received and “making lots of friends”, said JD and Deja. Darian, JD, Shaq, Josh, Daja, Jaleel, and Bria, talked with me about the support they wished they had had and how college was nothing like what they thought it would be. I go further into providing examples of what they said in subsequent sections of this chapter and chapter five. For these alumni, the expectations they had of their college experience directly impacted their transition and matriculation through college. This was partly because some of them were attempting to live up to the image of what they thought a college student should be although they had not defined for themselves exactly what this looked like. Social media and TV had impacted some of their views.

From participant interviews, I could conclude that all of these former students entered college with some knowledge of the heavy lifting they would have to endure to support themselves. Still, that did not stop them from hoping that more help would come from family and the people that they felt were supposed to be their support system. Several participants told stories of how they thought someone would step up and increase their support since they had made it to college. Only three out of the ten participants, Chris, Deja, and Josh, had experiences where their family and support system increased, was visible, and their support system made the effort to ensure their needs were met in college. They provided evidence of their families’ determination to make sure to the best of their ability that they had what they needed to be successful in college. For some of them and the other seven participants of this study, the college experience they imagined and dreamed they would have heavily incorporated family, lots of friends, and ideas about college life based on T.V. depictions of college life.

Today, more people are engaging in dialogue about how the images we see on T.V. and social media influence our perception of what our experiences will be. Some viewers will see these images and expect their experience to look just like what others experience. These images can also serve as reminders of what some may not have, as was the case with some of the participants.

## Family Contribution to Preparation and Transitioning to College

This section focuses on the direct impact participants' families had on college preparation and readiness. Study participants mainly defined and aligned family contribution with support. The support is not specifically financial, but families expressing pride, showing interest in the students' college preparation, and most important to the majority of study participants, contributing their time. It is important to begin by noting that monetary contribution to participants' preparation was of lesser note due to participants' understanding of their families' financial limitations and lack of resources.

When asked to sum up how freshman students describe the first year of college in one word, one might hear descriptors such as exciting, nerve-wracking, freedom, challenging, crazy, or fun. All of the institutions included in the study have an office dedicated to freshman first-year experiences where new student programs, resources, and classes are available to help freshmen students transition to college. Some of these offices also included programs and resources for parents and families, to keep them informed and connected to the campus community. As the study participants and I began our time with each other, participants were asked what their transition to college and the first-year experience was like. From there we engaged in conversation regarding what they learned about themselves during this time, and who was in

their life to influence, guide, support, and assist them with their transition. Participants also shared reflections on their freshman year, specifically family involvement.

When asked who assisted them with applying for college, some participants stated that “nobody helped" them and that they “did it themselves”. Through further analysis of what participants meant by “nobody helped", I came to understand that for some study participants, this meant that no one from home (parents or family) provided the help that participants felt they needed for reasons that may not be known. Many participants explained that they were their own primary source of motivation and support for themselves. At least half of this study’s participants reported having college application assistance from a high school counselor or someone from their school. Many participants acknowledged that they knew their parents and some family members couldn’t help them with the college application process because they “didn’t know what to do”, having never attended college themselves. Shaq said, “No one talked to her about college”, she “decided to go to college at the last minute”, and school counselors helped her. Chris, Deja, Jaleel, and Bria all applied to college with the help of high school counselors. Regardless of their family’s ability or inability to provide adequate support for their student in the way that the student stated they needed, the findings from this study revealed each participant was heavily influenced by their family, which impacted their collegiate experience.

Daja, Darian, and Chis described their experience applying for college as “fun”, “enjoyable”, and “pleasant”, although they were not assisted by their family with the application process. Daja recounted how her parents were very supportive during her college application process, although they did not assist her with the application portion. Deja knew she wanted to go to college at an HBCU because she had extended family and relatives that attended the HBCU she would go on to attend. Because the HBCU Deja wanted to attend was not on the list of free

college application waivers provided to her by her high school, Deja's father paid for her college application to her HBCU, under the condition that when her decision letter came in the mail, he could be the one to open it. Deja became emotional when she described the pride and joy her father displayed when he opened her acceptance letter. Deja's parents supported her "emotionally" and "helped in the ways they could".

## First-Year Experience and Adjusting to College

The first year of college represents a substantial time of personal transition and learning how to navigate a new environment. Adjusting to change during a student's first year of college is no small feat. The experience these FGLI HBCU alumni had with transitioning into their first year of college tended to be varied and heavily impacted by family support, encouragement, and overall preparation for entrance into the college experience. Preparation for the college transition includes both academic and non-academic preparation. In participants' discussions, the biggest common thread that united them all was the excitement of getting away from home by going off to college. The energy the participants exuded while telling the story of their eagerness to get away from home really came through with increasing passion from participants who were born and raised in small towns, those leaving what they felt were strained and challenging living environments, and participants who were the eldest of their siblings. Where almost all participants spent time talking about their want and need for freedom, I could almost feel the craving and longing they felt and how it felt to finally grasp it when they stepped onto their respective campuses.

I listened intently as the alumni detailed their first-year experiences. After a while, the stories of their experiences started to sound like someone explaining what it felt like to be suffocated or trapped in a place, then explaining how it felt to finally be able to breathe freely. A

smaller number of participants also stated that they were excited to go away to college and experience freedom. Typically, these were the alums who had described a healthier home environment and who had grandparents or parent(s) who wanted them to go to college and experience life away from home. The conversation on the feelings they experienced going off to college for their first year was different from participants who described the environment as challenging, lonely, or isolating.

There was a certain feeling of heaviness permeating the beginning moments of the conversation regarding first-year experience. The emotions displayed by participants made the recall of past trauma and triumph so real for me, all while the highs of reliving the good times of freshman year shone through the dark places of their stories like sunbeams. Through the heavy recollection of challenges, there were smiles as participants spoke of how making it to freshman year gave them a sense of empowerment when the odds were stacked against them. For example, JD spoke with pride when she shared, “I knew I never was supposed to make it this far” and “I know people counted me out,” and then there was Darian who shared that there were those who told him he wouldn’t get far in life. It was during moments like these, especially when I went back to read the interview transcripts, that I would have to sit back for a moment in my own reflection of what I’d heard these young scholars say. I couldn’t help but think about the impressionable minds of youth and how it must’ve made them feel to be discounted from a young age.

## Support

HBCUs have been centers of success and support for historically underrepresented, marginalized, and disadvantaged students since their inception. As the participants in this study shared, HBCUs feel like a home away from home and become a home for those who come to

school without a home. Woven in the thread of HBCU culture is a sense of family, which each of the HBCUs in this study pride themselves on and market their campus culture as having. This sense of family and shared community was highly important to the participants of this study. Literature and extensive research on FGLI student success discuss in great detail the importance of colleges and universities finding ways to help students find a sense of belonging and how this aids in support and retention. Support during this critical time of student development became essential to the success of these former students.

As participants discussed the support they received, and the support they needed and did not receive, they continued to weave back and forth throughout the conversation on support. The major findings on support naturally shifted into support needs. The identified support needs in this study indicated that family support and involvement or the lack of having family support and involvement during the participants' college careers not only directly impacted these former students, but it heavily impacted them through college and into young adulthood. The account of active presence or inactive involvement of the participant's family or support system permeated through most of the responses from participants. Three major findings emerged during this study that were directly linked to support which contributed to personal and academic success, increased motivation, and retention. This includes where participants found support, and the specific people participants went to for support when they felt they did not receive support elsewhere. These reported support systems were college preparation activities and programs (which will be discussed in the next chapter), grandparents (specifically grandmothers), and actively supportive parents and families.

## The Grandmother Effect

One part of better understanding the personal-individual and family factors that influence FGLI HBCU student success was identifying the key supports and stakeholders in their life, in addition to examining the degree of impact that these individuals had on successful outcomes. As HBCU alumni were sharing their family dynamic, their motivation to go to college, and their primary source of support, there was one family member named other than the participants' mothers that strongly influenced or impacted participants: their grandmother. Specifically naming their maternal grandmother, the role of the grandmother in these participants' lives ranged from a caregiver, emotional and motivational support, wise counsel, and voice of reason when participants were struggling in school. For these and other reasons that were detailed by participants, the role of the grandmother was important to highlight and situate in the context of student, personal-individual and family factors that challenge and influence student success.

Four out of ten participants directly linked the influence of their grandmothers to their personal and academic success in college. The role JD's grandmother played in her life was detailed in the previous section on family relationship strain. Her grandmother raised her and her siblings until she turned sixteen years old and was placed into foster care. JD's mother was declared mentally incompetent, her grandmother was also declared unfit, and she went into the foster care system after being taken from her grandmother.

The other participants expressed having a different relationship with their grandmothers. Some participants described their grandmothers as being the only ones who understood them. Deja, who described her parents and family as being loving and supportive, spoke highly of her grandmother. When asked who her primary source of support was, aside from her parents, Deja

spoke with reverence about her grandmother. She shared how her grandmother would call and check on her at school and how she provided a wraparound support system.

Jaleel experienced a similar relationship with his grandmother, sharing that she "had a big hand in raising me." Starting college in 2010, Jaleel dropped out of college in 2014 after his grandmother died, returned to school in the fall of 2016, then graduated a few years later. Expressing that his grandmother was the only one he could talk to, he experienced grief and depression over her death. Like Jaleel, Chris also experienced the loss of his grandmother in college. Chris shared how the loss of his grandmother impacted him so much that he felt her death was the major non-academic challenge of his college career. Chris described his grandmother as, "My motivator." When he lost his grandmother, Chris began experiencing depression and became seriously overwhelmed with trying to figure out how to support his girlfriend, now wife, and their newborn baby. Chris said:

> My grandmother died in 2014 so, that was like my sophomore year. She was one of the biggest motivators I had. So you know, just over time watching her pass away and not knowing that I had that (motivation and support) was a huge challenge for me. I was depressed for a while. I had to figure out how to balance and then I lost my cousin. I was battling with death and grief, it was rough.

For these FGLI HBCU students, many of whom came to college with challenging family circumstances, the support and connection to their grandmother was paramount in having a sense of support from the family they needed.

Josh directly linked improvement in his academics to the behavioral correction and accountability his grandmother challenged him with. Josh's heavy involvement with the band, other extracurricular activities, and issues with time management resulted in falling grades. Josh admitted, "I had so much going on and didn't apply myself. The band and my friends became my primary reason for wanting to be at school, and homework and quizzes weren't getting done."

Josh was receiving a partial band scholarship and was in jeopardy of losing this academic funding if his grades did not improve. Josh explained that when his grandmother heard about his grades, “She was in tears and disappointment. This impacted me.” Not wanting to hurt or disappoint his grandmother, Josh made the necessary changes to improve. Laughing, he explained when his grandmother found out about his grades, she had a “serious talk” with him. The respect and reverence Josh had for his grandmother, in addition to wanting her approval, and wanting her to feel proud of him, helped Josh get back on track academically.

Throughout the study interviews, I asked participants directly who were their number one sources of support. First on the list were themselves, followed by parent(s) or grandmother equally, friends (either individuals or friend groups within clubs or organizations), then a university faculty or staff member. Grandmothers served as loyal confidants and trusted advisors when the students felt as if no one else would listen or could understand them. Last and importantly, I asked the participants who indicated they started having feelings of depression and sadness after the death of their grandmother if they sought campus resources such as the campus counseling department for help. Most participants indicated that they did not, but they did talk to friends and available family for support. It is clear that the role many participants’ grandmothers played in their college career was essential to their overall success and, for some of these former students, retention. How participants referenced the support, guidance, and unconditional love they received from grandmothers, indicated the want and need for more active family involvement.

### Active Supportive Parents and Family

The previous sections have focused on the needs and unmet support needs of former FGLI HBCU students, with the greatest support needs being identified as practical and emotional

support. Practical and emotional support, per the participants' statements, would have been positive interactions consisting of welfare checks by phone or in person, attending or showing interest in the student's collegiate experience, and positive reinforcing or affirming speech to motivate and show pride in the student. These displays of support can also be attributed to active parenting or active parenting style. Active parenting can also include effective and regular communication (parents and students decide what constitutes "effective and regular communication"), assisting the student with decision making or assisting the student with finding a knowledgeable guide to assist the student with decision making, and other attributes.

Two study participants made it known that their parents were their number one supporters, with their grandmothers coming in at a strong second. They recalled times when they were faced with various challenges in college and provided examples of how their parents supported them. They affirmed that support from their parents was not always financial in nature and what was most valuable to them was knowing that their parents were proud, that they would be there for them, and that they could be relied on for a simple word of encouragement. Their parents' influence, support, and sacrifice for their education was influential in helping them stay motivated and encouraged in school. These study participants understood that although their parents had limited knowledge of the college experience and process, they wanted to be fully immersed in the personal and academic growth of their child.

Deja always spoke fondly of her parents. Doing her best to hold back tears, she shared with me a story about how her father took time away from his job for a few moments when she had called to check on him and he could tell that she was feeling down. Her eyes welled with tears recalling how her father left work after he got off the phone with her to come to campus and "lay eyes" on his baby girl. He had come to campus to check on her directly, they sat on the

steps of her building and ate a sandwich for lunch together. Knowing Deja had suddenly and unexpectedly lost her father during the height of Covid and how much of a "Daddy's Girl" she was, almost made me cry. I could see how much Deja loved both of her parents, but her father had a very special place in her heart. As a fellow daddy's girl myself, I understand the reverence and pride felt for a good supportive father. Deja explained how both of her parents married young, were high school sweethearts and had dreams of going to college themselves. They still had plans of going to college, but they planned to put Deja and her younger siblings, whom Deja affectionately refers to as "the younger ones," through college first, and then her parents would get their chance to go to college. Deja shared that her parents were so inspired by her being a first-generation college student and graduating from college, that they felt like they could also try to go to college. Deja said, "My Mom still wants to go back to school. My Dad has passed now but, it makes me feel good to know I inspired my Dad." Because Deja attended and graduated from college, she not only became a role model for her younger siblings, but she also inspired her parents as well.

Some parents played a direct part in removing some of the greatest barriers for their children to ensure that they would succeed by any means necessary. Chris performed very well personally and academically in school. He was an active participant in academic clubs and organizations and enjoyed helping other students to improve themselves academically by tutoring classmates in accounting. Chris met a young lady who was also a student at his HBCU; they started dating and soon learned that they would be becoming parents. Chris became a father at 19 years old, the week after he took his first freshman final exams. When Chris' son was born, he had to learn quickly how to balance the responsibilities of fatherhood, school, and work.

Knowing that his parents wanted him to graduate and succeed, they helped him and his wife with caring for his son.

> I did have some parents I could lean on, so I didn't have as much of a financial challenge as most. They were my primary source of support. Basically, when I would ask for money they would, you know, give me whatever I was looking for and then help out with groceries whenever I needed it. I didn't really need a lot. I was so supported throughout my college experience.

Chris explained that without his parents' support, he didn't know how he would have made it through college, especially because his junior year of college was very hard. Chris worked hard to maintain his grades, provide as much as he could for the family he'd started, and learn to support himself with less of his parents' help. He repeated often during his interview that he knew that he had to grow up and how college taught him many adult life lessons quickly.

Noticeably shorter than the previous sections detailing other family interactions and the impact of one specific family member, the grandmother, I think it is important to note that this section was written because two participants in this study shared that they had a whole family support system in place, in addition to campus support. Out of ten study participants, two unequivocally state that they received full support from family during their entire college career. They also detailed how the support they received from home, in addition to the support they received at their HBCU, not only helped them to graduate but it enabled them to have a more enjoyable undergraduate college experience. Detailing a supportive parental experience is not to say or suggest that there was no level of support provided to the other participants of this study by their families. This section on supportive families is a testament to parents and families who support their students in the ways that they could and in the ways that they knew how. In reflection on Chris and Deja's parents' attitude, interest, and active approach in their academic and collegiate experience, several factors affected each narrative and student outcome.

## Celebration at the End

Before ending this chapter, I believe it is very important to provide clear additional context to the section on family strain and for any narrative in this study that may appear as if the families of participants are being presented in a less than positive light. I am mindful and intentional about refraining from presenting African American families within a mindset of personal deficiency, given their history of being systematically oppressed and marginalized. I am cognizant of how literature and media portray those of us who identify with and belong to these communities. What I have attempted to do is present the findings in the exact way that were presented to me by study participants, and as they were told to me, to the best of my ability. At times when I felt conflicted about how I would present the narratives of participants who appeared bitter, hurt, annoyed, and disappointed as they gave accounts of how lack of family involvement and support made them feel in college, I asked them to help me further understand their feelings. Throughout this process, I had to draw heavily upon my reflective listening skills.

