Black Female Student Experience and White Supremacy Historicity in HE:

An Intersectional Analysis of the Black Female Student Experience from Access to Career

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This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

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Abstract

For over 40 years, U.S. colleges and universities have failed to improve racial and gendered enrollment and graduation rates for Black women. Furthermore, Black women continue to hold the highest unemployment rates and difficulties in the job market, even with a college degree. While there have been some gains over time, they are still unable to persist at the rates of White women due to systemic barriers in HE institutions. This study examines the intersectional experiences of the traditional college journey for Black female students from accessing HE to pursuing gainful employment after graduation. This research collected stories from 12 Black women who successfully graduated college and employed a feminist methodology and Intersectionality Theory to examine how they accessed and persisted in college and how they were prepared for the workforce after college. Analysis revealed that all participants experienced microaggressions on campus, but first-generation students/lower income experienced additional stress of accessing and affording college, which led to further isolation on predominantly white campuses. This research finds racial isolation, white-dominated campus culture, and lack of academic preparation from high school weakened that academic confidence. Additionally, participants improved their academic confidence and coping with microaggressions by finding or building a Black network and social support while still seeking more inclusive spaces for their unique identities, i.e., mixed ethnicities, abilities, and sexual orientation. Recommendations are offered to improve college campus culture by educating White students and staff and utilizing career readiness programs with an intersectional understanding of cultural wealth and gainful employment, increasing representation and support for multiple identities on campus, and embedding cultural competency and cultural wealth in university career preparation programs. This research concludes that racial isolation amplified financial and first-generation issues, participants found the most support with Black female support groups, and all participants experienced different degrees of microaggressions on campus. Participants recognized that universities and colleges employed diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices, but they were not enough to address the deeper systemic issues affecting their college journeys.

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Abbreviations

PWI	Predominantly White Institution
HBCU	Historically Black College and University
FGS	First Generation Student
SES	Socioeconomic Status
HE	Higher Education
CRT	Critical Race Theory
DEI	Diversity, Equity & Inclusion
TA	Thematic Analysis
FASFA	Free Application for Federal Student Aid
EFC	Expected Family Contribution
COA	Cost of Attendance
AP	Advanced Placement
DE	Dual Enrollment

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1: Introduction

In 1960, at the age of six, Ruby Bridges was the first African American student to attend a desegregated, all-White elementary school in the United States (Michals, 2015). She and her mother were escorted to school by federal marshals due to the large number of White protesters yelling slurs and threats. Only one teacher, Barbara Henry, agreed to teach her, so Ruby was a class of one, ate her lunch alone, and only had Ms. Henry to play with at recess (Michals, 2015). We would all agree that this is a terrible burden for a young child to bear. Her family faced job loss, threats to their safety, and evictions, all so she could obtain the same education as White students (Michals, 2015). Although legal segregation is a thing of the past, we still see disparities between White students and students of color's academic success in the US. Unfortunately, while segregation is against U.S. law, it is still very active in education due to the history of Jim Crow laws[1], redlining practices, and how primary schools are funded (Bottia, Mickelson, et al, 2016; Jacobs, 2013). This is further compounded by college graduation numbers showing that Black female students are not persisting at the rates of their White counterparts, nor are they getting employment at the same rates (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011; Salami et al., 2020). I do not use White women as a measure of academic or workforce success, but rather as an understanding that HE equates success in proximity to Whiteness (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019). Using an intersectional framework, this research will explore how Whiteness on campus affects the experiences of Black women pursuing a college degree. I chose this research to 1) help amplify Black voices in education, 2) uncover more research about the intersectional needs of students, and 3) investigate the role of racial isolation and academic confidence within White dominated college campuses. To meet these goals, this thesis outlines the previous research on Black women's experiences accessing, enrolling, and graduating from college, provides an understanding of intersectional theory and how it is applied to this research, and provides an analysis of the life histories shared by the study participants examining the role of identity, academic confidence, and campus culture.

[1] Jim Crow law, in U.S. history, any of the laws that enforced racial segregation in the South between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s (Urofsky, 2023).

1.1.1: Global Perspective and the Legacy of Slavery

Black women continue to enroll in college, and higher education (HE) has yet to find a way to close the enrollment and graduation gap between Black women compared to White women and men (Bhopal, 2017; Wilson-Strydom, 2015; Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo; 2022; Arday & Jones, 2022). In this study, I investigate equity gaps in HE for Black women in degree retention and employment rates, using an intersectional analysis and feminist oral histories. Essentially, this research is listening to the stories of Black women who successfully graduated college to better understand the barriers and achievements during the journey and what Predominantly White Institutions [2] (PWIs) can do to improve White systemic oppression on campus. In order to understand these issues fully, this research provides a brief background on the systemic issues in HE and how the history of slavery and segregation in the U.S. still influences these systems today.

The 1950s -1980s saw the Black gender gap in college rates close due to a general lack of educational resources for all Black people (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011). Black women were more likely to be educated than White women, likely because Black women needed to work to compensate for lower income levels due to discriminatory hiring practices of Black males (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011). However, White women's enrollment increased with the invention of birth control and the feminization of degree-required careers such as teaching and nursing (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011). The passing of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color, gender, national origin, or handicapping conditions in educational institutions that received federal funds and resulted in significant increases in the high school and college completion rates of African Americans, both men and women, during the last half of a century (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Each racial and gender group, except White men, has increased their college enrollment numbers, and Black women have consistently held higher numbers than Black men, although little is known as to why (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011). Several factors that may contribute to this trend include funding and resources for the college. However, even when colleges put resources specific to disadvantaged groups, 'they have not yet found

[2] A term used to describe institutions of higher learning in which Caucasians account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (Bourke, 2016: 13).

ways to match the impact of these deeply rooted systematic obstacles to equity in access and completion' (Brint & Clotfelter, 2016: 18). This study looks to interrogate the deeply rooted systemic obstacles as they affect Black women to gain insight and develop recommendations on the more significant impacts of these obstacles.

I understand systemic oppression and historically marginalized groups are not unique to the United States, but my research does take place with U.S. citizens attending U.S. institutions. I do not want to discount the global racial systemic issues that continue to affect Black students in accessing college (Bhopal, 2017; Wilson-Strydom, 2015; Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo, 2022; Arday & Jones, 2022). Additionally, Arday & Jones (2022) found the impact of COVID-19 to be deeply racist on both the UK and US academic institutions and how then-U.S. President Trump and the murder of U.S. citizen George Floyd created racial re-trauma for Black students and staff globally and furthered the feelings of isolation and loneliness. The history of colonization and exploitation of Black people continues to affect the policies and systems in academia and perpetuate equity gaps in the academic outcomes of the institutions. While systemic and systematic barriers and Black exploitation are not specific to U.S. universities and colleges, the legacy of slavery in this country continues to affect the educational systems in the U.S. tremendously (Du Bois, 2007). Slavery, the U.S. Civil War, and Jim Crow laws greatly affected who could develop generational wealth and who could attend school. The U.S. eventually deemed segregation illegal, but this research will show how it never really left education in the U.S. (Bottia, Mickelson, et al, 2016; Jacobs, 2013). I recognize that situational oppression, global oppression, and the legacy of slavery influence systemic oppression.