As I analyzed the meaning behind each participant's words, I checked in with them throughout every section of the interview. We spent the most time in sections of interview questions that focused on family support, success, and words of advice for current and future FGLI students. Participants were passionate about family involvement as it related to their personal/individual and family success. I, along with the participants who may not have had the most support from their families while they were enrolled in undergrad, wanted to make it clear to readers that they did in truth and honesty, feel alone and unsupported throughout their undergraduate experience. For some participants, it wasn't *until* the time of their graduation, specifically the graduation party or celebration time, that they began to see family take interest.

As stated earlier, some participants maintain that they were not celebrated at any juncture of their college career.

Returning to the discussion of participants who exhibited feelings of bitterness, hurt, annoyance, and disappointment, I am told that these feelings heightened during the time of graduation and somehow became combined with the happiness, joy, and elation that "they made it!" and graduated. I wanted to understand how these conflicting feelings coexisted and what it felt like to feel this way. JD and Jaleel provided a clear understanding of what it felt like to celebrate one of the happiest days of their lives and still feel aggrieved. Jaleel said, "Oh everybody showed up for the graduation and when it was time to celebrate" and explained that what he said about his family and the lack of support he received while in college was factual, but "family did come through and show up at the end." JD shared these same sentiments and expressed that, "after graduation, that was it." Meaning, her family came to the graduation ceremony and that was it.

As I gained a deeper understanding of how JD and Jaleel felt when JD explained, "It's like people show up after you feel like you've just been out here fighting for your life. People saw you struggling, and nobody helped. Now you show up for a party. That hurts." Early on in their college career, JD and Jaleel discontinued any expectation that they would receive the support that they wanted from their family. Jaleel expressed that he knew his family "couldn't support," and we entered a conversation about how he persisted despite the feelings he had. I had a similar conversation with JD. The commonality with both alumni is that these feelings - feelings of hurt, disappointment, and sometimes abandonment - are what pushed them to succeed. These feelings inspired perseverance and sparked the dedication to not only graduate

from undergraduate studies with honors, but to go past that to earn master's degrees, and for JD, a Ph.D.

In chapter five, in a section entitled “Something to Prove to Myself and You”, I further discuss how personal disappointment leads to pushing participants to strive toward success. I also share the participants' feelings about what success means to them today.

## Conclusion

During the study interview, I asked participants to tell me about their family demographics, challenges, and successes they experienced, who helped them overcome their challenges, and what would have been helpful to them as they went through their college years. Throughout the interviews, I heard hopes, dreams, wishes, expectations, and reality woven all in between tales of perseverance. Participants spent a great portion of time sharing about their family dynamics and how their family contributed to shaping who they have become as individuals. They also shared how their family could simultaneously be a point of contention and a point of pride, which led to some participants feeling emotionally compromised because of strained family relationships and needing more support from family. Participants explained how they began experiencing challenges as they prepared to transition to college from high school and how this greatly affected their first year of college. Participants detailed how their families motivated and supported them or where support was absent, then shared the impact either situation had on them.

Many of the FGLI college graduates in this study were the first in their family to attend and graduate from college from either side of their family, maternal or paternal. These graduates shared that they did not have many opportunities to see other family members experience college or if they did, the family member did not complete college by graduating. For some participants,

parental involvement from the beginning to the end of their college enrollment ranged from little to no family involvement, and for some, it consisted of parents and grandparents encouraging higher education and providing the necessary support where able to help their student succeed.

In summation, the common thread that participants in this study shared was the want for support, specifically family support, while beginning and matriculating through college. While some participants enjoyed active family support when engaging in the college application process, some had already realized that there would be little to no family contribution to their college preparation for various reasons, and they would navigate accessing college independently. For most of these participants, despite realizing that their parents or guardians had limits on how much they could help or provide assistance, the longing they felt for more parental involvement and family engagement was deep at this transformative juncture. For some FGLI students who may have had less academic and college preparatory skills, adjusting to college invoked a multitude of various feelings and emotions that some participants said they had never shared with anyone until they shared them with me. This study was the first time most of the participants had ever been asked about their college journey or experience.

Finally, it can be concluded that these former students want their parents to know how much they needed them in college and wanted their input. The study participants showed a clear understanding of why their parents were challenged in assisting them with college preparation with several of them stating that they believed it was due to their parents having little knowledge of the college process and not attending college themselves. However, as students, they would have appreciated their parents and family's involvement throughout their college years. I believe it is evident that as students, these alums would have been accepting and grateful for any help, even at the smallest measure, their parents could contribute. I think going forward in the future, it

would be helpful for college personnel at HBCUs to help facilitate or make space for these critical conversations on the topics discussed in this chapter with FGLI students and their parents.

# CHAPTER V: INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS THAT CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT FGLI HBCU STUDENT EXPERIENCE

> *"Looking back (Anonymous HBCU) was the best decision I ever made. (Anonymous HBCU) is my foundation. I wouldn't have gotten that experience anywhere else. My HBCU did a lot. I was so supported throughout".* Chris

As previously mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3, various factors challenge and support first-generation and low-income students (FGLI). To better understand the FGLI HBCU student experience, this chapter focuses on institutional factors that impacted HBCU FGLI alumni when they were enrolled as undergraduate students.

Presented here in three distinct categories, these factors consist of: (1) Institutional challenges and needs; (2) Institutional support; and (3) Recommendations for institutional improvements from HBCU FGLI alumni. The main institutional factors alumni presented as challenges for students were with teaching faculty and university staff. The named challenges consisted of campus support for FGLI and FGLI independent students and faculty and staff knowledge of FGLI student life. After discussing challenges identified by alums, I move on to discussing institutional support they found, used, and appreciated on their campuses. These support systems and programs consisted of: (1) Summer bridge and living-learning communities; (2) College preparation and development programs; (3) Support and encouragement from faculty, staff, and alumni; and (4) creating capital with friendships, clubs, and campus organizations. Next, I present recommendations for HBCUs from the alumni, which are intended to provide authentic insight into how faculty and staff can support FGLI students. These recommendations consist of faculty and staff serving as a resource and showing up as their authentic selves.

Finally, in the section entitled HBCU Pride and Experience, participants shared reflections on HBCU experiences before offering words of advice to current and future FGLI HBCU Students. The topics these FGLI HBCU alumni covered for current and future HBCU students were: (1) Asking for help; (2) Networking; and (3) Using available resources. Concluding this chapter, I share what success means for participants post-graduation in addition to what made these former FGLI students feel like they had something to prove by graduating and completing their degree.

## Institutional Challenges

Every great school has its challenges and this information from HBCU alumni provides an opportunity for institutions to improve, grow, make changes, and increase overall institutional success. Study participants felt that although they stated that their college experience overall was very positive, there are changes that they believe their HBCUs can make now to improve FGLI student success outcomes. Challenges to FGLI student success and support were presented to me in the form of recommendations by the alumni. Their stories regarding their respective HBCUs were mainly positive with several participants remarking that they had nothing overly critical or negative to say about their school in general. Notably, the challenges reported centered more on the need for creating targeted support exclusively for FGLI students.

It is important to note that these "challenges" did not simply "emerge" from the data. During participant interviews, discussions on student needs and college university experiences resulted in responses from participants on what would have been helpful to them as students. In addition, asking participants to share what they would want HBCU faculty and staff to know about how to better support FGLI HBCU if given the opportunity, evoked responses that revealed challenges and areas that can be improved. From these responses, which primarily took

the form of recommendations for institutions, challenges could be identified and ways to improve the student experience for FGLI HBCU students could be discussed while presenting anti-deficit framing of HBCUs.

### Campus Support Needs for FGLI and FGLI Independent Students

In Chapters 1 and 2, I discussed commonly known FGLI student needs that have been written about in literature and are widely accepted. Within the special demographic of FGLI students are FGLI students who are also independent. Three participants in this study indicated that they were documented as independent students from the time of their enrollment through their senior year when they graduated. These three alumni emphasized the fact that they were FGLI students who were also independent. It became apparent that they wanted to ensure my understanding of their belief that they experienced additional challenges as students because they felt they required a higher level of support; they felt they had the greatest unmet needs and responsibilities. An example of this additional challenge was given by Darian when he explained how frustrating it was to complete financial aid paperwork, having to prove and explain year after year that he was independent and receiving no financial support from his parents. Then JD explained how it felt to be 100% dependent on outside funding sources that may or may not be renewable annually, contingent on various variables, and meeting certain requirements. Then, other participants indicated that although they were not documented as independent students, they also went through college functioning as independent students. This means they acquired and financed their housing, food, transportation costs, and other living expenses without assistance from others. The independent students in the study emphasized the fact that they were independent and made it known that it took a lot to fully support themselves at a young age,

especially having to keep up with paying major bills. These factors caused these alums to lean heavily towards using the campus support and any assistance being provided by their institution.

Collectively, all participants in this study used and benefited from campus support services. As shared before, at least half of the participants received academic, career, and personal counseling support through TRIO Student Support Services, a federally funded grant by the U.S. Department of Education. Still, FGLI and FGLI independent students indicated a need for additional assistance with completing student paperwork for departments such as financial aid, housing, and general student record documents.

### Faculty and Staff Knowledge of FGLI Student Life

Who are FGLI HBCU students and what does college look like for them? What barriers do they have to crush to be successful in every endeavor of their college experience? I believe we are beginning to establish that here in this document. Next, I inquired what participants believed their HBCU staff and faculty might have done to better support them academically. Many of the participants responded by saying they felt like some professors had no idea who they truly were beyond being enrolled students in a course. This pointed to a challenge that could impact a student's academics.

I asked participants what they wanted HBCU faculty and staff to know about how they could better support HBCU FGLI students; the responses of Josh, JD, Shaq, and Darian were uniquely similar. Josh insisted that faculty and staff should, "Have a greater knowledge of the students you're working with" and that way they would be better equipped to "tailor your experience to fit more than just the model student…you've got to care above the job. You've got to care beyond the classroom." Impactful to say the least, I had to spend some time unpacking Josh's words. Although I believed I understood what he meant, I wanted him to take me through

a complete understanding of his message. In the simplest terms, Josh was describing what most people describe as "going above and beyond." However, there's a deeper process required to reach this level of going "above and beyond" that consists of spending time to get to know students as individuals, learning the individual needs of students (met and unmet needs), learning styles, assessing where they are currently in knowledge and understanding, academic and personal goals, and much more.

As for understanding what the term model student meant here, Josh explained that in this instance, the term model student simply meant the "perfect" and "all around student," a student who appears to have it all together, has good grades, and even excels academically, faces little to no "real" problems, and enjoys the all-around "traditional college student" life. When you face personal challenges as a student, it's not hard to imagine some students have it all together and everything is perfect for them when you compare your challenges to their experiences. This becomes a lot for any student to take in and for any faculty or staff member to help students work through. This is why having a better understanding of student experience aids in student success.

Also aligning with Josh's sentiment of "caring beyond the classroom" was Darian who said that faculty and staff "shouldn't just focus on academics." He stated that "Faculty should do more than just teach because some students look up to them. Students want a personal relationship." This suggestion, which includes a strong and bold statement, reveals a need. Certainly, there are faculty that do more than just teach; however, perhaps we can look at how the student may have encountered and experienced an instructor. Here I saw the student looking upon the instructor as a mentor, guide, or example. This could also possibly be a way that instructors provide indirect service to the student. If the need here is for students to feel like they

can connect with their professors and establish an academic helping relationship, then perhaps the overall need is to identify ways to create these interactions. Darian also expressed that some students may not feel comfortable with their professors, due to "feeling intimidated by them." If a student feels intimidated by their professor, this hinders their ability to learn and perform at their best academically. This is also a clear barrier to academic success that begins in the classroom but can have a negative effect at the greater institutional level.

JD expressed her thoughts concerning the need for faculty and staff to become more aware of students' lives outside the classroom as well. Importantly, she presented the issue that sometimes schools do not have the appropriate resources and staff in place to assist with the specific needs of FGLI students and independent students specifically. She reiterated that most of her challenges were not academic. The severity of her issues could have easily caused her to fail school. She explained that although there were programs in place to help FGLI students at her HBCU, the major focus of those programs and workshops was academic and focused less on the "real problems" she faced. She shared:

> I was dealing with real-life issues like finances, like homelessness, lack of support, and trying to seek answers for independent living, so where is the support in that area for independent students? And you're talking about 17 or 18-year-olds that don't know so, where do they get their answers? I needed help. I needed someone to tell me that it was going to be ok. I didn't know you could sign up with the housing and residence life director and if you had a specific situation, you could write a letter and say hey, this is my situation, and they would let you stay in the dorm rooms over break, depending on your situation. These are things that were told to me after the fact. If I had known about this resource before, I could have avoided having to figure out how I could stay at different places, and I could have just stayed in the dorm. So that's what I mean by a resource. Also like when it comes to resources, we had a specific person in financial aid that could answer our questions in regard to our financial aid, however when it came to financial decisions or classes, you really just didn't have that person that you could be like, "Hey, what do you think about this? Do you think I should do this?" and sometimes ethically speaking, some of them can't provide the counsel that you necessarily need and then it becomes more of an ethical issue because they can't tell you how to make those decisions, that's something you have to do on your own. So, it becomes difficult for the independent student because you don't really know what to do.

JD's recommendation pointed to the growing need for clinical social workers on college campuses. Using her own experiences, and the experiences of other FGLI, and FGLI independent students she encountered during her time in college as an example, she gave specific examples of services clinical social workers provide that are needed on campus. JD further shared that one of the reasons she studied social work and became a Doctor of Social Work is because she wanted to help reduce and alleviate some of the burdens that children, foster youth, and young independent adults face today.

Like JD, several participants in this study expressed that not every student's issue has to do with clinical mental health, emotional health needs, or the need for academic advising at the time. Some participants felt people were "quick" to assume that they had mental health issues because of the burden of having to support themselves in college with little to no help. Sometimes, participants were just overwhelmed, frustrated, or, exhausted. Then there were times when being overwhelmed, frustrated, and exhausted led to feeling like they went into survival mode due to stress. This is when mental health challenges began for some. I documented a few participants saying they felt like they were constantly in "survival mode" or "just trying to survive." I heard them say, I felt down, I was depressed, I was sad, I was just trying to figure it out, it took an emotional toll on me, I felt jealous of other students who didn't have to struggle, and it was hard. Then they would say, BUT I made it!

Sometimes an FGLI or any student who finds themselves living independently, or having to make independent decisions on their own, needs guidance that they cannot get from a parent or someone else they trust. These decisions are the "real world" or "adult" decisions that young adults may not have the needed knowledge or prior experience required to make these crucial decisions. Essentially, what each participant in this study indicated was that they experienced

major issues with coming into adulthood, due to having limited prior training or guidance. Navigating through complex situations in addition to being enrolled in college full-time, greatly contributed to increased stress levels that affected the students' overall well-being. Because of this, JD recommended that institutions “handle them (FGLI students) with a different level of care” because “they are already trying to dismantle a statistic in their family.”

Even with this small sample of alumni, their student narratives establish a need and challenge on the institutional level. As we listen to these challenges, I look to find feasible solutions to reduce or eliminate the challenge to achieve overall success and wellness for students and institutions alike. I discuss further recommendations in chapter six.

## Institutional Support

In this section, I present how FGLI HBCU alumni acknowledged receiving support and feeling supported by their HBCU. Participants identified specific programs, student support services, clubs and organizations, teaching and non-teaching faculty, staff, and alumni that served as a system of support for them. This section highlights what NC four-year public HBCUs are doing well from an institutional standpoint regarding support programs, services, and departments that participants in this study used. This section also details what participants love and appreciate about their schools and why they speak so highly and affectionately about their HBCU experiences.

### Summer Bridge and Living-Learning Community

Navigating a new place and being away from home was a challenge for some participants, while for others it was a welcomed adjustment. To assist new freshmen with adjusting and getting acclimated to their new college environment, some of the HBCUs represented in this study provided institutional support through college access programs, summer

bridge programs, or by hosting living-learning communities specifically for FGLI students. Participants in this study who participated in college access programs that included college tours and summer bridge programs shared that their first-year experience was "smoother" because of these programs. Josh, JD, Chris, Darian, and Deja participated in a summer bridge program at their HBCU the summer before their freshman year. Generally, summer bridge programs consist of a group of incoming freshmen engaging in four to six weeks of new student transition activities, cultural event trips, academic and personal enrichment, and experiential learning activities. This experience helps students to bond with their peers, gain a better understanding of campus culture, and learn to navigate a new landscape. The opportunity to earn college credit by taking 1-2 general education classes may also be offered.

Jaleel did not participate in a summer bridge program, but he and Josh participated in band camp, a requirement for all marching band members, which is a residential music camp experience that takes place weeks before the start of school. JD, Josh, Chris, Darian, Jaleel, and Deja say that these experiences enriched their freshman experience and helped them to begin building a network of friends. Josh, JD, Chris, Darian, and Deja participated in a summer bridge program and a living-learning community that was specifically for FGLI students.

Half of the participants in the study participated in a living-learning community during their freshman year of college. Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) traditionally consist of students with similar interests who live together and form a community, based on a commonality. These students typically engage in the same activities, classes, and residential programs provided by the university's housing and residence life or academic department (grouped by academic major). Before being accepted into an LLC, six study participants participated in a summer bridge program. Summer bridge programs and LLCs have been known

to increase the academic success of students and aid in student retention. Josh, JD, Deja, Darian, and Chris all indicated that they participated in a summer bridge program at their respective university the summer leading into their freshman year. JD, Deja, Darian, and Chris specifically participated in a year-long living-learning community for FGLI students, facilitated by the TRIO Student Support Services program (SSS) at their university. All of them credit these programs with making their transition to college "smoother" by helping them adjust to college. Darian and Chris detailed their experience participating in the LLC, sharing all about how the bonds of friendship and support they made because of the program still benefit them today. Chris said, "Being put together in an LLC helped because you knew somebody." Chris and Darian said being with other students who come from the same or similar backgrounds and who understood what it was like to be FGLI, really helped them to open up and not feel so "different."

Darian talked about how his TRIO SSS program helped alleviate some of the challenges he faced by having "all the resources, books, and materials" he needed for four years of school. Chris also shared with me how he benefited from the free tutoring TRIO provided saying, "TRIO had unlimited support. TRIO had a tutor for just about every subject you needed and if they didn't have someone at the time, TRIO went out and brought it to us." Essentially, Chris was sharing how TRIO SSS would locate other students who could tutor TRIO SSS in specific subjects that its program participants needed to increase the program participants' chances for academic success.

Chris was appreciative of the support and assistance he received through the TRIO SSS program at his HBCU. He says he saw the value of the assistance and exposure he received when he compared them to what his college sweetheart was receiving. Chris explained that his wife, who was his girlfriend at the time and also an FGLI student attending the same HBCU, wasn't

part of the TRIO SSS program and didn't receive half the opportunities he did. Chris gave an example of how this program helped his career trajectory by preparing him for the campus career fair, supplying him with all the materials needed to attend, and providing workshops on what to expect when attending a career fair. He shared that because his girlfriend did not have the preparatory training he had, she didn't feel confident enough to attend and wished she had because she wanted to. Chris credits this program with helping him navigate his personal, career, and academic pathway and through the comradery he established by bonding with the other TRIO students, a secondary chosen family support system.

From these responses, it is evident that the majority of the HBCU alumni who actively participated in TRIO Student Support Services as students found value in the program. Those who participated in summer bridge programs and transitioned into the TRIO Student Support Services Program received the extra added benefit of wrap-around student support as they transitioned into their first year of college and matriculated through college. Perhaps this helped to make a greater difference in student success outcomes because these students experienced both programs. This federally funded student support service and the program staff helped to provide college success skills training, and personal, career, and academic development. This program makes a difference in the lives of students by helping them persist through challenges that arise as they work to complete college requirements and graduate.

## College Preparation Assistance

College preparation involves providing support and resources needed to prepare high school students to successfully navigate college. A major goal of this preparation is to help students achieve successful outcomes. For some students, college preparation begins at home and is extended through high school attendance. The literature detailed in the aforementioned

chapters illustrates why first-generation college students are often less prepared for college than their counterparts. College access programs were created to prepare and improve the college readiness of FGLI students and motivate students to apply to college. College preparatory programs serve as "interventions to improve college readiness by offering a variety of services, from academic preparation and information about college and financial aid to psychosocial and behavioral supports, to the development of habits of mind including organizational skills, anticipation, persistence, and resiliency" (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013, p. 117). Scholars have produced compelling literature on the effects of college preparatory programs on FGLI student success; these often discuss the positive effect these programs have on increasing persistence.

Early exposure to college life and campus culture, through college enrichment and access programs, received the most credit from study participants helping them to become adjusted to college in the earlier days of freshman year. Participants in this study detailed the impact college preparatory programs had on their college readiness and the impact high school counselors made by personally assisting them with applying to college. Participants shared how their high school guidance counselors served as guides to applying to college, motivating, and positively affirming their ability to attend college. Participants also detailed their experience with navigating the college application process, some with and without assistance, what their understanding of the application process was before and after receiving assistance, what tools and resources they used to apply to college, who and what influenced them to make their college choice, and concerns about securing funding to pay for college. These accounts of who specifically contributed to assisting them with their college application process, finding funding for college, and deciding which college would be the best fit for them, are significant given the way literature indicates that FGLI students are typically underprepared for college and require much assistance. Shining

the light on high school counselors and other college access programs who help FGLI students shows the continued need to support these job roles and support these access programs.

### Support and Encouragement from Faculty, Staff, and Alumni

Although alumni acknowledged there were challenges with some faculty and staff at their respective institutions, many participants specifically expressed their appreciation for the faculty and staff who supported them. Alumni in this study provided several examples of times when faculty and staff uplifted, motivated, and encouraged them by showing that they cared. The outward showing of care and concern by university personnel in and out of the classroom left a lasting impression on the alumni during their time as students, so much so that when participants spoke about the kindness that was shown to them, you could see sincere gratitude exuded.

Relationships and the showing of care and concern were of great importance to participants. Throughout this study, participants spoke about how having various unmet needs caused them to work harder, become resilient, resourceful, increasingly independent, and determined. Several participants remarked how showing these traits in the classroom worked to their advantage, especially when they were working to improve their grades in a class or on assignments. Chris shared that the professors at his HBCU would help students as long as they saw them trying to improve their grades. He elaborated:

> As far as faculty and staff, when I think about academic wise, they made sure as long as you were trying, they knew, they saw that. They knew they understood it and they dropped your lowest grade which helped your GPA out a little bit or helped your overall GPA in the class. So as long as you were trying and you went to their office hours, they made sure that you weren't left on the short end of the stick. I mean, they made it tough for you, but they also made sure that "Ok this person tries, this person consistently came to our office hours, or they sought help so, let's see what we can do to make sure they get everything they need and move on." Even when it came to my kid (being a student with a child) everyone (professors) was really understanding of my situation but not by having pity on me. They were like, "OK Chris, we'll be there to support you and help you out with your situation, but what are you going to do on your part to help yourself out, not only for your child but, for yourself as a student to ensure that you graduate on time?

Chris expressed that there were “a ton of things” his instructors did to support him because “he didn’t know what he was looking for.” Chris went on to reiterate that he had originally come to his HBCU with hopes of getting a spot on the football team and, essentially, that’s all he’d thought of as far as plans for college. Chris described receiving attention and consideration from his instructors at his HBCU; they took into consideration his personal responsibilities as a young, new, father who needed grace and guidance as he continued his academic studies. This display of flexibility in instruction contributed to his overall success and most likely his retention.

In addition to university faculty, staff, and administrators providing support to students, HBCU alumni are known to give back to students by providing guidance. Some of the participants in this study received assistance from HBCU alumni who came back to campus to be of service to currently enrolled students. This additional support system was beneficial for Shaq, Daja, and Bria. Shaq expressed that when she was a student, the HBCU alumni from her school “stepped in” and provided support for her and other students “outside of office hours.” This interaction was a “great encouraging experience” for her. Bria chose her HBCU because her high school counselor brought in an alum of her HBCU to talk to her and her mom about the HBCU and what she could look forward to because Bria’s mom was nervous about her going off to college.

Like Shaq and Bria, Josh and Jaleel also had the opportunity to network and engage with their HBCUs alumni through their participation in the university marching band. In the HBCU marching band culture, alumni band members not only come back to guide new or undergraduate members in musicianship but also to be there as a source of support when needed. HBCU alumni often serve as guides for current students. Alumni come back to campus to serve on alumni

information panels to bestow words of wisdom and give advice to current students. They also return to campus to serve as representatives for the companies they now work for during university career fairs, oftentimes hiring current students for internships, and providing insight on what it is like to work for the company they represent. All of the HBCUs in this study have active alumni associations and a few of them have recruiter programs in place where interested alums can become certified to recruit students to the university and represent the university at community events and college fairs. HBCU alums are one of the greatest resources and valuable assets HBCUs have. HBCU alumni hold a wealth of knowledge and serve as living testaments to the greatness that HBCUs produce.

### Creating Capital through Friendships, Clubs, and Campus Organizations

Another way these FGLI HBCU graduates found support and community in college was through building friendships with roommates, joining student government, marching band, and Greek organizations (fraternities and sororities). Through these connections, they were also able to develop personal, career, and academic success. Participants shared how study groups and group project groups they were placed in to complete projects also helped them to persist through college. These groups helped them persist through graduation by helping them to leverage consistent academic support (e.g. tutoring, exam prep, career insights based on major), sharing course materials they otherwise were not able to afford when needed, and serving as accountability partners. Membership in organizations that some study participants joined such as their universities' marching band, student government association (SGA), and Greek Life also had specific academic requirements that participants had to maintain to retain membership. Student grades were also monitored by an academic advisor, academic coach, and/or an organization advisor.

Chris talked with me about how participating in study groups helped to overcome academic challenges and establish an academic support system that took him through college. He said, “I leaned on my study group. I couldn’t have gotten through college without them.” Chris went on to share how challenging his junior-year accounting classes were. He also expressed that his classmates were some of the most important sources of support and through this connection, he was able to “stay on track” with degree progression. He explained how progressing through courses with the same people in his class and major and receiving tutoring from upperclassmen was what helped him. When speaking of some of the highlights of his college experience, Chris proclaimed, “I cherish the long-lasting relationships. My HBCU opened my mind up to the world.” Chris also joined an accounting honor society, later becoming a tutor himself, and competed in accounting competitions.

Ray also credited his involvement with study groups for helping him to be successful personally and academically. Speaking specifically to the point of how developing friendships at his HBCU contributed to his success, he explained, “Friendship is key. I took practical courses, so we (classmates) were on a team.” Like Chris, Ray also purposefully matriculated through his classes and coursework with the same group of classmates; they supported each other and benefitted from the collaborative study. Bria considered the friendships she made at her HBCU to be one of the major highlights of her time in college saying, “You walk in with no support and walk out with support -- friends, opportunities, experiences.” JD and Daja said when they were food insecure, they had friends that would cover the cost of their food so they wouldn’t be hungry.

Jaleel and Josh were a part of the largest organization on their HBCU campus, the university marching band. Although they both attended different HBCUs, the experience they

described was very similar. Both explained to me that the culture of HBCU bands is family-oriented. Jaleel and Josh chose their HBCU specifically for their band program and the HBCU culture. Both credit their activity in the band, bandmates, band director, and section leader for helping them to develop accountability and a sense of responsibility. Participating in the marching band taught Josh accountability in many ways. His participation in the band along with spending time on activities created challenges that were hard at times to navigate. He explained:

> Balancing school activities, friends, and family, sometimes it's hard to determine which ones are more important. I had my band family and my real family. I was like, "how can I balance them all?" I had so much going on and didn't apply myself. The band and friends became my primary reason for being.

Being part of the university marching band was one of the greatest highlights of Josh's college experience, but it came with a sacrifice. When Josh started having trouble balancing academics and the band, his band director sent a letter home to his parents concerning his academic performance. Satisfactory academic performance is a requirement to march in the band. Josh explained that he had "always kept family and academics separate" because "there was no accountability from home because they didn't know what to ask (how to help). They just cared if I passed (classes) and graduated." Accountability, motivation from his grandmother, and a warning from his band director helped motivate Josh to improve his grades. For Josh, the pride he felt from being in the band, the friendships made, HBCU homecoming, traveling with the band, and coming from the small town he came from all made him realize that he needed to do whatever it took to be in good academic standing.

Jaleel expressed the same pride and passion for his university band, saying being in the band was the major highlight of his college experience. The band, the excitement of the game day, going to the cafeteria with other band members, and the university community being excited

to take pictures of him in his band uniform, all contributed to the pride he felt. Jaleel said he felt like he had “arrived” when he was chosen for the band. It was “fun times.”

From the alumni narrative of institutional support that contributed to their success, it can be seen how students used navigational capital to progress through school by building the support system they needed in college. These FGLI students were taught various skills and abilities on how to navigate their educational space and yield the best outcomes. Then, they created a community in the spaces they became members of, such as student government, marching band, TRIO SSS, and Greek life to help support them. Thus they created cultural wealth.

## Recommendations from FGLI HBCU Alumni to HBCUs

As institutions look to develop their strategic plans for student retention, it is essential to understand the implications student engagement and institutional response to student needs will have on current students and future young alumni populations. After listening to and learning from the various narratives of these HBCU alumni, it can be determined that each of their HBCUs had a valuable role in developing, shaping, and molding them as young adults. All of the alumni came to their HBCU with the hope of graduating and along the way, growing up, discovering who they were as individuals, and increasing their knowledge alongside both different and like-minded individuals. Tales of determination despite challenges permeate their stories. Alumni told stories of needs that went unmet and the needs that were met because each of them made a way to provide for themselves as well as needs that were met because of the help and support of institutional initiatives, family, and friends. Alongside the pride each individual had for their HBCU, were recommendations of what could make the college experience for HBCU FGLI greater. During the *Life Post Graduation* portion of the interviews, I asked each

participant to tell me what they would say to HBCU faculty and staff about how to best support HBCU FGLI students if given the opportunity. As an educator who has worked with FGLI HBCU students for over 10 years, this portion of the interview opened my eyes and moved me. In the next section, I share the suggestions that the FGLI HBCU alumni in this study have for the colleges and universities that have committed to educate them. Participants wanted their schools to know who they are as people and beyond the identity of "student", how they lived, what they had to go through to stay in college, and how they needed to be engaged authentically.

### Serving as a Resource

Chris and Deja believed that faculty and staff could help FGLI HBCU students by serving as a resource. Because they had experienced what it felt like to have faculty and staff at their HBCU who transcended above and beyond the scope of their title to help students, they could differentiate between those they could go to for anything they needed versus those who were less engaged. Both alums expressed the importance of having faculty and staff that are easy to talk to and whom students feel like they can "lean on," especially because some students may not always have friends or family they can go to. Deja stated:

> I would tell HBCU faculty and staff to just be a resource to students, encourage them to come (use campus resources or talk to professors), push, and motivate them (students). But it's up to the student to seek help and resources that are at no cost to them.

While here I heard Deja expressing a need for intentional active engagement and service from faculty and staff, she also spoke to students taking accountability to seek and take advantage of offered resources. The key here would be to ensure that FGLI students, along with all students, are aware of campus resources and often reminded of the services each student services department provides. Deja recommended "pairing students with a buddy in a buddy program for first-year students" to help them become more acclimated to campus and sources of

support. Chris also mentioned that faculty and staff serve as a resource saying, “Faculty and staff can help just by being there for them (students). A lot of students do not have anyone. Be present. I was blessed to have so many resources.” What I understood Chris and Deja to be expressing is the need for “caring beyond the classroom” as Josh said. There is a need for more than providing curriculum and instruction for students by staff.

### Show Up as Your Authentic Self: A Note to Faculty and Staff

In addition to students wanting their university faculty and staff to know who they are beyond being students in a classroom, these alumni share how their perceptions of faculty and staff impact their academic and overall college experience. In reflection, they suggested that the college and classroom environment would have felt more inviting if students were allowed to authentically engage with faculty and staff. Essentially, they described the need for gaining a deeper relationship with faculty in hopes that this would increase their knowledge of how to apply what they learn in the classroom to real-world experiences. Daja and Bria said they would have benefited from professors taking an interest in who they were outside the classroom and showing transparency by perhaps using their own life experiences as teaching moments. Bria suggested:

> Change your approach. Don’t look at students in just one way but know that students are diverse. Take an individualized approach with FGLI students. Check on students. Prepare them for life after the degree. If we didn’t have an example of what college life was before college, we don’t have an example of what life with this degree is like after.