1.2. Rationale and Importance of the Study

I work and teach at a sizeable two-year community college that serves approximately 33,000 students, with 49% White students, 40% Hispanic, 8% Black, and the remaining student population identifying as Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Indigenous, and unknown or two or more (ACC Student Profile, 2023). In 2017, I completed research on the racial climate of the college and reported that in every cohort from 2009 – 2012, Black students consistently decreased in enrollment, graduating with a certificate or degree, transferring to a 4-year university, and completing 60 credit hours within 3 years. All other races increased transfer rates except Black students at the time of the report in 2016 (Institutional Effectiveness Report, 2016).

The college is open-access admissions and continues to reproduce the same retention trends as the 4-year institutions (Bottia, Mickelson, et al, 2016; Bhopal, 2017; Thomas & Jackson, 2007). During this research, I performed research using the keywords 'racial climate,' 'critical race theory,' and 'college students.' I reviewed nine scholarly articles that conducted studies using CRT as their framework. Five of the articles and studies I reviewed focused solely on Black male students or only utilized Black male testimonies. I concluded that over fifty percent of my articles catered solely to the male student of color experiences, and seventy-seven percent ignored and minimized gender as a contributing variable to student success.

At this time, the college funded and staffed a program called Men of Leadership, formerly known as Men of Color. This program was built to target and provide resources and staff to support Black male students and provide leadership training, resources, and mentors. Because there was not a similar resource for female students, even though they are over half of the college's student population (ACC Student Profile, 2023), I started a student-led Women's Leadership Organization (2017-2020) and quickly realized that it was a significant burden on the back of students as student run organization to match the Men of Leadership program. At the same time, our membership base quickly grew with female students seeking direction, mentoring, and networking from this group. The organization suffered compared to Men of Leadership (which was run by college staff and had a college budget) due to officer turnover, the logistics of the cumbersome election and organization renewal process required by the college, and a small amount of funding and eventually ended with the pandemic and remote nature of the college at the time. From this experience, I learned that although female students are performing better by standard college matrices of graduation and perseverance, the growing membership base of a struggling organization shows they have needs that are not being met in the college. It begs the question: Are women, specifically women of color, being overlooked in HE because they succeed despite multiple barriers and challenges they face due to gender and race?

1.2.1: Defining the Research Problem

As I investigated further into HE issues, I found my experience was not unique within HE, which tends to specifically targets male students of color when determining needs, programming, and student resources for marginalized students. Additionally, I find HE

institutions have a pattern of limiting students to single identities (racial, gender, LGBTQIA+) and often overlook the intersectional needs that help shape students' identities and, by extension, academic confidence. Programming within HE institutions that support historically excluded students historically targets perceived female needs (Title IX, Take Back the Night) or Students of Color needs (such as Racial Healing Centers), which are all needed resources for students, but it can often force a student to pick one identity over another, or becoming limiting in the needs they seek to address. For example, at the college I work for, the Title IX Office (a federally required office to combat sexual harassment and assault) assists female students with harassment, stalking, and dating violence. This is a critical office for college campuses, but it only addresses one aspect of the female experience and does not openly address the role of racism and assault. Furthermore, it cannot address racial or gendered isolation on campus, improving academic confidence for women of color in White dominated spaces, and address the disparity in graduation and employment outcomes. From my experience and research, there is a lack of understanding of the intersectional experiences of Black female students on college campuses from access to graduation and their effects on the consistent graduation and employment gaps between their White and male counterparts.

1.2.3: Aims of This Research

This research aims to incorporate life history stories from Black women and the college experience, including both access to and life after college. The combined literary and feminist oral history research will acknowledge their hidden barriers in multiple areas of oppression by using an intersectional feminist theory lens. Additionally, it will examine the role of college support, or lack thereof, during their journey and how racial and gendered microaggressions played a role in their student and possible career development as it delves into the disparity between graduation and employment rates. Using the analysis of themes developed from the oral history data, I address the overall research question of *how do the intersectional experiences affect the journey of college for Black female students* by also addressing the following research questions:

- How does Whiteness and college culture impact Black women's experiences in college?

- How does Black women's access to college affect academic confidence and sense of belonging?

These questions are answered using an Intersectional Framework for analysis and discussion to understand better the roles of interlocking oppressions and equity blind spots on campus and preparing for employment after college.

1.3: Need for Intersectional Perspective

Crenshaw was one of the first key theorists of Intersectionality Theory and the examination of multiple disadvantages and how they affect social movements (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Zack, 2005). She argued Black women experience the same key issues as Black men, such as police brutality and predatory regulations, but college and political responses often center around the Black male experience (Patton, Crenshaw, Haynes, Watson, 2016; Crenshaw, 2013). Even programs such as Black Lives Matter and President Barack Obama's 'My Brother's Keeper' are aimed at the systemic injustices for Black men, inferring that the Black experience is the Black male experience (Patton, Crenshaw, Haynes, Watson, 2016; Crenshaw, 2013). In fact, much of the race research centers on the male experience, and while this is critical, it cannot make Black women invisible in order to empower Black men (Patton, Crenshaw, Haynes, Watson, 2016; Crenshaw, 2013, Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Thomas and Jackson (2007) also find that early advocates educating and uplifting Black women would elevate the Black community, while other critics claim the higher rates of Black women enrolling in college and graduating at higher rates than Black men contributes to low marriage, parenting, and family dynamics (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011). I would argue that both points place the burden of 'saving' or 'uplifting' the Black community at the feet of Black women and still carry both sexist and racist elements.

This research acknowledges systemic racism as racist structures embedded in institutional policies and procedures (Watson & Collins, 2022). Thus, even if the institution was run by non-racist people, the system would still produce racially unequal outcomes by its very design. In HE, systemic racism adversely affects Black student persistence, and intersectionality informs us even in a racist system, the same barriers do not exist for both men and women and have different effects on their journey, hardship, and stress as college students and gainful

employment rates. I believe Intersectional Feminism Theory is the best approach to my research because it allows for the experiences of multiple identities and vulnerabilities, and I will use this theory to define key terms, including gender, feminism, racial and sexist microaggressions, and additional themes that are produced from the research sample data. Using Intersectional Feminism Theory to fully explore the multiple identities of gender and race, my research will examine the struggles facing female students of color and negotiating both race and gender in their college experience using the following methodology to establish patterns of invisible barriers within HE.

1.3.1: Methodology

I will be using a feminist methodology as my research will be driven by my experience as a female student, educator, and administrator (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). This research will not include male student experiences but will acknowledge the gendered politics and power differences within the female student experience. The core of intersectional feminism is to focus on the varying aspects of identity affecting women of color that both Feminism and Critical Race Theory have overlooked historically. This research and methodology intend to promote voices to these stories and highlight gaps in research intersectional experiences of female students of color within HE. The two defining frameworks of this research are feminism and race and will include additional intersectional factors such as (but not limited to) socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and ableism as they make sense in the research.