Bria’s response calls for faculty to create personalized learning and engagement opportunities, for faculty to see the learners they teach beyond their identity as a “student,” and to incorporate life skills training or development with academic preparation. Daja’s recommendation to faculty and staff included her perceptions of their attitude and perceived interest in working and teaching at HBCUs. She remarked:

> I would tell faculty pretty much what I tell everyone and that is that it's OK to show up as your authentic self. I think so often, especially faculty, sometimes feel like they need to fit into the mold of what we think faculty are supposed to be (which are) these educated and academically esteemed people. But, if you have experiences, these students want to know that. I don't care if you went to Yale or Harvard or Howard…I don't care where you went to school and learned. That's not necessarily what I'm here to learn and so many people understand that, especially HBCU and FGLI students. I care about that. I care about who you are as a person because that's the connection that matters most to me. So, I think about the connections of the faculty and staff members that I have, and I have those connections because of them showing up every single day their authentic self, unapologetic, and who they are.

From this narrative, we see Deja directly calling for faculty to be vulnerable enough to share about themselves, which includes sharing their triumphs and challenges. She directly states that she wants to feel a connection with the people that have been charged with educating her. This is an opportunity for faculty and staff to show relatability, model how academic lessons reach beyond and outside of the classroom, and foster an environment where students are more likely to organically engage in learning, resulting in better academic performance.

Daja also gave an example of how the authenticity of a faculty member at HBCU impacted her greatly in an inspirational and positive way, although she was never enrolled in any of his classes:

> I think about a particular faculty member Dr. (omitted) at (NC HBCU) I actually never took his class. (Speaking with exclamation and excitement) Everyone everywhere loves him! Why? It's because no matter where he is, he's going to be his authentic self. He's going to tell his story and his story is so important so, tell your story, tell me who you are, and that is going to be the buy-in for why I'm going to listen to you. It's not going to be because of the accolades, it's not going to be because of the letters behind or in front of your name, it's going to be because of your testimony. All of that matters to FGLI students more than the fact that you have your doctorate. I mean all that is cool, and that's the end goal, but that's 50 miles away (for me).

Daja's recollection of the experience she had with a professor at her HBCU spoke volumes. She presented her recommendation for faculty and staff in a way that leaves space for them to imagine how they can make a difference by being their true authentic selves. She shows

respect for the position and credentials of her professors but also acknowledges her understanding that like students, professors are much more than their title or the identity of professor or faculty.

Lastly, in being authentic, there is also a need to be mindful of the approach and how faculty and staff show up or appear to students. Just as Daja explained how students cared less about the titles and accolades of their professors, JD's thoughts about that topic mirrored Daja's in some ways. JD was passionate about faculty and staff being more mindful of their words and how they come off to students. She expressed:

> You can't just say they (students) have to work hard. It's complex. A student is only supposed to be focused on academics, but they can't. We (FGLI students) have to figure out how to do it all. Staff needs to be trained better. Sometimes your privilege as a staff (member) speaks loud because of how you (they) talk to students. Every staff member should be able to support students from all backgrounds. Don't look like you are too good to have a relationship with students. I feel like sometimes there's no empathy in higher education. Students would feel more supported and staff would be more respected if it was.

JD spoke about how some professors "throw out the assumption" that some students aren't trying hard enough when they don't perform well in the classroom. As a student, JD sometimes perceived those attitudes as discouraging and demeaning. These attitudes and assumptions that she wasn't applying herself in the classroom, sometimes caused her to withdraw from fully engaging in class. According to JD, she did work hard in college and was an honor student most semesters, but it took working past feeling overwhelmed and exhausted with life and responsibilities weighing heavy on her. Her recommendation was also for faculty and staff to seek to understand what students may be dealing with personally and how this may affect their academics to help the student find a possible solution to their challenges.

Here, alumni call again for relationships and connections with their professors. They believe that if professors had this connection, knowledge, and understanding of who they are as

FGLI students, these students would learn better and be excited about what they're learning and create a teacher-student bond. The alums want professors to understand that FGLI students often come to campus with a load of responsibilities, then add academic and additional responsibilities on top of this. They want faculty to know that on top of working hard to meet satisfactory academic progress (SAP) and managing personal issues, having a professor that shows empathy for all they have to manage is a need. In essence, what is being suggested here is promoting classrooms where both students and professors can show up as their true authentic selves, being open to vulnerability, understanding, and empathy.

## HBCU Pride and Experience

In previous chapters, I discussed HBCU history, who HBCUs have traditionally served, what constitutes a first-generation and low-income college student, and the need for HBCUs. Situated in these discussions were explanations of personal, family, and institutional factors that challenge and support first-generation and low-income college students. Then during the conversation with three of this study's participants, another FGLI sub-population emerged, and that is the independent FGLI student. After listening to and reading the narratives of alumni who were both FGLI and independent students, it became evident that there are distinctions between "low" and "very low" income students, who are "extremely impoverished," as Chen and Nunnery (2019) suggested in their profile of very low-and low-income undergraduates from 2015 to 2016. These alumni certify, show, and prove that there are indeed levels of student poverty and that there is a further distinction between low-income students.

HBCUs have historically answered the call and met the challenge of educating students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, predominantly African American students. These students, who often have some of the hardest need gaps to close, push past the stereotypes often

used to label them, and reach high levels of success when given the opportunity and proper support. The participants in this study also have shown that although some of them may have experienced challenges during their enrollment at their respective HBCUs, their institution still gave them so much in return, and choosing to attend their HBCU was one of the best decisions they ever made.

In the previous sections of this chapter, I gleaned from the personal narratives of Historically Black College and University first-generation low-income students explanations of how institutional challenges and institutional support both negatively and positively impacted them. What we learned is that these HBCU FGLI students had no other choice but to always be conscious of the challenges they face. To achieve success, they would need to stand steadfast and be mindful of the reward they could have if they maintained the ability to hold themselves together and press forward to reach their goal of graduating. Underlying all of their trials and triumphs, the HBCU pride and the impact the HBCU experience had on these young alumni were priceless to them. Many of the participants decided that if they had the chance to do it all over again, they would still choose their HBCU.

Through analyzing and summarizing the narratives of HBCU FGLI alumni, I was presented with how alums used the capital they acquired on their HBCU campus to propel themselves through successful matriculation through college as well as establish lifelong connections and networks of friends who became their family. In this section, I focus on how alumni feel they benefited from attending their HBCU, words of encouragement and advice FGLI HBCU alums left for current FGLI HBCU students and FGLI students in general, the importance of using campus resources, and defining success on your terms. I use this section to give the alums' voices a platform once again and to create space for them to speak on how

HBCUs have shaped who they are today. The greatest source of support for all ten participants was themselves. As I spoke to each participant, they would share that, regardless of what was occurring in their lives or who they had asked for support, in the end, the only person they could depend on was themselves. They understood that to accomplish their dreams and goals, self-determination and intrinsic motivation would be key to realizing success. I end this chapter by sharing how participants defined success and their thoughts on how successful they believe they have been post-graduation.

With five different North Carolina HBCUs being represented, one of the biggest highlights of the interview portion of this study was meeting each participant and discovering how they felt their HBCU impacted them. Each participant was asked to reflect on how their HBCU college experience impacted their life today. Participants were grateful for their HBCU experience and the sense of love, family, and belonging they found or built there. “Sense of belonging in college has been shown to be related to academic achievement, retention, and persistence to degree attainment” (Hinton and Woods, 2019, p. 40). Some of the alums stated that their HBCU prepared them to be able to go anywhere in the world and that they could compete with some of the best and brightest scholars.

Chris and JD talked about finding brotherly and sisterly love at their HBCU, both saying they felt that their HBCU was like one big family. Beyond having pride in his HBCU, Chris shared how some of his friends that did not attend an HBCU give him respect when he talks about his HBCU and the great foundation it provided for him. Chris also said that when he travels and is in an airport wearing his school shirt or something with the school logo, strangers or alums he doesn’t know stop him and say something about his shirt. He says alumni are always excited to see fellow alums and when you meet another alum, “It’s like an instant bond and

connection that makes you feel good." Chris also met his wife in college, which he says really is one of the greatest things to happen to him and come out of his college experience. He's proud of the family that he and his wife have built together. Shaq also shares the same sentiments with Chris as she also met her spouse in college although he did not attend college. Thinking back about her HBCU experience, she shared:

> It motivated and shaped me into the woman I am becoming. I'm forever evolving. I'm still becoming. I still kept my relationships from college, and I'm still building relationships with people from college because of mom and kid play dates. There was a girl from school I know and now our children play together. HBCUs protect each other, it's not something you can explain, it's something you (have to) experience.

For these alums, the friendships and relationships they built at their HBCU represented their social capital as they were able to reach success by joining the campus communities' networks of people and resources (Yosso, 2005, p.79).

Participants also credited their HBCUs with instilling the drive and motivation that they have today. Many participants remarked that being in college with like-minded individuals who work hard to perform at their personal and academic best, regardless of their background and the challenges they may have, caused them to want to work harder and be successful as well. In addition, the constant reminders from HBCU leadership that excellence and high scholastic achievement were the standard at their HBCU, empowered them to strive for high academic marks or seek academic support to improve their grades. Darian made an interesting point when he spoke about how seeing students who seemed to have a harder time making their way through college really pushed him. He said:

> You can be having a tough day and then you see these kids who have it worse than you still trying, I mean really trying and not giving up, and that makes you think. I used to think "dang, they're really struggling but they're still pushing themselves and I'm over here feeling down about my situation." Seeing kids that still get up every day and still try made me want to do better and not complain about my situation.

Ray also expressed that his HBCU made him become the hard-working person he is today. He explained that he "came from a culture of hardworking people" so when he went to college and saw the dedication students in his major and at his HBCU overall had towards their studies, it inspired him to be his absolute best. These former students essentially spoke about the power of extrinsic motivation. It became clear that they harnessed the power of extrinsic motivation: the push they were inspired to have when they saw other students at their school persisting, and hoping to achieve goals that at times, seemed so out of their reach.

Lastly, Deja's story of her parents being inspired to go to college because she was able to have a college experience and graduate, speaks to how drive, motivation, and success for one first-generation student can be transformative for the family. Some of the participants in this study were the first on either side of their maternal or paternal family to graduate. For those students and others, degree attainment not only was a point of pride for themselves as individuals, but it marked a sense of accomplishment for their entire family. Deja believes her college attendance set an example for her younger siblings and inspired her parents to want to attend college as well. By Deja earning her college degree, she has created a legacy of access and opportunity for her entire family.

In summation, by graduating, all the HBCU graduates in this study set themselves apart by establishing a family legacy of degree attainment. Their attendance at their HBCU helped to instill values that they believe have made them successful. Participants attested that through their attendance at their HBCU, they learned who they were as individuals, how to have pride in themselves and the academic work they produced, a solid work ethic, how to persevere despite challenging circumstances, how to channel intrinsic motivation, and more. The pride these

former students have in their HBCU was evident throughout this study and they will never forget the education they received in and out of the classroom at their HBCU.

### Words of Advice from FGLI HBCU Alumni to Current FGLI HBCU Students

The HBCU FGLI alumni in this study were eager to share their stories in hopes that the information they shared would be helpful for students, HBCUs, families of FGLI students, and anyone serious about developing strategies to dismantle FGLI student barriers. The alumni in this study took time to share words of encouragement, motivation, and advice for HBCU FGLI students who are on the path to graduation and those who are preparing to go to college. In addition, alumni provided strategies on how to navigate college, overcome challenges, how to enjoy the college experience, and prepare for life after college while still in college. Their hope for providing this advice was to provide a sort of "roadmap" and guide to make college life easier for students who come behind them.

The HBCU FGLI alumni in this study placed great emphasis on the importance of curating and keeping good relationships beyond peer groups in college and they emphasized how doing so can lead to building a much-needed circle of support. The advice they gave to current and incoming college FGLI college students was clear. They recommended students learn to ask for help, network on campus, and use all available resources that would help them succeed. They said that one great way to find out about the services and resources available to students is during new student orientation. Some of them further shared that the first weeks of school are when most campus support and academic departments are readily available to introduce their services and staff to students. Campus services and staff normally make themselves available to students in one centralized area and make a concerted effort to ensure students are aware of all the assistance available to them. I appreciated that these former students remembered this from being

in school and were able to provide these words of advice to current and future students. One of the most agreed upon ways to combat challenges and find support in college according to participants is to ask for help from campus support departments and staff and develop a relationship with them.

Chris's advice to students was to make sure they stay in touch with the staff in various campus support departments throughout the time they are in school, even when they don't need immediate support at the moment. Chris recommended the following for students:

> Network with people and figure out the resources on campus like first-generation student programs. Go to freshman social events, I would really say go to all the events hosted on campus like homecoming and use your alumni networks. Try to find a study group or workgroup and learn about the others in the group. Stay in touch with your faculty advisor to make sure you're on track (with grades). Use all the resources like career counseling and tutors. Definitely take all their advice! As far as summer school, don't look at it as just something you go to when you're behind. Summer school is what you need to stay on track academically or get back on track.

Chris emphasized that resources are on campus and available to all students if they go out and seek them. He also made it clear that although faculty and staff are there to help and may ask students if they need help or assistance, students should not expect faculty and staff to "know that something is wrong, especially if you're showing up to class every day and don't look like something is wrong. That's when it's up to you to speak up and say hey, I need some help." Like Chris, Deja also stressed the importance of networking and taking in as much of the college experience as possible. Her advice to current students and incoming freshmen was:

> Try new things and go live the college experience. Resources are out there, you just have to ask for what you need and seek peer support. Ask for what you need and communicate. I had to learn how to communicate and have conversations. You have to be able to say what you need.

Chis and Deja alluded to the need for students to take the initiative to seek out resources to help themselves.

Bria also said that students should "Take any resources that come your way and get with your school's alumni to get help and advice. They can be really helpful." Other participants also mentioned using older alumni from their schools as a resource. They mentioned that having someone who provides guidance about the same situations and scenarios and who actually attended the same school, made them feel more understood and at ease, and it helped tremendously. JD, having been an FGLI independent student, felt very strongly about advising current and incoming FGLI students to seek out resources. She advised:

> Don't be afraid to ask for help. If you don't advocate for yourself, no one else will. Use your resources. You have to learn how to be your (own) best advocate. If not, you will be mentally drained if you are not mentally strong.

JD spoke a lot about how being an FGLI independent student affected her mentally and emotionally. Being independent in college and a former ward of the state for 10-plus years leading up to her college enrollment, apparently caused her to experience college and life in general in a way that most of the other participants did not express that they had. These recommendations from Chris, Deja, Bria, and JD display how these former students learned to operate independently, find, and utilize campus support at their HBCU. There was a consensus that students must make more effort to seek appropriate services and take charge of their college experience.

## Defining Success Post Graduation

*"The sky is not the limit for me because I wish to go beyond the sky"*. (Ray)

In chapter one, I offered various definitions of success. For this study, I have discussed personal and academic success in depth from a research and institutional standpoint. In the "Life Post Graduation" portion of participant interviews, questions about how students define success provided extremely personal and authentic responses. From the most talkative to the least

talkative study participant of this study, everyone had much to say about how they define success. What I enjoyed most about this point of the interview is that every participant defined success on their own terms. I asked participants what success meant to them, especially as a graduate of an HBCU, and concluded by asking them how successful they feel today.

Two main themes arose in the ways students defined or identified a sign of success. The first theme or identifier of success for participants was establishing security for their families and the second was realizing their accomplishments and personal growth for themselves. Secondarily, and aside from realizing personal success for themselves, was proving to and showing others that they had become successful. Proving their success to others was not to show off in a braggadocious fashion, but to show that they accomplished a great goal. To this day some participants still couldn't believe that they had gotten as far as they did academically, and they are still amazed and in awe of the fact that they not only graduated from college but went on to complete master's and doctoral degrees. This was the sentiment expressed by JD, Josh, Darian, and Chris who between them hold three master's degrees, two doctoral degrees, and one juris doctorate degree.

Below participants describe what they believe is the culmination of true success at this time in their lives. I believe it is important to note as I did that what every participant described as a sign of success was the securing of basic needs, not material things. Some of the basic needs' resources the alumni shared that they wanted for themselves and their families were good physical health, safe housing, financial stability, and mental wellbeing.