I selected a small sample of Black women who successfully graduated from at least one HE institution to share their life history stories. I aim to explore how intersectional experiences affect the journey of college for Black female students and let them tell the story through a series of interview questions. Intersectional feminism says narratives and storytelling are essential to give voice to those being oppressed (Ferguson, 2017; Patton, Crenshaw, Haynes, Watson, 2016; Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). Feminist oral histories lend themselves to different points of view and provide examples of how negotiating their different identities on campus affected their persistence.

1.4: Addressing the Gap in the Research

This study highlights the importance of understanding equity and inclusion on a PWI college campus and the need to dismantle White supremacist systemic practices. We know that female students of color experience more stress, struggle with both femininity and race, and have increased barriers in college than male students (Morales, 2008; Lopez, Erwin, Binder & Chavez, 2018; Esposito, 2011). Additionally, research also shows Black women are more likely to be placed in development classes and are more likely to use financial aid, thus causing more classes, time, and tuition costs (Lopez, Erwin, Binder & Chavez, 2018), and further research finds there are significantly more studies and academic articles about the Black male college experience than Black female college experience (Patton, Crenshaw, Haynes, Watson, 2016; Gillborn, 2015; Comeaux, 2013; Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000; Vue, Haslerig, & Allen, 2017; Hope, Chavous, Jagers, & Sellers, 2013; Massey, & Owens, 2014; Mitchell, & Stewart, 2013). Finally, the small amount of research that does center on Black women uses a narrow framework that targets one identity or group, such as athletes or STEM (Lewis, et al., 2016; McDaniel et al., 2011; Morales, 2008; Pittman & Kaur, 2018; Pyant & Yanico, 1991; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). This work shows us there are barriers for Black women that affect their persistence but excludes the intersectional influences that are unique to historically excluded groups with multiple, and sometimes competing, identities. Building on this research and incorporating Crenshaw's (1991) and Nunez's (2014) work on Intersectionality, my study will help fill this gap by interrogating a bigger picture of the intersectional needs of Black women on campus and allowing participants to describe their entire journey from access to employment. This allows the research to explore themes across their entire journey from their first year to entering their career field. I contribute to the literature in the following ways:

- First, the analysis examines how the women saw themselves on campus with multiple identities and what they internalized from experience in contrast to the institution's role in reinforcing their identities on campus.
- Second, this study incorporates these identities and experiences and considers how they shaped participants' academic confidence and racial isolation.
- Third, this research examines the links between university career prep programs and employment outcomes for Black women.

My research will help uncover more overarching themes that affected participants prior to entering college through graduation and career obtainment. I argue that systemic barriers and

microagressions do not stop and start with different stages of Black women's lives but rather have a persistent effect through every stage, causing them to constantly be aware and negotiate their identities. In this work, I report how intersectional experiences and different identities of black women influenced their academic confidence and racial socialization of women on campus and the long-term effects that impacted career preparation and career choice.

1.5: Chapter Summary

This thesis is divided into six sections, including the introduction and conclusion of the research. Chapter Two outlines the existing research on education debt and a deeper understanding of the history of Black female students in education. This section helps develop the historical understanding of Black social mobility in the U.S. through education and how Black women need more credentialing to obtain employment but still find barriers persisting compared to White women. Chapter Three will explore Black Feminism and Intersectionality theory, highlighting why feminism and critical race theory (CRT) are not enough and why intersectionality is the best approach for this research. Following this, Chapter 4 discusses the research methodology, as well as the ontological and epistemological framework for the research. This chapter also discusses my role as a White researcher and incorporates a feedback loop and reflexivity positionality to address my own biases in the research. This chapter is followed by Chapter 5, where I analyze the data using an intersectional framework. Chapter 5 focuses on the participant's understanding of their identities and how this understanding informed their decision-making and shaped their academic confidence. Furthermore, it will build on their interpretations and interrogate the role of the university and campus college culture in these experiences and the cultural blind spots in their career preparation programs. This allows the research to have a better understanding of campus culture and policies within the context of their lived experiences before, during, and after college enrollment and graduation. Finally, Chapter 6 will conclude the thesis and provide a summary of the findings and recommendations for PWIs to address college culture and career prep with more inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches.

Chapter Two: History of Educational Debt and Black Female Student Retention

2.1: Introduction

This research aims to uncover a more holistic understanding of the Black female college student experience. The majority of the research agrees on two things: 1) education policy is failing in terms of equity due to gender and race gaps in graduation (Bottia, Mickelson, et al, Giersch, Mickelson, Stearns, Moller, 2015; Bhopal, 2017; Thomas & Jackson, 2007) and 2) there needs to be more research on the experience of Black female college students and the intersection of race and gender (Thomas & Jackson, 2007; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, Huntt, 2016; Winkle-Wagner, 2015; Domingue, 2015).

This research explores the big picture experiences of Black women in college, meaning the research is interested in the college experience from beginning to end instead of specific or more narrow experiences, i.e., Black women in sports or Black women and assessment testing. Essentially, this research aims to better understand their experiences from access to career and to address the gap in educational and career achievement compared to their White and male counterparts. This research will also address the gap in the research surrounding educational debt, Black female retention, and the role of universities and Black female employment obtainment.

To understand the history and overarching themes of this research, this chapter is divided into four parts: 1) a brief history and Black female education and understanding the achievement gap, or educational debt, 2) exploring student access to college, 3) analyzing the role of the University and, 4) examining employment after college. I believe looking at the full extent of experiences of Black women in college from beginning to end will yield a better understanding of why more Black female students are not persisting in graduation and employment rates and also provide a better understanding of the systemic barriers that impede Black female student success.

2.2. History of Black Female Education and Educational Debt

To fully realize the role of Whiteness in education, we must first look at the nation's history with Black students. Many educational institutions and norms are still influenced by founders from before the Civil War and/or during the Jim Crow era of segregation. We can connect this history to a colonized curriculum, where Western knowledge prioritizes a hetero, White centric perspective with capitalism and imperialism drives the need for knowledge (Ashu, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2016). I argue this understanding of colonialism is critical because it led to segregated educational practices in the United States, and then created assimilative practices that cause deep inequities in educational persistence that we still see today.

Furthermore, this context is important to understand in discussions of first-generation students and the socioeconomic status of Black students. First-generation and low-income students can be any race, but Black people were specifically and sometimes violently denied the ability to build generation wealth, and this still affects Black students today. First-generation students are more likely to be female, low-income, and persons of color (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018), adding more weight to the importance of this research on the impacts on Black female students.