### Success Indicated by Family Security

There was a common theme among participants who had already started families of their own or had taken on the responsibility of contributing financially to their families, especially to

younger siblings. Their definition of success almost always focused on being successful to meet the needs of their family and, specifically for participants who are parents, the needs of their small children. Being a parent that can provide for children and ensuring their children's happiness was paramount to participants. They also wanted their children to be proud of them as parents. Ray's definition and outlook on success was very motivational. Listening to him talk about success moved me so much that it brought me to tears. He expressed:

> Success is not just about achieving what you want, it's making sure someone else can achieve what they want too. I worked hard so I could help my family. I don't think my brothers will have to go through what I went through…they don't deserve that. I am successful. I have achieved what I wanted to achieve at 30. I feel 80% successful.

Ray responded to my questions about success with a straight face as tears began to form in my eyes. His genuine care overtook me for his family and the passion he spoke with. Ray apologized for bringing me to tears. I assured him they were happy tears and that it was so refreshing to hear someone be so thoughtful, driven, and dedicated to making someone else's life easier and much better. Ray also told me that:

> Life doesn't have to be about repeating your past or staying down in a bad place because that's where you started from. You can be better in your future. We have seen people come from nowhere to somewhere with hard work and consistency and become better everyday.

Ray's thoughts on success gave me much to think about. Like Ray, I have come to learn that some of our greatest successes are not our own. Or at least we do not reach success on our own. Our success is the culmination of others pouring into us and then giving a portion of ourselves to others in return so that we all can thrive.

Having a healthy and happy family that is well taken care of is what success meant to many of the alums in this study. Whether it was the family they came from, the family they

created, or the future family they will have, participants included family in their definition of success. Chris included his family in his definition of success by stating:

> Doing something you enjoy doing, no matter if it doesn't mean much to someone else, is what makes you successful. My family is what makes me successful and drives me, the family I created. I feel about 85% successful. The other 15% will come when I feel like I'm doing something I love to do (career-wise).

Like Chris, Shaq also felt that success or being successful was signified by "doing whatever makes you happy" and incorporated having happy children as the mark of success. Shaq shared that a point of pride and success for herself was knowing that she "can overcome challenges, be more confident in speaking, and build confidence." On a scale of 1-10, Shaq said, "I'm a 12 and the scale is still growing. I have more work to do. I want my kids to see and feel the love I have for them." After I noticed the pattern of participants linking personal success to the happiness of children, I stopped to take into account that five out of the ten participants were the parents of children all under the age of six, and two of those participants were fairly new mothers, with children under the age of two. This quite possibly could have been the leading factor as to why participants led by significantly correlating their success to children.

Bria, who also believed that success equates to growth and, for her, is only marked by her own personal growth, admitted that she used to attach success to her G.P.A. Graduating from college and no longer being in a space that oftentimes measures success primarily by academic achievement, helped Bria to realize that success consists of more than just making good grades and that she represents more than just a number.

Overall, I noticed that participants enjoyed reflecting on where they are now in their lives compared to where they started out. For those that felt successful, this time of reflection helped them to see that defining success on their own terms felt good. Although some of the participants stated that they weren't quite where they wanted to be, had work to do on themselves, or wished

they were in a different place career wise or financially, I encouraged them to think about how far they had come. I went back over my notes with them and recalled for them all the challenges and barriers they'd told me they had overcome. I encouraged them to think about all the wonderful things they have already accomplished and all the awesome things they will do in the future. This helped to put things in perspective for the participants and I could visually see the pride that came back over them. I think sometimes we need people to show us that we have overcome so many challenges, that we can do anything, and, if we have done our best, that is good enough. I wanted each participant to know how proud I was of them, even if we had just met.

By the time we got to this portion of the interview when we discussed what success meant to the participants, I wasn't surprised that none of them attributed success to money, cars, clothes, and other material things because all of them seemed so humble and thankful for the little things. I learned that what participants wanted the most is what many of them didn't have as children growing up. This is why providing a safe environment and a home for their children was so important, along with making sure their children are happy, healthy, and don't have to struggle. Their family being proud of them was of the utmost importance. I noticed that the male participants placed emphasis on wanting to make their moms proud and the female participants wanted their fathers to be proud of them. Chris had no issue telling me he was a mama's boy and how much he loved his mama and Daja fawned over her father in true Daddies girl fashion. I could tell that even though he recently passed on, she's still working hard to make him proud.
I am happy that these alumni feel successful and feel like success can look like different things

for different people and has a lot to do with what we value. These alums have defined success for themselves, and I love that they didn't compare themselves to others to measure or define success.

### Something to Prove to Myself and You

Throughout the virtual interviews I observed the non-verbal cues of participants. I listened for changes in tone and documented which topics and questions evoked looks or feelings of uncertainty, happiness, sadness, and excitement. As I explained in chapter four in the section entitled "*Celebration at the End"*, I learned that a part of what drove some alumni to finish college was the determination that stemmed from having something to prove. Specifically, there were participants in this study that not only wanted to prove to themselves that they could graduate college, but they wanted to prove to friends and family that they could graduate as well. The need to prove themselves to others came from people telling them that they would never graduate, that they wouldn't be anything in life, and from the struggle of being FGLI and not receiving the various forms of support they wanted and needed from people that were the closest to them.

Although there were other participants in this study who also felt they had something to prove, JD and Jaleel spent a great deal of time sharing why obtaining their degree was extremely personal to them. They explained why achieving personal success in life after college was extremely rewarding for them and gave them the greatest sense of pride and accomplishment because of what they had endured in life. Jaleel explained:

> I feel very successful. Nobody in my family has ever done what I have academically or personally. Being able to run my business and talk about my company to people from all over the world while letting them know I'm also an HBCU graduate is awesome. Having people wish they had the HBCU experience because you had one is cool too.

Post undergraduate studies, Jaleel went on to put himself through a master's program, become a homeowner, the CEO and CFO of his own business that has already grossed almost a half million dollars, and he is looking forward to beginning doctoral studies soon. He has a better relationship with his family now and enjoys having the ability to help them when they need help. Jaleel's educational experiences, college exposure, and hard work, now enable him to share opportunities with his mother and brother that they also never had. This makes Jaleel feel successful. Being able to give back to his family who could not support him in the past is a point of pride for Jaleel. The relationship he and his family are building through the bond they are establishing now is what Jaleel wanted most.

JD indicated that she also feels a great sense of accomplishment and success because she has surpassed the goals she set for herself and achieved what others said was impossible for her. She said, "I have already beat so many barriers and done what everybody told me a girl like me, coming from where I come from couldn't. Some people just knew I wouldn't be anything, they'd counted me out." On the topic of success and defining it, she added:

> If you're able to dismantle things you once struggled with, improve yourself, and change your life, that's success. Success is changing your mindset and being able to defy the odds. People had placed limits on my life. This was a drive. I am successful, not only statistically speaking, but with my life. With all I went through, I'm actually surprised that I am where I am because statistics say otherwise. This speaks to how successful I am.

JD decided that it was up to her to change her mindset and shift her focus on to positive self-development through college degree attainment. JD and Jaleel believe that a major part of their success comes from having no other choice but to be resilient. Astonishingly during their interviews, they both repeatedly remarked "I had no choice" and stated "there's nothing else out there for me" (JD) or "I knew there would be nothing else out there for me" (Jaleel) when we talked about success, drive, and motivation. When JD and Jaleel stated that they knew there was

nothing else out there for them, this meant that college was their only possible option to make it out of the life they had before. Essentially, for them college was their ticket out of the struggle they had known for so long because degree attainment for them was equated with success and would give them the credentials needed to get a good job and provide for themselves. If they did not go to college, there were no other plans set up for them. Oftentimes students come to college to escape undesirable or less than positive home life situations. In the case of JD, she came from a foster home living situation so, there was nowhere for her to return home to if she didn't go to college because she had aged out of foster care. This is also why both former students felt that they had no other choice than to be successful and that college would be their pathway to success. While in school, they always thought of the life and living situation they came from back home and were determined to make a better life for themselves going forward. A more in depth look at Jaleel's and JD's college experience is shared in chapter three in the introduction to participants section.

## Conclusion

So far, NC HBCU FGLI Alumni from five different institutions have detailed their lived undergraduate student experience, directly presenting the challenges they faced that they believe were directly correlated to institutional approach and response followed by the ways they felt supported on campus. I have detailed the impact family, faculty, staff, relationship building, and resource leverage can have on the overall success of students. I have provided examples of a few challenges HBCU alumni from five NC HBCUs stated cause opposition to student success and shared their suggestions for eliminating or reducing those identified barriers. Former students expressed that although they had a positive college experience at their HBCU

and they highly recommend HBCUs to other students, there is a serious need for improvement in areas that directly impact and contribute to an increased positive experience for FGLI students.

Through this study, it can be suggested that the HBCU FGLI student experience is not just slightly varied, as some literature suggests, when compared to the traditional student experience of students who do not identify as FGLI. In fact, the data derived from this study points to the fact that some HBCU FGLI students experience highly varied, non-traditional, and extremely complex college experiences. Through dialogue on positive factors and negative student experiences, we begin to understand the complexity of the total FGLI HBCU student experience, which includes assessing both academic and personal progress. In addition, during the study interview, there were participants who specifically identified themselves as FGLI-independent students. They made a case for why they required an additional level of support. They provided scenarios, examples, and recommendations to show why and how their special student demographic would benefit from targeted FGLI independent student specific wrap-a-round support and why such support should be implemented expeditiously. The institutional recommendations for the majority of the challenges alumni detailed include concern for student engagement, faculty/staff relationship, customer service within student services and student support services departments, and institutional procedures. Understanding and taking into consideration the examples that this sample of young alumni provided is critical for NC HBCUs and HBCUs in general; this is especially true in the areas of institutional research, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness for the purpose of measuring institutional performance.

# CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FINAL THOUGHTS

I was inspired to choose this topic for research because I have always been intrigued and inspired by the FGLI HBCU students that I went to school with and, later, taught and academically advised. By conducting this study, I sought to learn from North Carolina HBCU alumni, what they believed were institutional and personal factors that impacted them the most when they were students at their HBCUs. In addition, I thought it was important to introduce a diverse body of narratives from FGLI alums who have lived through and experienced the topics we write about when we produce literature on FGLI students and graduates.

I spent time researching FGLI students and HBCUs' history of educating people of color from disadvantaged backgrounds, the purpose for which HBCUs were established. As an alumna of an NC HBCU, I was so excited to be able to include in this study10 NC HBCU alums, representing 5 different NC HBCUs. Through their stories, I gained more insight into the college experience of African American FGLI alums who attended HBCUs, the challenges they faced, the successes they achieved, and the support systems that they placed the most value in; even if that support system was not always available to them. Engaging with the alums through open-ended interview questions and sharing the commonality of being a product of the HBCU community helped to quickly foster rapport, empathy, and greater understanding during the interview portion of this study. During my professional experiences in various departments within the HBCU space, I saw a great need to quickly find ways to better understand the needs of the students I served to make their college experience happier, less stressful, and smoother. I also wanted to develop a greater rapport with FGLI students by establishing an authentic relationship with them so they would feel comfortable sharing their life with me, and also so I could stay informed about campus and community resources that would be beneficial to them. As a mid-

level higher education administrator and student affairs practitioner, I entered this study with the intent to better understand the challenges, encountered by African American FGLI students, in order to help HBCUs match student support services to current and future student needs. As I began to engage in deep conversation with the young alumni in this study, it became increasingly apparent with each interview that personal factors, especially and specifically those having to do with family relationships, were the most critical to their personal, academic, and overall collegiate success. Often thought of and written about through a cultural deficit lens and model, with their stories, the FGLI HBCU alumni in this study show readers that they did not allow barriers, challenges, and unmet needs to stop them from achieving high levels of academic, career, and personal success. Through their responses, alums identified FGLI-specific recommendations for HBCUs and, essentially, any institution type that serves and educates FGLI students; these recommendations will help to develop or improve the programs and services designed to support current and future FGLI HBCU students.

## Research Questions, Purpose, and Findings

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What do first-generation and low-income graduates from HBCUs identify as what most hindered them from achieving and performing at their absolute best?
    a. What barriers did they face related to the college and university institutions? (Academic, policy, campus services, etc.)
    b. What non-academic barriers did they face?
    c. How do they define success?
2. What do first-generation-low income HBCU graduates credit as being their source(s) of motivation for graduating?

3. What impact did attending an HBCU have on the lives of African American FGLI graduates post-graduation?

This study was guided by Yosso's community cultural wealth (CCW) model as an analytical framework to analyze the alums' responses on personal and institutional factors that influenced their progression through college at their HBCU.

## Individual and Family Challenges

Participants from all five HBCUs shared the following list of challenges they faced on their respective campuses:

- Financial Strain
- Emotional and/or Health Challenges (because of compounding challenges)
- Strained Family Relationships

The above tier list ranks the personal challenges participants experienced in the order of most experienced to least. Since financial strain was experienced by 10 out of 10 participants, it is ranked at the top followed by emotional and/or health challenges which were directly reported by nine out of ten participants. Last, strained family relationships, which eight out of ten participants reported. Every participant in this study reported experiencing financial strain and some reported financial hardship at the level of growing up in poverty before arriving at college. JD was very descriptive in detailing what food and housing insecurity looked like for her and her family. She shared that there were times when she and her siblings had to eat ketchup sandwiches, mayo sandwiches, slices of cheese, and old cans of food, and if they didn't have bread, they made flour bread in a pan. Darian, experiencing the compounding issues of financial and family strain revealed that he had been on his own since the age of 14, being disowned by his parents because they did not approve of his sexual orientation and identity. Darian became

homeless and stayed from place to place with friends. Darian worked to provide for himself with little to no assistance from the end of middle school through college and beyond.

There were also participants in the study who experienced financial strain as children with their families. The rate of financial strain ranged from hard times consisting of living paycheck to paycheck, low-income public housing which Daja referred to as “the projects,” and Ray described “living conditions that were not the best” to the point of feeling like he was always in survival mode while making major sacrifices.

Chris, Josh, Deja, and Jaleel explained what it was like seeing that their parents ofter didn’t have the financial resources to give them money for things they wanted or needed; they learned not to ask for too much or at all for money. Chris and Deja also had parents that would do whatever they could to meet their college financial needs like paying for books, food, and other necessities when they could. This made Chris and Deja beyond appreciative of their parents because they knew that they had sacrificed greatly to support them.

Ray’s story of working throughout high school to earn money for his college savings is like the story of many other FGLI students who work to alleviate some of the burdens college expenses place on their parents. To assist his family Ray worked day labor jobs and part-time tasks and kept the savings he earned from working in high school to help with his college expenses. He shared that he tried to preserve his money and kept his mind on saving money when he could so that one day he could live the life he desired. Although he spoke about the hard times he and his family had financially, Ray remained so very positive about his experience. I believe he is one of the most positive people I have ever met. He didn’t go into too many deep details about certain topics - I could tell that he was very private, spiritual, or very religious. He kept most of the conversation focused on himself and did not reveal too much of his parents’ or

his family's information. Although he talked about hard times, attributed to a lack of financial resources, Ray maintained a positive attitude and spoke with optimism.

Lack of financial resources caused some participants to experience anxiety, stress, irregular eating habits, insomnia, and depression. Ten out of ten study participants reported feeling stressed at some point during their college experience. Although stress is common among college students due to attempting to manage schedules, time management issues, irregular sleeping habits, and other factors, when combined with financial strain, stress can make "you feel like you are going crazy" as Darian and JD said. Jaleel expressed the same sentiment saying, "Sometimes it's just too much." To combat financial strain, every participant in this study worked full-time at some point in their college career and/or earned funding through academic or need-based scholarships.

Added to the other two main reported personal challenges—financial strain and emotional/mental health challenges—were strained family relationships, which for many participants led to limited or no family support. Strained family relationships were the topic that participants in this study spent the most time talking about. I could sense that this topic was a point of contention, hurt, pain, and disappointment for many participants. As they spoke about strained family relationships, I could see the hurt in their eyes. Some participants cried, held back tears, or became misty-eyed. I could also tell that some of the young men would pause to gather themselves because they "didn't want to get too emotional" as one of them told me. The conversation about family and financial strain was hard for both me and the storytellers. After reviewing this list of challenges, I noticed a direct correlation between these alumni's college experiences and Chen and Nunnery's (2019) Profile of Very Low-and Low-Income Undergraduates. Chen and Nunnery reported national data indicating that in 2015 about 11

percent of 4-year college students came from food-insecure families. Then they stated, “Despite the recent attention paid to extreme poverty on campus, the current literature provides little information about the scope of the problem among U.S. postsecondary students” (p.2). This study begins to show the difference between very low-and low-income undergraduates, and I am certain that the narratives of participants in this study, by their own validation, distinguished for themselves which category of student they fit in.