2.2.1: A Brief History of Black Female College Education

After the Civil War, newly freed slaves struggled to keep and maintain Black schools, seeing education as the bridge to true freedom and opportunity (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). In the early 1900s, the National Training School for Women and Girls opened as an educational opportunity for Black women that were not funded by White people and offered students more options besides typical female occupations by offering training in either trade or seminary (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). The 1800-1900s also saw the opening of four colleges specifically for Black women as there was little educational opportunity: (a) Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia; (b) Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina; (c) Tillotson College in Austin, Texas; and (d) Barber-Scotia College in Concordia, North Carolina. This is important because Black women were severely marginalized at the time, and gender was often dismissed.

Also, during the time, education and work were prioritized for men, and the treatment of Lucy Diggs Slowe, the first Black female Dean at Howard University, hired in 1922, epitomizes the double standards in education for gender. Recognizing the need of increasing college education, she 'argued that the extent to which African American college women will be able to

take their places as leaders in their communities depends, to a large extent, upon the opportunities offered them for exercising initiative, independence, and self-direction while in college' (Thomas & Jackson, 2007: 363). She believed in creating leadership opportunities for Black women but was met with resistance from the University's first Black President, Mordecai Johnson (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). The disagreement on their views of women's equality and empowerment led to a strained relationship between the two and the dismantling of women's programs that were built by Stowe (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). We see early on the damage of putting gender identity behind race identity, telling Black women sexism is second to the fight for racial equality for men, and therefore their opportunities, or lack thereof, are less important. This context is still carried today, as pointed out by Crenshaw (2013), when programming and research on the Black experience continues to focus on the Black male experience.

2.2.2: Educational Debt and the Need for Decolonizing the Curriculum

The term 'achievement gap' is often presented in conversations on educational equity and analyzing the persistence and retention rates of students (Hoffman et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006). This research instead uses Ladson-Billings' (2006) term 'educational debt' to more accurately describe the consistent and inconsistent rates of college graduation based on race and gender. I say consistent and inconsistent because graduation rates by race have not changed in comparison to any other ethnicity, meaning Black students remain at the lowest retention rates (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed; 2011, Brint & Clotfelter, 2016; Bhopal, 2017; Wilson-Strydom, 2015; Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo, 2022; Arday & Jones, 2022). Women have made some gains, and White women have the most positive changes (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011). I also use 'inconsistent' to point out there is no reason U.S. universities should have such disparity in racial graduation rates.

It is important to note that achievement gaps or educational debt are direct results of a colonized curriculum that rests on silencing non-Western voices and cultures by dismissing and othering non-White academics and students (Etieyibo, 2021; Ashu, 2020; Bhattacharya. 2016). In the case of Black women in the United States, we took their ancestors from their country and then forced colonization through slavery, religion, and little to no education pathways. Historically, this led to Black Americans being unable to build generational wealth or improve social mobility due to Westernized barriers that require assimilation into White Euro-centric culture to be successful

(Etieyibo, 2021; Bhattacharya. 2016). I believe this leads to an economic and educational deficit owed to BIPOC students due to these historical, systemic barriers.

Educational debt recognizes the Whiteness-centered language of the achievement gap that implies non-White students have a deficit and cannot and will not achieve at the same rates as White students. Rather, I argue that the history of segregation and White male supremacy set up many Black students for failure in educational systems and making superficial diversity efforts such as Black History Month or offering non-white history courses as an elective. These initiatives have shown they do not work or have minimal results and have not greatly influenced graduation, and by extension, employment rates (Hoffman et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Rather, HE should embrace decolonizing the college experience using Etieyibo's (2021) definition:

> it is also important here to specify what I mean by curriculum: not just some content or some document with some content about what and what not to teach and what learners are to be taught and why they will be taught it; rather, by curriculum I am gesturing toward the full gamut of educational experience, including such things as attitudes, values, norms, beliefs, dispositions, and worldviews, which one gets to form and reform and learn and unlearn

Furthermore, in order to address racial equity issues, educational debt assumes the responsibility is on the institution to correct it and acknowledges they owe something to historically excluded groups' student success. Research shows that Black students, nonwhite students, and white students benefit from participating in authentic Black spaces, where racial and intersectional experiences are discussed instead of dismissed regarding White comfort (Deckman, 2022; Sonu & Deckman, 2021) and addressing the educational debt will benefit all students.

2.2.3: Why the Educational Debt Matters

I attended an optional professional development training on equity in education at the college where I am employed, led by the college's Associate Vice President, Equity & Inclusion in 2017. Something that stayed with me referenced that we know it is an institutional issue (as opposed to a deficit with students) because we can predict the outcomes. This was specifically speaking of graduation and persistence outcomes when broken down by race. This idea that we

can continue to predict that Black students will have the lowest graduation rates is severely problematic and must be fully addressed. No one would get on a plane if, consistently, only a small percentage of the passengers were likely to survive on every flight that takes off in the US.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) shows some sobering trends from 1976-2019 when enrollment and graduation rates are presented by race and gender:

Enrollment: 1976 - 2019	
White males	dropped from 84%-54%
Black males	increased from 8.4% - 11%
White females	dropped 83% - 53%
Black females	increased 11% - 14%
Bachelor's Degrees Conferred: 1976 – 2019	
White males	dropped from 90% - 64%
Black males	increased from 5% - 8%
White females	dropped from 88% - 61%
Black females	increased from 8% - 11%
Master's Degrees Conferred: 1976 – 2019	
White males	dropped from 90% - 66%
Black males	increased from 5% - 11%
White females	dropped from 87% - 63%
Black females	increased from 9% - 11.6%
Doctorate degrees Conferred: 1976 - 2019	
White males	dropped from 93% - 68%
Black males	increased from 3% - 7%
White females	dropped from 90% - 64%
Black females	increased from 7% - 11%

For 43 years, Black students held the lowest rates of enrollment and conferred degrees in the U.S. Black women hold a small majority over Black males in all degree areas, but there is a substantial distance between Black women and White women. Additionally, the US. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) shows Black people have maintained the highest levels of unemployment compared to all other ethnic groups from 1972 to 2020, with a gap of women having the highest

rates in their respective ethnic groups (Smith, Edwards, et al. 2021). In short, for decades, Black people have never had the social mobility in education or the workforce that White people benefit from in the same education systems. Black women confer more degrees but, seemingly inexplicably, enjoy fewer job opportunities, and these racial and gender gaps have not seen any meaningful change over time.

I consider that HE has an educational debt to all Black students due to the systemic areas within HE and the country that allow for increased barriers for non-white students (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). This Chapter also considers the effects of Financial Aid, assessment testing, and under-resourced high schools that create barriers for Black female students (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). A small amount of research explains as to why these rates persist in educational spaces such as campus racial climate and microaggressions but makes little to no link to college graduates, unemployment rates, and the college's role in career prep (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Mandel & Semyonov, 2016; Bloch, et al., 2021; Mintz & Krymkowski, 2010; Hinchliffe, 2021). This research will add to this gap by exploring the experiences of Black female college graduates before, during, and after college to provide a holistic approach to future anti-racist institutional outcomes.

2.3: Exploring Black Female Student Access to College

Merridy Wilson-Strydom (2015) writes there are four dilemmas for access: 1) access and success/graduation, 2) access and socioeconomic context, 3) access and schooling (pre-university prep or quality of schooling), and 4) access and readiness. While her research centers on South African schools and universities, she makes comparisons to schools in the U.S. because these are fundamental issues of access across HE, including the U.S. Additionally, the U.S. considers diversity and equity a defining feature of a university (Bhopal, 2017; Brint & Clotfelter, 2016; Warikoo, Fei, & Jacoby-Senghor, 2016) although it does little to address diversity and equity issues with access. Diversity in the college setting is meant to increase perspectives and challenge norms for students, allowing them to be introduced to more global awareness (Moody, 2020). Diversity initiatives on campus are meant to benefit all people, thus giving White college administrators incentive to increase inclusion efforts on campus from Black students; Derrick Bell (1980) points out that White interest is the driving reason for White people to care about Black issues. This incentivizes colleges to recruit a more diverse body of students but does not

guarantee the college campus culture is welcoming or safe for these students. J. Luke Wood, chief diversity officer and Professor of Education at San Diego State University says 'students should look beyond the lip service to determine what a college's commitment to diversity and inclusion truly is. Colleges must demonstrate actions taken to enhance campus diversity, he says, and prospective students should weigh the success of minority populations on campus' (Moody, 2020). This section will focus on Wilson-Strydom's (2015) four barriers to access and address the barriers for Black women accessing college by exploring success and graduation, access and SES, and segregation patterns in college prep programs.

2.3.1: Academic Success and Graduation

Black students are increasing enrollment, but colleges are still not able to address the racial and gender gaps in enrollment and completion in college (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011; Brint & Clotfelter, 2016). This indicates that access to HE, as in applying and entering college, is improving, but has not quite reached an equitable standard. Enrollment numbers may be closer to reducing the racial gap, but graduation rates are not seeing the same growth. Wilson-Strydom (2015: 5) writes 'widening participation without putting in place mechanisms to support success is doing just this-increasing access to university for those previously excluded but also creating a generation of unsuccessful and further indebted young people'. Universities must address their campus climates, policies, and culture that create systemic barriers for Black students. They must put focus on determining what support systems are lacking for their most vulnerable groups, instead of being complacent in continuing the cycle of promising social mobility but producing more vulnerable groups without a degree and with increased debt. The stakes are not the same for all admitted students and education in general, especially PWIs, should take more responsibility for their student outcomes.

McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed (2011) offer some explanations for the educational, racial, and gender gaps and attempt to address the gender gap with superfluous talking points that are still being used today. They discuss the female 'advantage' of women enrolling and graduating at higher rates, even referring to the Black female advantage over Black men when discussing the racial gap between White and Black men. First, the word 'advantage' is problematic because it implies 1) somehow women are privileged in educational spaces without the article giving a reason why and 2) while the article discusses the gender employment gaps, it

does not refer to men as being 'advantaged' in the job market. I disagree that women are 'advantaged' in education spaces, but rather, they recognize the need for more credentials in order to advance in the workplace compared to their male co-workers. The gender employment gap and the wage gaps are present in all ethnicities (although rates still favor White and Asian women), and there is a universal need to obtain degrees compared to male counterparts.

Their research and other research also point to feminized careers requiring degrees (teaching, nursing), and women need to be more credentialed to enter the workforce than their male counterparts (Brint & Clotfelter, 2016; McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011; Morales, 2008) and this is an important point. There are various fields that require extensive training in HE, such as STEM fields, that are underrepresented by women (Martinez & Christnacht, 2021). Additionally, the top fields that require a degree and are over-represented by women include health associates, health professionals, and teaching professions (ILOSTAT, 2020). I agree that women are being socialized into caretaker roles and I add that these fields also offer shorter degree plans and guaranteed job placement. In the U.S., health and teaching degrees can obtain employment with 2 or 4-year degrees and there is always a need for health techs, nurses, and teachers in schools. For students with high-stakes needs, these fields are low stakes, even though they pay less than many STEM fields, to provide stability and possibly a small amount of social mobility.

Finally, also attributing to the gap to a lack of resources for Black men and high incarceration rates, and this argument ignores any intersectional approach to the gender and race gap in education and upholds a toxic patriarchal perspective that already shapes these arguments. The article cites several reasons for the gap, including a claim that Black women are rarely incarcerated and instead have an advantage over Black men entering college, although Crenshaw's (2013) work would disagree. I believe that incarceration is a factor as the U.S. holds the highest incarceration rate in the world and Black inmates are overly represented in the prisons (Gramlich, 2020). However, I still would not use the word 'advantaged' over Black women because they are still affected at higher rates than any other racial group by gender by incarceration rates in state prisons from 1980-2016 (Dyer, Hardfeman, Theall, Wallace, 2019). I point this out to say that yes, incarceration rates and the 'school to prison pipeline' likely influence enrollment rates and are not exclusively a Black male issue. Furthermore, Black women are not protected from the effects of police brutality and the emotional toll and stress of

worrying or losing their partners, sons, brothers, fathers, and friends in addition to worrying about their own safety regarding both their race and gender. Gender needs to be included in the discussions of threats to Black bodies in the U.S. instead of being seen as an unequal advantage.

2.3.2: Access and Socioeconomic (SES) Context

U.S. universities value diversity efforts and 'are ranked in terms of their curricula and how they address issues of equity and diversity' (Bhopal, 2017: 295). However, Black students are less likely to enroll and are underrepresented in elite universities such as Harvard or Brown. In the U.S., students apply for federal loans and grants using the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA). Student awards are based on both the family expected contribution (EFC) and the cost of attendance (COA) at the university (Cellini & Goldin, 2014). Students are awarded grants and offered loans based on these two factors, meaning a student with a poorer economic status (lower EFC) who attends a university with higher tuition will be offered more aid, including higher loan amounts. Grants are money that does not need to be paid back, and amounts vary based on financial need (Federal Pell Grants, 2023). Student loans, also based on financial need, are paid after a short grace period after student graduation (Subsidized and Unsubsidized Loans, 2023). Loans are direct from the Department of Education and can be subsidized and unsubsidized and paid back with a standard 10-year plan or income-driven plans (Hillman & Orosz, 2017). Subsidized loans have the interest paid by the federal government and unsubsidized loans involve the students paying both the balance and the accrued interest. Federal student loans do not have a credit rating requirement for borrowers but have the highest penalties for default including garnishing wages, seizure of tax refunds, and the inability to discharge the loans (Ionescu & Simpson, 2016). This appears to be an equitable avenue to accessing HE, but it can be harmful to those who are the most vulnerable because student loans have the highest stakes of any lending format.