## Family and Friends’ Support

The findings of this study established key family and friend support systems that the HBCU FGLI alums in this study credit as being their source(s) of motivation for graduating. The alums provided the following list of specific sources:

- Active Supportive Parents and Family
- Grandmothers

The participants share how they believed having a more involved and supportive family would have greatly contributed to their personal and academic success. Participants detailing unmet family support needs pointed directly to the actions, behaviors, and interactions they said would have motivated them to complete college with less stress. It is important to state that each participant in this study that did not report having an active family support system, still graduated and achieved success on their terms. The main issue they faced was what they believed to be undue and avoidable hardship. Most participants stated that they had to be their own primary support system in college; they had to be intrinsically motivated to finish college. Participants also felt the push to keep persevering and graduate because of friends who served as extrinsic motivators and supporters. Still, they longed for support and encouragement from their families. An example provided by participants of a simple, yet impactful and free-of-cost, display of

support was receiving regular welfare check phone calls to show care, concern, and interest in the student's college attendance. This was the number one example provided by participants of a way they felt family could have supported them at the smallest level.

Interestingly, the majority of the participants specifically named their maternal grandmothers as being the primary person who showed support and a vested interest in their well-being, personal success, and academic success. For participants, the consistent and unwavering support and judgment-free other-mothering approaches of their grandmother were what they valued the most. Other-mothering occurs when another woman who is not the biological or blood mother of a child or person assists a mother with caring for her child. This can also include raising the child and serving as a close support system as some of the participants in this study experienced. Many study participants also credited their grandmother for being present in place of their biological mothers when their mother was not available or did not make themselves available for various reasons. Due to the closeness that some participants developed with their grandmothers, when their grandmothers passed away it took a very huge toll on them emotionally. Chris, Deja, and Jaleel expressed that the grief they felt impacted them for a prolonged time and noticeably affected their emotional and mental health during the semester their grandmother died. Chris, Jaleel, Deja, and JD all reported losing their grandmothers while in college. Some of them shared during their interviews that they still hadn’t gotten over this loss and some had never experienced this type of support again. In chapter four in the section entitled, “The Grandmother Effect,” I provide greater details about the impact the participants’ grandmothers had on their lives. I noticed that although every participant in this study discussed the impact of their parents in their lives when grandmothers were mentioned,

this seemingly touched a soft spot with participants, even JD who was taken away from her grandmother due to child neglect and her grandmother's addictions.

What makes the finding of the maternal grandmother serving as one of the greatest forms of support for these former students notable is that, typically, literature simply refers to a student's family generally as a nuclear unit that normally consists of a mother, father, and siblings. Although it is known that extended family can impact a student's academic and personal success, I believe the naming of the maternal grandmother is highly specific.

## Low-Income and Very-Low-Income FGLI Students

Chen and Nunnery's (2019) Profile of Very Low-and Low-Income Undergraduates explained the difference between low-income and very-low-income students. One of the most stand-out findings in this study was the number of alumni who could have met the designation of first-generation "very-low-income" student during undergrad. Study participants reported a significant number of individual and family factors that either prevented them from providing basic needs for themselves or made providing for themselves challenging. I provide this brief snapshot of the report profile findings here and then discuss its significance to this study.

The profile report presented to the U.S. Department of Education included context to determine the difference between the two designations. The characteristics of low-income and very-low-income students were provided. In the profile, low-income students are characterized as students who need "postsecondary financial aid programs to increase access, improve affordability, and promote equal opportunity and college success for postsecondary students" (pg. 1). Very-low-income students are characterized as "the lowest-income students who struggle to meet their basic needs, let alone pay for a college education" (p. 1). Chen and Nunnery suggest that very low-income students have the greatest need. They provide statistics for 2015,

which was during the time some of the participants in this study were enrolled at their HBCUs as undergraduate students:

> In 2015 about 13 percent of 2-year college students and 11 percent of 4-year college students came from food-insecure families. Research examining the relationship between food, housing, and school performance revealed that food insecurity and housing instability negatively affect class attendance, performance, and persistence (p. 2).

The report further provided additional characteristics for both designations and included the 2014 poverty guidelines.

The additional characteristics of these two designations of students, and the synopsis of the report's key findings, revealed similarities with the participants in this study. The key findings suggest that "among independent students, a higher percentage of low-income students than their above-poverty level peers were female. In addition, a higher percentage of very low and low-income independent students than their above-poverty level peers were Black". Along with these findings, the authors provided Goldrick-Rab's (2016) study. The study provided the following thought-provoking findings:

> 3,000 public college students in Wisconsin who had an average family income under $25,000 reported the following challenges faced: inadequate food and housing, working excessively to make ends meet, and taking time off from school to save money.

Finally, Chen and Nunnery state, "despite the recent attention paid to extreme poverty on campus, the current literature provides little information about the scope of the problem among U.S. postsecondary students" (p. 2). Until I read Chen and Nunnery's report, I also was not aware of the designation of very-low-income student although, by teaching and advising HBCU FGLI students, I have always known and been able to see that some FGLI students have less than others in terms of finances and support. In essence, as some people would say, there are the poor and then there are the "dirt poor."

I've spent a lot of time working with African American HBCU FGLI students through my work with the TRIO Student Support Services (TRIO SSS) program. Part of my job was to assist students with securing their basic needs with the resources available to me and the TRIO SSS program. The specific grant awards I managed only allotted and provided federal funding for around 210 first-generation, low-income, or disabled students to be served out of the entire undergraduate student body. At one school, oftentimes students would express their lack of resources and inability to provide basic resources for themselves which included food. So, if I had the money, I would walk with the student to the cafeteria and buy their lunch; sometimes I would give the student the few dollars I had, or I would tell my program director and she would use her resources to cover a meal for the student. I soon realized that this was not sustainable and the number of students needing assistance was too great. I wasn't making a lot of money, and at times, I needed help myself. So, I taught myself and the students how to coupon. I consistently kept this up for about three years (2013-2016), and I was able to keep a snack drawer in my office filled with food items such as snack packs, instant noodles, juice boxes, popcorn, crackers, and microwavable meals. Students came to my office daily, knowing that they could grab a quick snack. The students who did not have a meal plan came the most frequently and it appeared that the weight of student needs was increasing and so, there came a time when this snack drawer was also not enough. There was no provision in the TRIO grant that I worked for at the time to provide food or meal assistance to students. It disturbed me to have someone come to our office, state that they hadn't eaten that day or since the day before, looking for food, and send them to class hungry.

After reading the Profile of Very Low and Low-Income Undergraduates in 2015–16 and interviewing study participants, I wondered which of them could have possibly qualified for the

designation of “Very-Low-Income” student, instead of being grouped under the one widely used designation of just low-income. So, in conjunction with some of the general descriptors and known challenges of FGLI students and the challenges provided by study participants in their narratives, I took inventory of which study participants perhaps could have been classified as very low-income at the time of their enrollment. To determine which alumni met the designation of very-low-income, I reviewed their interview transcripts and responses regarding their childhood and pre-college life, including family demographic/structure, and background. This process took about 1.5 hours to complete and, in the end, I created a Very Low-Income Student Designation Determination chart (Table #2) to help visualize who among the participants presented with the greatest need, based on the information they provided. The criteria included the following factors and were arranged by these categories:

- Students who are both first-generation and low income
- Students who provide financial support to their families while enrolled in school
- Independent students (documented and undocumented)
- Students who come from a family of four or more
- Housing insecure
- Students who come from a single-parent household
- Food insecure
- Reported no family support
- Worked 20 or more hours while enrolled fulltime
- Student is a parent

The results of the inventory suggested that this small set of 10 factors could be used to determine the possible designation of very-low-income and the greatest need; if ranked by

students who presented the greatest number of needs, four (40%) out of the ten alumni in this study might have been very-low-income. I made this determination of very-low-income as these students, JD, Darian, Shaq, and Jaleel presented with five out of ten factors, with Darian and JD reporting food and housing insecurity while enrolled. The severity of the student's specific need should also be taken into consideration. For example, if "Student A" reports current food and housing insecurity and "Student B" reports they are an independent student who has no family support, then it seems "Student A" has the most immediate need and may need emergency student support services and assistance. However, this determination can also be seen as subjective as both students need support.

On top of all the challenges African American FGLI students face, having basic needs is one of the biggest challenges. This study revealed that at some point during their undergraduate career, four alumni participants could have been deemed a very-low-income student, not only a low-income student, because their need was greater. Thoroughly understanding the criticality of unmet basic needs is paramount for HBCUs. To improve success outcomes of African American FGLI HBCU students, recognizing, accepting, and adopting the idea of very-low-income students and implementing intentional student support services for "very-low-income" students is crucial. Essentially, each respective HBCU in this study, at some point in most of these participants' lives, served as the only option and sole provider of their basic needs; this lasted anywhere from one to four plus years. This is why this report by Chen and Nunnery and their findings are significant to this study and these findings speak to the great impact of HBCUs.

## The Impact of HBCUs

Graduation marked the culmination of each participant's college career at their HBCU. However, it did not mark the end of their HBCU experience. Many study participants are still

connected to their HBCU through the lifelong friends and connections they made, thus where cultural capital is concerned, they are also still benefiting from their HBCU attendance. Many of the participants talked about how the friendships they made at their HBCU extended beyond graduation, and the bond they shared with their HBCU classmates continues to shape who they are today. Participants recalled the life lessons they learned with their classmates and how these HBCU friends became family. I am reminded of how Chris spoke about a friend he met freshman year in a program for FGLI and how this friend is now the Godfather to his children. Like Chris, Darian still talks to a fellow classmate who has remained his best friend, they have maintained this friendship for several years after graduation. These friendships are influential in the lives of these former students and speak to the extension of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) for FGLI students of color beyond their college years. As I listened to the alumni talk about their life after college and the impact the HBCU college experience had on them, it was evident that cultural wealth through the extension of social, familial (chosen family in respect to close friends who have become family), and aspirational capital, is still being shared and attained.

The attainment and increase of social and income mobility that came from attending an HBCU is evident among study participants. Drawing back to Cuseo, (2007); Nathenson et al., (2013); and Arroyo & Gasman, (2014), the completion of a four-year degree equates to student success. Taking a closer look at how the attainment of a college degree impacts the income mobility of African American HBCU graduates, Hammond et al. (2021) and the U.S. Department of Education (2019) show how the social mobility of these HBCU graduates also shifts. The statistics show that HBCUs are responsible for the positive career trajectory of a great number of degrees earned by Black students. As previously stated, HBCUs are responsible for

19% of the degrees earned by Black students in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), 80% of Black judges, 50% of Black doctors, and 50% of Black lawyers (p. 4). North Carolina HBCUs fostered the initial space for three participants in this study to earn their first college degree and go from impoverished to Ph.D. and J.D. In addition, North Carolina HBCUs provided 60% of the participants in the study with the credentials to earn master's degrees, thus directly impacting six of the alumni's projected earning potential.

It can be inferred that by providing a place where African American First-Generation and Low-Income college students can thrive and reach their full potential, which in this case is at an HBCU, the students gain the potential to substantially further their positive life trajectory when equipped with at least one college degree and the various forms of wealth they acquire by attending an HBCU. In addition, the value-added benefit of cultural wealth they enjoy also transfers to the children and family of the HBCU alum. This represents some of the greatest impact attending an HBCU may have on the lives of African American FGLI graduates post-graduation.

## Institutional Challenges

Participants from all five HBCUs shared the following list of challenges they encountered on their campuses:

- Lack of FGLI Student-Centered Campus Support Programs
- Lack of Faculty and Staff Knowledge of FGLI Students

Having spaces where they could be understood and assisted with common FGLI student needs was important to alumni. Several participants described a lack of FGLI support programs on campus other than the TRIO Student Support Services (TRIO SSS) program which Deja,

Chris, Darian, and JD all were a part of. The TRIO Student Support Services program is a federally funded program that has an acceptance cap or limitation where they are only funded to serve a certain number of students. Even after students apply for the program, they cannot be admitted into the program unless there is an open space for them available. There are also other TRIO programs on the campuses of the universities included in this study that participants could apply for admittance to, such as the Ronald. E. McNair Baccalaureate Program (McNair/McNair Scholars). The McNair program is a federally funded program designed for students who have an interest in engaging in research and other scholarly activities and plan to enter graduate school after undergraduate studies. The McNair program's ultimate goal is to increase the number of earned graduate degrees by FGLI African American students, students from underrepresented backgrounds, and students with financial needs. Like the TRIO SSS Program, the HBCUs in this study that have McNair programs on campus have a limit of twenty-five students that they can admit into their program. At the time the alums in this study were enrolled as students, programs that support FGLI students were limited, and they remain limited in number today. Because there were limited spaces on campus that specifically provided specialized support, FGLI alumni participants saw this as a challenge and noted the issues they had navigating their campuses. This pointed to a concern several participants had regarding faculty, staff, and administrators not fully understanding their identity as FGLI students; or making time to understand their situation. Without so much saying that their HBCU teaching faculty and staff were out of touch, some participants such as Josh, JD, Shaq, and Darian felt faculty and staff had no idea who they were or some of the challenges and barriers they faced as FGLI students outside of the classroom. These alums expressed that they needed their professors to see and understand the compounding outside issues they faced in addition to their academic responsibilities. This posed an issue for

participants as they did not feel seen and sometimes understood. Students shared that feelings of belonging were a concern, which was impacted by faculty and staff knowledge of FGLI HBCU students.

## Institutional Support

Institutional support becomes increasingly important for FGLI students for several reasons. The primary reason is that FGLI students rely on institutions to fill their need gap in the place of their families being unable to do so. The reported data from this study indicate that FGLI students who are independent may financially fall into the "very-low-income" financial category. While some FGLI students have parental or family support and guidance, independent students typically do not. In this case, the institution, which is inclusive of both faculty and staff, becomes the student's primary source of support for almost everything. As I have previously detailed in earlier chapters, Darian and JD served as an example of this. Aside from working all four years in college to support themselves, and JD qualifying for support and assistance from the state of North Carolina's foster care system, these alums depended on their HBCU to fill their need gaps. Below, we take another look at the impact of HBCUs as systems of support.

- Summer Bridge and Living-Learning Communities
- TRIO Student Support Services
- College Preparation and Development Programs
- Support and Encouragement from Faculty, Staff, and Alumni
- Building Social Capital through Friendship, Clubs, and Campus Organizations

After establishing areas of campus where institutions could implement or improve services for FGLI students, there were a few programs, organizations, and interactions with faculty and staff that received positive feedback across the various HBCUs in this study. Alums

from two universities (numbers one and two) all participated in their HBCUs TRIO summer bridge program the summer before their freshman year. They all remarked how this program, specifically for FGLI students, helped them to immediately feel more comfortable with leaving home and less stressed at the thought of navigating campus. Chris and Darian shared that because they had attended their summer bridge program at their HBCU with other FGLI students, they found a sense of community and belonging quickly. After completing the summer bridge program at their HBCU they felt more connected to their peers. Establishing social and navigational capital, they began to build relationships with campus support professionals, teaching faculty, and peers while being introduced to the colligate level of academic rigor. So, through this feedback from alums on the impact of summer bridge programs for FGLI students, we can better understand how these college academic and social experiences for incoming first-year students prepared them for success in college and provided a direct tie with institutional agents.

Referring back to Yosso's (2005) explanation of her Community Cultural Wealth model, Yosso states that social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources. Throughout this study, participants have provided examples of how they used peer and other social contacts to provide instrumental and emotional support to navigate through their HBCU. The social supports that participants either created or joined provided a social network of support and resources that they not only used in college but had access to after college. For example, each university represented in this study has an Alumni Marching Band Association. These marching band associations and groups are active groups where past members of the marching band can maintain a connection through music, social engagement, and social activities that are exclusively for members of that marching band. Furthermore, when all of the HBCU

marching band alumni associations connect, which they do, they form a marching band community, which is extensive. Then, members of this community who stay active within the community, are afforded a network of resources and support for a lifetime. This community and network of resources are very similar to HBCU alumni associations which all of the HBCUs represented in this study have as well. Through the HBCU alumni association network, members of various HBCU alumni groups and associations benefit from the extension of campus connections, the strengthening of relationships built while in college, and the uniting of social networks worldwide.