The ease of borrowing funds and the severity of the consequences cause it to be concerning when educational loans are the ‘largest line of consumer credit behind only home mortgages’ (Hillman & Orosz, 2017: 8). Plans can be flexible for students to pay back, but can never be discharged. Student borrowers are making a long-term investment when they sign up for loans. Once they get behind on payments, it begins a lifelong cycle of bad credit, wage garnishment, and possible liens on assets. Arguments around student loan debt include

neoliberalism ideas that the person agreed to the debt and, therefore, should work hard and pay it off. However, this argument does not recognize inflating tuition costs, and that federal student loans have the highest penalties for default, including garnishing wages, seizure of tax refunds, and the inability to discharge the loans (Ionescu & Simpson, 2016). Additionally, the unequal distribution of wealth and resources means those with the greatest need and lowest generational wealth take out the highest loan amounts.

Black students hold almost double the amount of student loan debt of White students, get less of a return on their college investment, and have a higher risk of losing their job during a recession (Zhan, Xiang, and Elliott, 2016; Davis, Mustaffa, J. B., King; Jama, 2020). Black college graduates suffer from a racial pay gap and limited opportunities for advancement, therefore minimizing their income growth opportunities, and this creates a greater risk of default if they cannot earn as much as their White counterparts. Unequal outcomes for Black students are part of a systematic issue in HE, and student loans only fix part of this problem by creating access. Women are hit the hardest by student loan debt because of the need to borrow more and fewer career opportunities that allow them to pay off the debt, and Black women hold more debt than any other race or gender group (Piper, 2018; AAUW, 2021). In short, the increasing rates of Black female college enrollment create more debt, and they will struggle the most under this debt with limited job opportunities. Using federal loans to supplement tuition costs has a higher risk for Black women than any other demographic in this country.

SES barriers affect students before they may even apply for college, as they are more likely to attend under-resourced K-12 schools. In the U.S., public schools are funded through property taxes from the community. Therefore, the less valuable the properties near the schools, the less funding that is going into the school. This leads to issues retaining highly qualified teachers, fewer resources, and a curriculum less likely to engage in college prep and high rigor intellectual thinking (Bottia, Mickelson, et al, 2016; Chambers, Walpole, & Outlaw, 2016). Additionally, Chambers, Walpole, and Outlaw (2016) find that lower-income schools tend to have fewer Math classes and while Black student enrollment has increased in Math courses, the rigor continues to increase for all students to remain competitive for four-year college institutions. Empirical research shows that lower funded schools have higher rates of minority students, and this is influenced by a variety of things, including White flight and gentrification (Brazil & Candipan, 2022). SES is a racial issue and cannot be separated, especially in

educational spaces, as the intersection of race and class influence students as early as kindergarten where students range between 5 - 6 years old. Education systems that allow students to start on uneven educational opportunities continue the cycle of poverty when the college options are limited because low-income students are under prepared by their public schools, or the risk of high debt is too heavy a burden with little promise of an income to balance the loan payments.

2.4: Eliteness, Segregation and College Preparation

Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod (2019:737) argues that eliteness, defined 'as a marker of both economic rank and social status,' is regarded in proximity to Whiteness and assimilating to White norms. Whiteness, as defined as a racial construct to justify White superiority of Blackness (Di'Angelo, 2018; Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019; Whitehead, 2021) is not reserved for White people, but rather, Whiteness is a construct that requires compliance and complacency to a predetermined set of Euro Centric White norms as a result of colonization. Whiteness only exists in relation to being better (sometimes referred to as 'civilized' in coded White language) than an 'other' (Whitehead, 2021). The 'other' is a dehumanized version of Blackness that often rests in harmful stereotypes and cultural misconceptions. Collins (2005) reminds us that Black women are often dehumanized with harmful stereotype depictions in the media of over sexualized Black women (Jezebel) or overly motherly Black women (Mammy). These messages place Black women in boxes that determine their value in proximity to White women. Black female students are navigating the racial and gendered social categories that have been placed upon them in a White centered space.

Education has its role in promoting eliteness and whiteness by using color blind tactics to avoid racial concerns or issues, a colonized curriculum, and white norms in teaching practices. To fully understand the power of Whiteness in education, we must take a brief look impact of segregation and integration of education in the U.S.

> School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information

> only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. Bussed to White schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to White authority (hooks, 1994: 3).

bell hooks shares her experience of changing from a segregated school to an integrated school and the changes in resources, curriculum, teacher expectations, and teaching styles, particularly in the way they taught Black students. Although legal segregation is a thing of the past, we still see large and predictable disparities between White and Black academic success in the US. Desegregation attempted to end the 'separate but equal' mindset and attempted to give Black students the same opportunities as White students. However, research shows that Black students' educational experiences were more similar to hook's experience and Black students may have been harmed by a lack of resources and poor teaching quality (Thomas & Jackson, 2007; Bottia, Mickelson, et al, Giersch, Mickelson, Stearns, Moller, 2015; Jacobs, 2013). This is not to say that desegregation was necessarily a bad thing, and we can see the successes of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)[3] in student engagement but desegregating schools for Black students more often led to expecting them to assimilate into White culture to be academically successful.

This mindset was further proved in a 2018 study that examined the effects on students of color in the AVID program, a bridge program in response to segregation designated to help Black students catch up to White students in college prep (Brooks, 2018). In the study, two AVID teachers, one White, and one Black, were interviewed on their classroom management and curriculum choices. The study finds the following conclusions:

- teaching a White centered curriculum helped Black students who were able to assimilate into White culture,

[3] The HE 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 or3association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation.' (U.S. Department of Education, 2023)

- The program puts the burden of self-deficiencies on the students instead of the system,
- the program employs predominately White female teachers who utilize a White savior complex and see themselves as heroes.

A White curriculum is also typically a White male curriculum, causing even more blind spots and areas of oppression for Black female students. Black female students may be subjected to harmful stereotype tropes that affect the education placements and discipline due to cultural mismatches, and they have increased doubts about their academic confidence directly related to how teachers and the school treats them (Chambers, Walpole, Outlaw, 2016; Bottia, Mickelson, et al, 2016). This begins to paint a picture that Black females are navigating barriers at the intersection of race and gender that affect their pathways to college differently than other underserved groups. Arguments that AVID helps minority students point out that college enrollment continues to increase for all participants; and underserved student college enrollment is higher when students participate in the program (Brooks, 2018). However, it comes with a higher cost for students when there is also an expectation of college success equating to White middle-class norms.

Another analysis of the Black/White gap in college readiness is to look at Advanced Placement (AP) and Dual Enrollment (DE) outcomes. AP and DE courses are ways for high school students to earn college credit while in high school. This is an incredible opportunity for lower income high school students to lower the cost of an overall college degree and gain some college experience in the high school setting, which may be more comfortable and familiar. However, the Black/White education debt still presents in both AP and DE programs and often reproduces the inequity already present in the school system (Xu, Solanki, & Fink, 2021; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021). Issues include schools from higher-income communities being able to offer AP classes more than rural schools, stereotypes and biases causing Black students not to enroll, needing high-quality teachers, and teaching to a 'dominant' culture, i.e., Whiteness (Kolluri, 2018; Fink, 2018; Xu, Solanki, & Fink, 2021; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021). Black students will consistently be at a disadvantage as long as college access and outcomes favor the dominant (White) culture. The bigger issue for college prep programs is that universities see their success rates in terms of White middle-class norms and unfortunately, PWIs also operate on White middle-class norms, and this can cause a hostile racial climate on campus for Black

students. College prep programs cannot change until HE employs a more intersectional lens to define success.