The personal narratives in this project challenge deficit narratives of first-generation and low-income college students and HBCUs. Contrary to the narrowly defined interpretations of capital by Bourdieu (1986), people of color, specifically African American students, do come to college with a wealth of capital in many forms. The participants in this study serve as proof that in whatever areas they find need for a resource, they will find a way to obtain the resource, meet their own needs, and with or without much help, be determined to reach their goals. The HBCU alumni in this study were not chosen to be in this study because I deemed them "successful" beforehand. I did not ask them about their GPAs, how much money they made, how many homes they owned, or any of the material things they possessed, which are often attributed to success. These participants are successful in their eyes and mine because they stayed the course, persisted and graduated, despite the challenges that made the journey hard.

Like Yosso (2005), Carter (2003) maintains that "Cultural capital's significance is often predicated on the experiences of the dominant social class; the multiple ways cultural resources of other groups also convert into capital are ignored" (p. 137). I maintain that to matriculate through college, each of the participants in this study used and combined several forms of capital

to reach graduation, so there is much to learn about capital through the experiences of people of color and those who are not within the dominant social class.

From the examples in the stories they provided, it was clear that these former students not only arrived at college with capital, but they used the capital they acquired from their life experiences before college (pre-college) and learned how to expand upon it while navigating their campus community. They also learned by observing others and through the new experiences attending college provided them. One of the greatest models that taught these former students about using and acquiring capital was seeing how their peers in college acquired capital and learned how to transform it into personal, career, and academic success. The participants in this study arrived at college with the determination to succeed and used every tool at their disposal to help them reach their goals. They invited me to learn about a period of great transition and development in their lives - namely their college experience. From what I learned, attending their HBCU taught them to take the lessons, skills, and knowledge they acquired there and apply them in their lives after college.

Deja, Chris, and Darian credited the TRIO SSS program at their HBCU for helping them to navigate college, and for providing continued opportunities for college matriculation, preparation, and student development. However, JD shared that she felt like this program wasn't very helpful to her and maintained that she learned most of what she knew about college on her own and along the way from peers. She does credit a staff member in the TRIO SSS program for being helpful to her when needed and serving as a mentor, although she did not actively participate in the TRIO SSS student success programs and workshops. However, as we learned from the experience of the alums who actively participated in the TRIO SSS program, adjusting to college was much "smoother" as Chris stated and the support was "unlimited".

Throughout my time spent with study participants, they emphasized the significance of support and encouragement from their HBCU faculty and staff, in addition to how the alumni from their respective schools assisted them along the way. As we analyze and think through what participants have said about their biological family relationships, we can begin to better understand why the relationships built between the participants' HBCU families are so special.

I understand the bond, reverence, and pride that comes from being an HBCU student and the pride that comes with knowing that wherever you go in this world, you can always come back *home* to your HBCU and be welcomed by *family*. As Shaq, Chris, and Deja said while smiling big with pride, "It's a feeling that just cannot be explained." Each participant in this study had a story about how someone at their HBCU helped them significantly in a way that they will never forget. Darian shared that he was inspired to always do his best at everything he attempted and strive for achievement because he had learned this behavior and how to have a more positive attitude from a best friend he met in college. Chris and Deja explained how professors "looked out" for them when they were struggling with coursework and how this showed them that not only did the professors want them to learn, but that they cared for them as people as well.

Jaleel and Josh explained the family culture of the HBCU marching band and shared that family is the universal culture of all HBCU marching bands, no matter what school you are from. They both shared that their participation in their university marching band kept them grounded when times were hard. They also specifically credited their marching band directors and their section leaders with providing guidance and support. Bria proclaimed, "HBCU staff do a great job of making you feel a sense of community and belonging" while noting that HBCUs still needed to take more time to focus on FGLI students. Consistent with Yosso's community

cultural wealth model, it is evident that participants leaned the most on aspirational, familial, navigational, and resistance capital while enrolled in school and post-graduation. Leveraging these forms of capital is what made them successful in and out of the classroom and later post-graduation.

## Recommendations

Building off the individual/personal support structures and challenges, in addition to institutional support and challenges that the alums identified, they shared several detailed recommendations for ways family members and institutions could better support African American FGLI HBCU students. Based on the factors they identified as challenging and supportive, they provided a main list of recommendations for those who want to improve or increase support for the personal and academic endeavors of FGLI students. These recommendations have been provided in the findings section of chapters four and five. To briefly reiterate their recommendations, for family support systems, they recommended families of FGLI HBCU students take an increased interest and show interest in supporting and investing themselves in their child's college education. They emphasized that this does not necessarily mean providing financial assistance but, it means providing moral support. Participants recommended that institutions, inclusive of teaching faculty, staff, and school administration, take a culturally responsive approach to teaching and interacting with students.

The main changes and improvements that they stated would improve overall student success outcomes of FGLI students were campus and institution-wide student support services (including administrative divisions and departments) that provide FGLI student-specific services and geared their services, practice, policies, and procedures to better fit the needs of FGLI students. This echoes the sentiment shared by the Yes We Must Coalition (2018) that campus

resources that are student-facing, such as financial aid, should receive additional training to be "more knowledgeable, student-oriented, and more professional" when working with marginalized student populations (p. 4). Longwell-Grice (2008) adds that cultivating relationships with school administrators impacts the persistence of first-generation college students and helps students navigate the unwritten rules on campus, thus equipping students with the necessary capital for college. Because FGLI students have unique backgrounds and specific support needs that they may not have anyone else to assist them with, they recommended that teaching faculty, staff, and administration find ways to become more relatable to FGLI students and increase their knowledge of FGLI students in general. Alumni explained that these recommendations are essential to increasing support for FGLI students and should already have been implemented.

## Implications for Future Research

In this study, I describe some of the lived experiences of ten first-generation and low-income students from four-year public North Carolina Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The alumni in this study provided rich detail of their own unique experiences while also sharing testimonies that showed evidence of communal experience that research shows is often common among this student demographic. Historians and researchers have established that HBCUs predominantly serve students from minoritized backgrounds, specifically African American students. HBCUs will continue to enroll students from historically underrepresented, minoritized, and low-wealth communities; through institutional missions and goals, they will pledge to provide the best educational opportunities to their students. So, it is my sincere hope that the information provided in this study provides further insight into the specific needs and challenges of HBCU students today. Furthermore, I hope that the information found in this study

prompts institutions and higher education practitioners to move quickly to establish or develop appropriate student support services and systems that match the needs of the HBCU FGLI student population. Moreover, I want promising HBCU student scholars to read this work and see how FGLI students like them persisted despite the challenges they faced.

In this section, I present implications for future research and practice. Developing policy, programs, and practice that match and meet the needs of current and future FGLI students are essential to student and institutional success. The narratives and reflections of the lived experiences of recent graduates, or what many HBCUs refer to as "young alumni," provide valuable insight into support systems students built and leveraged inside the institution, including those directly provided or not provided by the institution. These narratives also reveal the FGLI students' system for fostering and sustaining FGLI student success at HBCUs. The NC HBCUs that participants attended in this study have institutional assessment tools and institutional research offices that provide student trend data and metrics displayed on dashboards for institutional data. While these tools are available for us to view quantitative numerical data that provides insight, this study enabled me to personally engage with people who these numbers may represent. This study also allowed me to be fully immersed in critically thinking about the ways FGLI HBCU students can be better supported and how the university experience affected the lives of graduates after graduation.

## Limitations

In this study, I explored how FGLI HBCU alumni navigated college, persisting through to graduation, and what challenges they faced in doing so. My goal was to gain insight into the FGLI student experience through the perspectives of HBCU FGLI recent graduates. From the vantage point of recent graduates and their recommendations, my understanding of FGLI

students and their needs increased. This enabled me to have more of a complete comprehension as I wrote informative recommendations for future programming and support services for HBCU FGLI students. Nevertheless, as the study participant narratives provided valuable insights into this special population of students, this study also had limitations. The three main limitations of this study were as follows: the recruitment of HBCU graduates versus alums, the availability of participants from each HBCU in this study, and the exclusion of HBCUs outside of the state of North Carolina, including private HBCUs.

First, one of the requirements for participation in this study was that participants must be HBCU graduates. It is important to explain that someone who is an alum of a school may not necessarily be a graduate of the school: An alum can be anyone who attended classes at the institution, while a graduate is someone who attended and received a conferred degree.

Second, I initially set a goal of recruiting two participants from each of the five HBCUs in this study so that I would have an even number of participants from each school. I was unable to meet this goal, which limited the opportunity for me to include more than one representative from universities number one, three, and four. Although I had over 40 people express interest in participating in this study, the majority of them were from two of the five HBCUs included in this study. These two HBCUs had 4 or more people express interest in participating in this study at the time of the study recruitment. These participants completed all required study participation forms on time, and no one from these schools canceled or missed their scheduled interviews. I understood that finding graduates from one of the smaller (based on 2015-2019 enrollment/graduate data) HBCUs would be more of a challenge as I did not personally know anyone who had attended or worked at this school. Seeing I would not be able to locate and secure two committed participants to represent each of the schools in the study, I advanced the

study with one participant from universities one, three, and four, five participants from university two, and two participants from university five.

Third, participation in the study was limited to graduates of public NC HBCUs only. This excluded the other six North Carolina HBCUs which are private colleges or universities. If I were to run this study again, I would want to include private universities as well. I would be interested in learning more about the student support services they offer, how students use them, and what student support services and programs students felt would have been beneficial to them. I would also like to learn about the differences in the university experience between public and private NC HBCUs.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Throughout the years spent preparing for this study, learning more about the various functional areas in student affairs, higher education, and HBCUs, I carefully thought about the need for this study. With this study, I sought to fill a gap in current research and literature on first-generation and low-income student success and experience at HBCUs, through the voices of alumni.

What I found through this research is that HBCUs served as much more than centers of educational inquiry, scholarship, and exploration for these former students. Academic achievement and obtaining a degree in a specific area of study is a major part of going to college and what many people think is the primary reason for going to college. From many of the participant's responses, I learned that one of the primary reasons some of them chose to go away to college was to get away from home, gain independence and find personal freedom. HBCUs met the needs of these students and, in fact, we learned what happened to students such as JD when classes were not in session. She became housing and food insecure when her HBCU was

closed for the holiday or the summer. Current literature describes ways in which low-income and first-generation college students can benefit from student support services. This study provides and extends the context of those conversations by adding in-depth details about the ways ten African American HBCU FGLI alumni experienced college, the specific student support needs that were met and unmet by their schools, and ways that institutions can plan in the future to specifically target these special needs. The point here is to look at ways to provide targeted students support services that meet the greatest needs of the students on each respective campus, not to apply a general approach or solution to an issue that is said to be a challenge among FGLI students. The recommendations included in this chapter stem from the challenges the participants shared. From there, each institution can evaluate its students' needs to determine what actions to take.

College, specifically the HBCUs these alums attended, served as a launching pad for their future. It was a place for many of these participants to get on their feet in a sense before going out into the world as young adults. Many of the FGLI students in this study lifted themselves out of seriously challenging life situations, worked full-time jobs (30+ hours) with some students financially supporting families that could not financially support them, participated in extracurricular activities when they could, and still graduated with honors. One key aim of this study was to determine from research participants to what extent they believed attendance at their HBCU helped them to reach higher levels of success. These findings answer that question.

Another key point that should be considered is that if "HBCUs enroll a greater number of low-income students than PWIs and students experience more upward mobility at HBCUs than at PWIs" as Nathanson's (2013) HBCU income mobility study found, then more funding and resources are needed at HBCUs for the aforementioned reasons. To synthesize this, FGLI alumni

narratives from this study detailed how HBCUs impacted their success and they provided details as to how HBCUs did so. Then, the alums spoke to needs that went unmet, which showed a gap in student support services.

While the findings of this study cannot be generalized for all African American HBCU FGLI students and alumni, this study helps to provide a glimpse into the lived experiences of a small sample of former students whose experiences may mirror others. To provide relevant and current information that would inform and influence programs, practice, and research of institutions charged with educating and developing FGLI students, I wanted to ensure that the voices of recent graduates were placed at the forefront of this study. It was important to me that study participants were seen for who they are as HBCU alumni, and be recognized as former students who still have the power to enact and influence change at their respective HBCUs.

As an HBCU advocate, it is my sincere hope that higher education administrators, institutional researchers, and students studying education continue to conduct qualitative research centered around HBCUs. I also anticipate broader research through longitudinal studies that give greater respect to HBCU student and alumni voices. To truly encompass authentic experiences, these researchers should include experiences and stories of students and alumni even if they aren't all positive. This will be one comprehensive way HBCUs, as well as any institution that celebrates first-generation students and provides support for low-income students, can learn of student needs, work to quickly address the needs, and contribute to overall student success. Findings from this study can be used to inform future research and practice at HBCUs; and if extended, could also influence policy, programs, procedures, student and alumni engagement and beyond. Future researchers studying the experiences of first-generation and low-income students should consider using a case study approach to examine the personal, social, and

non-academic factors that FGLI students undergo throughout their collegiate experience. This would help higher education administrators and practitioners gain awareness and insight into the FGLI HBCU student experience and most likely, assess how contributing services and university factors such as campus culture, financial aid, student support services, and student support personnel, affect student life, development,  and personal and academic success.

While examining student experiences and success, another important prospective research target might be an in-depth qualitative assessment of avoidable administrative and institutional policy and procedures that may further marginalize or cause challenges for FGLI HBCU students. For example, take into consideration the campus spaces that posed a challenge for the participants in this study, regardless of the college or university the participant represented, such as the financial aid and housing department as well as various academic units. Next, a regular examination of the impact of academic and non-academic units, divisions, and departments could provide insight into how these areas could be improved in the ways the students find most beneficial for their needs. This would require tracking of incoming classes by year for undergraduate students, and outgoing classes by year if recent alums are assessed. In addition, understanding the impact of these campus service areas through comprehension of student success outcomes, available student services, and the most used or needed services by personnel of all service levels could prove to increase successful outcomes overall. Personnel of all levels spans from the practitioners that work with FGLI HBCU students daily, to directors who run programs that support FGLI students, to academic and student affairs administration.

## Final Thoughts and Conclusions

Before beginning this study, I was challenged by a friend and mentor who is also an HBCU faculty member, to critically think about “who would care and should care to read about

another study on student success?" They asked me, "What makes your study different?" and "Who will be served by your work?" This conversation served as a catalyst for me to ruminate on student success and reaching success in the face of adversity.

Originally, I planned to conduct this study with currently enrolled HBCU students. But after a second conversation with another faculty member who noticed how passionately I spoke about FGLI students I'd worked with over the years and their amazing continued personal and academic success post-undergrad, we decided that I should highlight their stories. As we teased out what would take the study beyond similar reports of FGLI academic student success, I thought about how we focus on the success of others in the end after they have achieved success. However, many of us do not know or fully understand the scope of what the person did to achieve success, what they sacrificed or perhaps gave up to become successful, how long it took, and other factors. It was then I realized that if I wanted to truly learn about how FGLI HBCU students reach success despite challenges and barriers, I needed to learn more about the basic actions of attaining success from FGLI HBCU alums who had gone through the process of completing college. Then, after learning more about their process and the challenges they encountered, I could properly prepare myself and others to do the work needed to foster a campus environment that truly supports FGLI HBCU students according to what the students say their needs are; not what we think they are. Until I could do this, I wanted to add to the proverbial college life "cheat code" I keep to help FGLI students. I also like to think of these tips, advice, and suggestions as student-life/college hacks. Staying current and knowledgeable about what best helps students helps me to be of assistance to more students and has kept me relevant in the work I do in student success initiative programs and higher education in general. I make a concerted effort to better understand what is working well and what needs improvement

in our campus communities. So, I want to continue learning from those who have a hand in FGLI student success and retention strategies for helping FGLI students get across the finish line to graduation and beyond.

This study caused me to think about how much I learned about HBCU history, culture, and the college experience in general *after* I graduated. In my experience, with every year that passes and with every incoming freshman class, it's easy to become or feel further removed from the student experience you once understood because you were a part of it. It seems as if it doesn't take much to become out of touch with the students you serve. Since I had become further removed from my time as a teen undergraduate student, I needed to consult the young adults who were closer to the campus community but distanced enough to have the ability to take a comprehensive reflective look back at their college experience. Post-graduation can be a time when all the "should haves and would haves" begin to become loud and clear for some. No longer caught up in the hustle and bustle of trying to do "all the things", as students today phrase it, the alumni in this study were able also to provide relatable words of wisdom to current and future FGLI HBCU graduates. This study reaffirmed for me that there's a deeper process required to reach a level of authentic engagement that benefits students. Authentic engagement was of the utmost importance to the participants in this study. For them, authentic engagement consisted of spending time to get to know students as individuals, learning the individual needs of students (met and unmet needs), and learning styles. This coincides with the literature on FGLI student affinity of belonging and social support, then expands this concept to specifically include authentic engagement.