2.4.1: Whiteness on Campus and Racial Socialization

Diversity and inclusion practices on campus often allude to integrating Black and BIPOC students into White spaces (Deckman, 2022; Sonu & Deckman, 2021). This means Whiteness is still prioritized on campus, and the result is a 'community in difference' or a community that preserves the tensions of difference instead of embracing the 'in-betweenness of difference across ethnic and racial experience' (Sonu & Deckman, 2021: 172). In short, authentic inclusion recognizes the intersectionality within groups and celebrates and works through the differences instead of marginalizing them in favor of the dominant group. For Black students, the community of difference often means finding safe Black spaces and protecting themselves from both overt acts of racism, and imperceptible acts of racism such as microagressions and stereotypes.

Microaggressions are 'subtle and everyday slights and insults that can include insensitive comments based on an array of racial assumptions about criminality, intelligence, cultural values, and citizenship, as well as the minimization or denial of the racialized experiences of people of color' (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, Huntt, 2016: 759). Racial and gendered microaggressions are linked to lower classroom performance and lower mental health, although little is studied on gendered microaggressions (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, Huntt, 2016; Pittman & Kaur, 2018; Jones, Ahn, Quezada, Chakravarty, 2020). This study aims to explore the subtler microaggression experiences of Black female college students. This part of the literature review is itemized into two themes that feel important to the nature of this research: microaggressions/stereotypes and college support.

2.4.2: College Culture and Stereotypes

Stereotypes, by nature, are microaggressions that negatively affect the targeted person. Authors Douglas S. Massey and Jayanti Owens (2014: 557) define stereotype threat as 'arises whenever: (1) a negative stereotype exists about a social group in society; (2) members of that social group are aware of the stereotype; and (3) group members are required to perform in a

domain where the stereotype is relevant'. Stereotypes present in two ways, externally, when someone from outside the group treats them as a stereotype, and internally, where the person from inside the group believes the stereotypes about the group are true about themselves and both types have negative impacts on academic performance. Stereotype threat by Black students is influenced by the type of institution, the size of the Black student population, and the universities' use of affirmative action admissions policies (Massey & Owens, 2014). Additional research studies the stereotypes projected onto Black female students and how they navigate these threats. Several studies grouped Black female stereotypes into familiar themes: Angry Black Woman, Black Mama (or Mammy), Jezebel (sexualized stereotype), and Exceptional or Educated Black Woman (Collins, 2005; Domingue, 2015; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, Huntt, 2016). These stereotypes are based on misrepresented historical events and often aim to silence Black women or make assumptions about Black beauty. Stereotypes like this are harmful because they assume Black women are angry, maternal, or highly sexual. They have often been used to silence, control, or diminish the experiences of Black women by minimizing their identity. This is critical as race is integral to the sense of self and students with higher positive racial identity have higher levels of positive academic identification. Conversely, students who feel more disconnected from their racial group experience higher levels of negative academic associations (Hope, Chavous, Jagers & Sellers, 2013; Watt, 2006; Jones, Ahn, Quezada, Chakravarty, 2020). Black students must renegotiate their self-concept, so their self-esteem is not connected to academic achievement, positive racial identity improves motivation, and students with lower positive racial identity are more likely to connect self-worth to academic achievement.

The role of colleges and universities cannot be understated in helping to develop positive racial and gender identities on campus. There are two studies I want to highlight as important to this research because of the role of the analysis of Black female well-being in HBCUs. Both studies agree that Black female students, in addition to positive racial identity, reported higher levels of cultural congruity and life satisfaction at HBCUs, and womanist and racial identities are the primary lenses through which Black women filter their university environment (Allen, 1986; Fleming, 1984; Harper,et al., 2004). They also concluded that womanist identity was not a strong predictor of psychological well-being, and racial identity was a much stronger predictor. Finally, Watt's (2006) study also cites empirical evidence that it is difficult for Black women to

disassociate feelings from their gender and race, and concludes, 'Women with positive attitudes about being Black also appeared to feel positive about being women. Conversely, women with negative attitudes about being women were also carrying negative attitudes about Blackness' (Watt, 2006: 329). Black women see their identities as Black women, not Black and a woman, but both as one singular identity. They use this lens in how they interact in the world, and college culture must recognize that Black students are not a monolith, and creating a positive racial climate must include other student identities.

A clear example of positive racial identity and student engagement is that HBCUs are responsible for a higher percentage of Black student graduation rates compared to PWIs:

> African American college students who successfully obtain a bachelor's degree comprise only 9% of all college students (NCES, 2001). HBCUs are responsible for the HE of 25% of the African American students attending college today. Although the majority of African American college students (86%) are attending coeducational predominantly White HE institutions (PWI), HBCU award a higher proportion of bachelor's degrees (28%) to African Americans (NCES) (Watt, 2006).

The little research on HBCUs and college student engagement, especially female college student engagement, reveals that HBCUs have made progress in female engagement although it's unclear how they made these gains (Harper, et al., 2004; Allen, 1986; Fleming, 1984). Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek (2004) conducted a study building on a previous study from 1980, noting that the 1980 study was the only study on female engagement at HBCUs. This is a sad fact of the invisibility of Black women when ignoring both their original low persistence rates at HBCUs and the role of gender in their identity, as noted again with older research. The 1980 study found low rates of student engagement among women as male students dominated the classroom and student support areas (Allen, 1986; Fleming, 1984). Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek's (2004) more recent study found female student engagement greatly improved in 2004 and showed higher levels of academic achievement. It is noteworthy that this research found HBCUs were able to increase female student engagement, but without more studies, it is difficult to attribute this change to a significant policy or culture shift. This may be due to the lack of attention in this area for 24 years between the two studies, and I was unable to find more recent

studies to date. In general, they did find that HBCUs have higher levels of student engagement despite fewer resources. I argue that as evidenced by Lucy Diggs Slowe's experience at Howard University in 1922, race was at the forefront of many HBCU's policies, and Black female students' gendered oppression was initially dismissed or overlooked. Somewhere between the two studies, HBCUs then addressed the disparity, likely by listening to Black female students and staff, and made positive strides to address it. Most research centers on Black students' experiences at PWIs, which is important, but we should be investing more in what HBCUs are doing with intersectional identities that could potentially increase Black student engagement at PWIs.