I was inspired by all of the participants in this study for various reasons. Although Ray did not talk as much as any of the other participants, he related to them by intentionally working

to leverage his college success to uplift, provide, and support his family. Family, regardless of the condition of their relationships, came first and was close to the heart of every study participant. JD, Darian, Shaq, Jaleel, Josh, Bria, Daja, and Bria, all came to college with issues of family strain and hurt. Still, they forged their own path, motivated themselves to succeed and persisted. Chris and Deja credited the motivation and support they received from their family with helping them to persist.

Based on the findings of this study and referenced literature, first-generation and low-income college students, including independent FGLI students who may experience poverty and severe financial constraints, benefit from student support services. I thought about the needs of students from a practitioner standpoint and then considered what the alumni in this study stated were their unmet needs and sources of support. I attempted to match a problem with a possible solution and came up with ideas for services and possible programs that could be created from these ideas to benefit FGLI students. I began to think through how NC public HBCUs could feasibly provide FGLI-centered student support services. I believe these conceptual campus-wide wrap-around student support services and targeted FGLI student interventions would be helpful on HBCU campuses and beyond:

1. **Alumni, Faculty, and Peer Mentors:**

   Findings from this study demonstrate that FGLI students directly benefit from supportive familial relationships. “Familial” in most senses means kinship but can also mean family that the student chooses. For students who do not come to college with an available, present, or healthy support system, or have basic knowledge of how to navigate college, then alumni, faculty, and peer mentors can serve as their extended support system. As a part of their extended support system, mentors would also support the

student at their special events in addition to or in place of the student's family. These events may include graduation, award recognition ceremonies, sporting events, etc. In addition, having relatable mentors who were former FGLI students may also prove to be an extra added benefit. Through providing guidance, emotional support, and role modeling, this elective available support system can provide various advantages.

2. **Campus Social Workers and Case Management:**

To eliminate, reduce, and educate students on ways to manage the challenges they face, upon enrollment, students can be matched or assigned to a campus social worker and case manager. The intended outcome of this targeted student support service is to assist FGLI students with their "unique combination of financial, academic, and social challenges" (Nichols and Evans-Bell, 2017) that make degree attainment challenging.

Students would have the opportunity to opt out of this support service and be reassigned to a case manager that they feel better supports their needs if needed. Campus social workers could assist students with issues that might arise such as student job loss, abuse, poverty, addiction, issues stemming from physical illness, perinatal services, and more. Case managers can access the needs of the student and then match the student with the appropriate support services to fit the students' needs. In addition, and if needed, the case manager could assist the students with taking the next step to enroll or sign up for the service, in conjunction with the student service department, that the student intends to use. Student progression would be monitored as support professionals follow up with the student regularly and serve as student advocates. This is one way to provide wraparound student support services.

Along with FGLI students, their parents, guardian, or chosen family should receive information from the institution about the campus personnel, services, and programs the school offers that are geared to assist FGLI students. Transfer and continuing students should also receive information about these services. Because the college orientation process happens quickly and an overwhelming amount of information is disseminated to students at this time, campus social workers and case managers will also assist students with the transition to college and FGLI student specific support services. Findings from this study revealed challenges and barriers that were not cognitive in nature or mental health based at the early onset. However, when challenges described by study participants persisted or became an unresolved compounding challenge, this resulted in participants experiencing mental health challenges. Examples of challenges were prolonged food and housing insecurity, especially when the campus was closed for the holidays, summer break, or when students moved off campus and were no longer required to have a meal plan. These challenges led to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and other challenges related to mental health, resulting in emotional distress for most of the participants in this study. Additionally, students who are parents would benefit from support and consulting for first-time college parents.

3. **Assigned Financial Aid Representative:**

FGLI-specific financial aid counselors who are knowledgeable about documentation and required forms that FGLI students must regularly complete would be helpful. Upon enrollment, FGLI students could be assigned to an FGLI student financial aid counselor that they would keep until the completion of their degree. As two of the participants in this study explained, having to continue to explain their status as FGLI

students and why their financial situation had not changed from year to year was challenging. Assigned financial aid representatives that solely work with FGLI students and are knowledgeable about FGLI student challenges would not only help students to develop greater rapport with a campus representative, but eliminate them having to re-tell and relive their traumas to a new person each time they needed to speak with someone in financial aid.

In retrospect, if I were to complete this study again, I would like to consult someone currently working in these three areas - campus mentoring, social work, and financial aid - along with a few FGLI students who use or would benefit from these support services. I was fortunate to have Dr. JD in this study, a clinical social worker, as well as Dr. Josh, who is a teaching faculty member and mentor to FGLI students to consult with about current FGLI student support needs and resources. I would also include more alumni from public and private HBCUs. Conclusively, if HBCUs and any institution type that serves African American FGLI students seriously seek to uplift and support the FGLI student population, then appropriate resources, faculty, staff, administration, resources, and additional funding (outside of federal grants for federally funded programs, which may or may not be renewed and have caps on the number of students that can be served) need to be provided and deemed essential. This will improve attrition, retention, and graduation rates in addition to contributing to successful outcomes after college.

4. **FGLI Meal Plan:**

To assist HBCU FGLI students with food insecurity, a free or reduced meal plan could contribute to helping students with the challenge of food insecurity. Serving as a

complement to the food pantries that all of the institutions in this study have in place for all students, the FGLI student meal plan can be offered to enable students to have a prepared meal. Individual campuses can assess how many students need this food program and determine if the FGLI student meal plan can be offered to students, on a regular basis or through a limited number of meals per semester, that might be used as emergency hunger relief. Freshman FGLI students living on campus have access to regular meals if they choose to eat on campus. FGLI students who are not freshman students, or any student living off campus, may not have regular access to food or face food insecurity if they do not have the financial means to pay for food.

This service to FGLI HBCU students allows them to go to their campus cafeteria and eat with the rest of their peers. This food service program would enable FGLI students to dine in a space where the rest of the campus community meets to network, relax, engage, learn about campus happenings, and share other student life concerns. Most importantly, this plan can ensure that FGLI students have access to food, thus contributing to the students' overall health and wellbeing. Proper nourishment can contribute to positive academic outcomes. Food insecure FGLI students would be able to focus on their studies and not on their hunger or where their next meal will come from.

The universities included in this study either require or strongly recommend freshman students have a meal plan, or, require all freshman students that live on campus to have a meal plan. To maintain the anonymity of these institutions, I refrain from providing specific details about the meal plan requirements of each institution.

## Conclusion

*"If it comes from your heart, you will do the work with enjoyment"*. - Ray

I am beyond grateful for my HBCU. I feel privileged to not only have received my undergraduate education from my HBCU but also to have returned to my HBCU and earned a second degree. HBCUs are truly special places filled with lots of love and pride. I proudly support and advocate for all 100+ HBCUs and I continued to be amazed by the greatness that emerges from HBCUs, in and out of the classroom. It was an honor to get to know these HBCU alums from all over the great state of North Carolina. In HBCU culture, everyone thinks their HBCU is the best. No matter what HBCU you attended, HBCU alums will always joke with each other and talk big about how illustrious, magnificent, or incomparable their HBCU is. It was cool to experience the pride that other HBCU alums have for their schools. I have much respect for each of the participants in this study who overcame several personal challenges, and a few academic challenges, to reach their dreams. From what I learned about them, they have surpassed their wildest dreams and expectations of themselves.

A point of pride for me as a researcher was hearing study participants I've never met say to me, "You get it" and "I feel like you really understand." This made me feel good about the work I'm doing and encouraged me to continue supporting FGLI and HBCU students. I will always be grateful to these alums for taking the time to tell me their personal stories of how they experienced college as African American HBCU college students, and I'm so proud to learn of their academic and professional accomplishments so soon after graduating from college. I have always been passionate about getting communities of people who have been minoritized and left out to the front of the line for a change. I am determined to help as many students as I can graduate, and receive a quality education, several lucrative opportunities, and an enjoyable

college experience, free of as much strife as possible. Going to school and staying in school shouldn't be so hard. Students should be able to go to college and just focus on being successful student, not worrying about how they're going to eat, get books, or where they will sleep when the campus is closed. As a student-centered higher education professional, I am committed to supporting HBCU FGLI students and all FGLI students alike. I hope this research is useful in several functional areas within the divisions of student and academic affairs, campus communities, and beyond.

As a final conclusion, I would like to leave you with the following quote by Dr. James Benson Dudley, 2nd President of my alma mater, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University 1896-1925, and namesake for my high school alma mater, James B. Dudley Sr. High School. This quote has resonated with me over the years. I thought of it often as I completed this work. This sentiment inspires me to continue to strive for excellence in my studies and work to uplift student scholars who come from humble beginnings.

*"The true status of school can be measured by the success of its students"*.- Dr. James B. Dudley

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## APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INVITATION LETTER

Are you an African American graduate of a four-year public North Carolina HBCU who was a first-generation college and/or low-income (FGLI) college student and graduated from college between 2015 and 2019. Note: first-generation means neither PARENT had earned a bachelor's degree by the time you graduated from college (undergrad). Low-income means you were Pell-eligible for financial assistance for you to attend college. If you answered yes to this question, I would love for you to be a part of my research study.

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn how the collegiate experiences of former HBCU FGLI students shaped who they are today and to ascertain how these experiences might help institutions better support FGLI HBCU students. In addition, this study is concerned with discovering what challenges, especially non-academic, former students may have been presented with, and how they overcame these challenges and persisted to graduation. This research is being done as a part of my program in the Educational Leadership Cultural Foundations program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Your participation in this study might help you learn some new things about yourself as you reflect, provide first-person experience and insight on academic barriers FGLI HBCU students face, and help others reach academic success by learning from you. Your story about becoming the first person in your family to graduate from college could help other students learn ways they may navigate personal and academic barriers to success in college.

Anytime I use the information you give me, I will identify you with a pseudonym to protect your identity and that of the institution. I request your permission to audio and video record our interviews via ZOOM, so that I may maintain accuracy during transcription and documentation. I will ask you questions and document your response. I will maintain possession of the recorded interview and all study documentation. A digital transcription service will be used. If you agree to be a part of this study, I will ask you to sign a consent form. Your participation in this study will include a 60-minute interview, followed by a 60-minute follow-up interview.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Macfoy, Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX B: STUDY PARTICIPANT DATA FORM



# HBCU Study Participant Data Form

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn how the collegiate experiences of former HBCU first-generation low-income students shaped who they are today and to ascertain how these experiences might help institutions better support currently enrolled FGLI HBCU students.

Below, you will find the required criteria needed to participate in this study. Once this form is completed, reviewed, you are found eligible, and selected for participation in this study, you will be contacted via email by Stephanie Macfoy, UNCG Doctoral Student Researcher.

* Required

1. Name *

2. Phone Number (Will only be used to contact selected study participants) *

3. Gender (Optional)

4. Do you identify as African American? *

*Mark only one oval.*

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

5. Please select what demographics described you best as a student? *

*Check all that apply.*

- [ ] Low-Income Only
- [ ] First-Generation Only
- [ ] Low-Income and First-Generation

6. What year did you graduate from college? (Undergrad) *

*Mark only one oval.*

- ◯ 2015
- ◯ 2016
- ◯ 2017
- ◯ 2018
- ◯ 2019

7. North Carolina HBCU attended *You MUST be a graduate of one of the following HBCUs to participate in this study. *

*Mark only one oval.*

- ◯ Elizabeth City State University
- ◯ Fayetteville State University
- ◯ North Carolina A&T State University
- ◯ North Carolina Central University
- ◯ Winston-Salem State University

8. Do you currently hold another terminal degree? Please indicate the credential for this degree. Example: PhD, MS, MA, JD, MD, DDS. *

9. Can you commit to contributing a maximum of 120 minutes to participate in the interview component of this study? *

*Mark only one oval.*

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

# APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Research Questions*

1. What do African American first-generation and low-income graduates from HBCUs identify as factors that most hindered them from achieving and performing at their absolute best?
    a. What barriers did they face related to the college and university institution? (academic, policy, campus services, etc.)
    b. What non-academic barriers did they face?
    c. How do they define success?
2. What do first-generation-low income African American HBCU graduates credit as being their source(s) of motivation for graduating?
3. What are African American FGLI HBCU undergraduate alumni's perceptions of the impact attending a HBCU had on their lives post-graduation?

*Pre-College*

1. Tell me a little bit about the family you grew up in. Who raised you, how many siblings did you have, and where did you grow up?
2. What was your motivation to go to college and specifically an HBCU?
3. What was your experience like applying to college?
4. How was your transition from high school to college?

*College/University Experience*

5. Looking back, how would you describe your experience as an HBCU student overall?
6. What would you say were the major non-academic challenges of your college experience?
7. I'd like to go deeper into understanding the challenges and how you moved through them. Tell me more about each. Let's start with _____. (Asked for each challenge participant mentions)
    a. What helped you surpass this challenge?
    b. What were your sources of support?
    c. Who became your primary source of support? How so? What did they do?
8. What would have been helpful to you during this time? What might the HBCU staff and faculty have done to support you?
9. Now that you've told me about the non-academic challenges, what would you say were the major academic challenges of your college experience? With each challenge, tell me about the challenge, what helped you overcome it, and what support you had that was helpful. (Use follow-up prompts for each challenge and then ask if there is another)
    a. What helped you overcome this challenge?
    b. What were the most important sources of support?
    c. Who helped you, if anyone, surpass this challenge? How so?
    d. What else might HBCU faculty and staff have done to support you?

10. Which challenges were the hardest to navigate? What made them most challenging?
11. What would you say were the major highlights of your college experience?
12. How do you feel being a first-generation, low-income college student impacted your experience at your HBCU?

*Life Post Graduation*

13. How has your life changed post-graduation?
14. How do you feel your HBCU college experience impacted who you are today?
15. What were you expecting from your college experience and how did it match or differ from the experience you had?
16. People talk about "success" a lot. What does success mean to you? What does it mean as a graduate of an HBCU?
17. How successful do you feel you are? What makes you feel that way?
18. If you were talking to a panel of HBCU faculty and staff about how to support FGLI students, what would you say to them?
19. If you were talking to a panel of HBCU FGLI students about how to successfully navigate college, what would you say to them?
20. Is there anything I haven't asked that you believe is important for current HBCU students or university faculty and staff to know about FGLI students?

APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT FLIER

LOOKING TO CONNECT WITH

# AFRICAN AMERICAN NORTH CAROLINA HBCU ALUMNI

The purpose of this study is to explore how recent first-generation low-income HBCU college graduates persisted through college towards graduation, what factors presented challenges to their college success, and what factors contributed positively to their success.

For study information and to complete a demographic survey for participation, please visit:

**https://tinyurl.com/3tkyte43**

or use the QR code to complete the survey

## ARE YOU?

- African American
- Graduate of a North Carolina 4-Year Public HBCU
- Class of 2015-2019
- Were you a first-generation and/or low-income college student?

## WILL YOU?

- Participate in two 1:1 interviews

## SHARE YOUR STORY!

- Participants will receive a $30 VISA gift card for completing the study

Note: first-generation means neither PARENT had earned a bachelor's degree by the time you graduated from college (undergrad).
Low-income means you were Pell Grant eligible for financial assistance.

Contact-Stephanie Macfoy |
sjmacfoy@uncg.edu
Doctoral Candidate at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro
IRB-
IRB-FY22-650

5/18/22

**Table D1. Study Participant Demographics/University Alumni Representation**

Study Participant Demographic

| University Represented | Gender | FG/LI/FGLI | Graduation Year | Highest Degree Obtained |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **University 1** | M | FG | 2016 | Ph.D |
| **University 2** | M | FGLI | 2018 | MBA |
| **University 2** | F | FGLI | 2016 | Ph.D |
| **University 2** | M | FGLI | 2016 | JD |
| **University 2** | M | FG | 2017 | MS |
| **University 2** | F | FGLI | 2019 | BS |
| **University 3** | F | FGLI | 2019 | M.Ed |
| **University 4** | M | LI | 2018 | BS |
| **University 5** | F | FGLI | 2019 | BS |
| **University 5** | F | FGLI | 2016 | BS |

**Table D2. Very-Low-Income Student Designation Determination Chart**