2.4.3: College Support

It's critical to recognize the role of the University and how it developed the college culture of the campus and the need for support services, like creating a positive racial climate on campus and providing networking and mentoring opportunities. Most research on Black women on campus focuses on identity, academic confidence, coping mechanisms, self-esteem, institutional racism, discrimination, and the role of wealth, which are all important aspects, but do not include intersectional support structures for Black women, so they continue to be regulated to a single identity (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Furthermore, colleges must avoid deficit thinking structures, assuming that Black women are somehow lacking (Wilson-Strydom, 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Wilson-Strydom (2017: 394) also warns against universities relying on Grit Theory [4] as it does not 'consider political, institutional, and inequalities of access' for student success. She argues that Grit Theory takes responsibility from the institution and places it solely onto the individual, and this may disproportionately affect Black women. Black women are often one of the most resilient groups because of historical oppression and the silencing of their voices. Winkle-Wagner (2015: 189) conducted a review of existing studies on Black female students and found that 'Black women are solely responsible for their success in college over relationships and institution support'.

[4] In 2013, Angela Duckworth, PhD, became a TED Talk sensation for her theory of grit — a facet of conscientiousness defined as passion and perseverance for long-term goals (Weir, 2020).

Black female students experienced additional concerns about race and gender identity, racial exclusion, gender expectations, and strained relationships with peers and faculty (Jones, Ahn, Quezada, Chakravarty, 2020; Chambers, Walpole, Outlaw, 2016). This is another reason that Grit Theory is inadequate, as it does not account for the stress of Black female students preparing themselves for possible biases before starting college and the emotional burden of dealing with microaggression once on campus. Colleges and universities must promote racially positive social spaces, culturally inclusive counseling services, and diversity in staff (Jones, Ahn, Quezada, Chakravarty, 2020; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Hope, Chavous, Jagers, & Sellers, 2013). Additionally, women-centered networks need to be available for female students such as sororities and mentoring networks (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Domingue, 2015). Domingue (2015: 468) found that 'women-centered networks were particularly beneficial for participants, as they described how these spaces taught them how to encourage other black women leaders; eased feelings of isolation on campus; and helped women to see that their individual oppression was actually connected to cultural and systematic oppression'. Mentoring is a key part of student engagement and career networking. Black female students need access to both social support and mentoring support that understands the gendered and racial barriers they are constantly confronted with on campus and at home. Black female college students are enrolling at increasing rates but hold the least success in the job market due to structural biases and finding that they can only depend on themselves to be successful. There needs to be more of an emphasis on the university's role to properly set these students up for success and support them with access to culturally competent resources, social support on campus and in the classroom, and networking for post-graduation opportunities.

2.5: Employment after College

The U.S. Department of Education monitors the gainful employment of college students for institutions that rely on Federal Funding (Federal Register, 2011). This gives institutions a vested interest in ensuring their students are provided with the career prep tools to obtain employment after graduation. President Biden also announced a comprehensive student debt restructuring that includes holding schools accountable that contribute to student debt but does not have outcomes that help students pay the debt, such as job attainment (White House, 2022). This brings us to a critical aspect of this research: What are colleges doing for Black female

students to help them get a career after college? This section will explore the current racial and gender gaps for women and the workplace, and how college career prep programs address support for Black female students.

2.5.1: Gender and Racial Trends in Employment

It is sadly ironic that Black female students experience additional stress and barriers in college that are often overlooked, and reap the least rewards compared to males and White females. They are often tasked with needing more credentials from higher-ranked schools to get the same opportunities as their White male counterparts, and they still suffer from both the employment and wage gaps. One study of the history of job attainment for Black female lawyers found Black women had to hold degrees from Ivy League schools, while White male lawyers could have a degree from any sort of HE institution. Additionally, Black women still had to overcome racial biases if they went into jobs considered 'feminine' or female-dominated (Dill, et al, 2009). It seems nearly impossible to meet expectations of completing more credentials (taking more time before entering the workforce and potentially incurring more debt), and make sure you do not act too 'Black' or too 'masculine' in White workspaces simultaneously.

Interestingly, another study found a wage disparity for Black women was less a product of racial discrimination (although this is still a factor) but more likely due to gender segregation (Mandel & Semyonov, 2016). These patterns are not merely frustrating, but also infuriating, as Black women lose in terms of employment despite their efforts in college. Women are often socialized to prioritize family over work (Mandel & Semyonov, 2016) to this day. The study notes that gender segregation has caused lower wages for women almost twice the level of racial occupational segregation, but the gap in Black and White women began to widen in 2010 as White women started earning more and Black women's wages continually decreased. Additionally, as the pandemic has taken its toll on the country, CNN reported the U.S. lost 140,000 jobs in 2020 and all of them belong to women (Kurtz, 2021). The report also notes many of the jobs lost belonged to Black and Latinx women while White women continued to make gains in the job market. This shows a disturbing trend of the changing gender occupational segregation evolving more to gendered and racial occupational segregation. Black women are still earning less and more likely to encounter job loss than their White female counterparts, and all genders are still earning less and more likely to encounter job loss than White males.

Regardless of how hard Black student works and how well they do academically, the constant exposure to microaggressions may erode their academic confidence in their abilities and increase stress when applying for jobs. There is not a lot of research on the intersectional spaces in management, but the research that does exist finds Black women hold the lowest percentage of management roles and are more likely to be promoted in institutions with more female employees, less gender segregation, and more Black employees in non-managerial roles (Bloch, et al., 2021; Mintz & Krymkowski, 2010). A current review of Fortune 500 companies (the metric in which the US measures the largest companies) reveals that women run 8.1% of the 500 businesses (Hinchliffe, 2021). While this shows an upward trend, there are only 41 female CEOs in the 500 largest U.S. businesses, and only 11 women/female-run companies in the top 100 companies. Of the 41 CEOs, for the first time, only two are Black women. Women are 50% of the U.S. population and non-White Americans are almost 50% of the total population (Quick Facts, 2022). The managerial and leadership roles need to better represent the U.S. population, and HE needs to take responsibility for its role in producing inequitable outcomes for students of color (in addition to the inequities on campus and in the classroom).

2.5.2: Lack of Career Support for Black Female Students

Unfortunately, there is no research on *how* colleges currently help Black students obtain employment after college or provide networking opportunities, but rather the research focuses on the racial and gender lines of graduation and employment gaps (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Mandel & Semyononov, 2016; Bloch, et al., 2021, Mintz & Krymkowski, 2010; Hinchliffe, 2021). There was also no research on how HE exclusively helps White students gain employment, noting that systemic racism and White privilege remain the default. Black students report additional stress and negative feelings about job attainment in worrying about affirmative action stigma, tokenism, and imposter syndrome, causing them to doubt their abilities and qualifications due to stereotype threat and lived experiences with microaggressions (Salami, Lawson, & Metzger, 2020). The existing research fails to show how Black students cope with these stressors and how, if at all, universities support them when applying and interviewing for jobs when graduating (Mandel & Semyononov, 2016; Bloch, et al., 2021, Mintz & Krymkowski, 2010; Hinchliffe, 2021). Additionally, it still does not account for the intersectional experiences of Black female students or how the wage and employment gap affects their additional stress.

There is some research showing that mentoring is a beneficial, even necessary, partnership to help Black women in PWIs and male-dominated fields like STEM areas (Grant, 2012; Settles, 2020; Sanchez, Hypolite, Newman, & Cole, 2020). Current research focuses on Black female doctoral students, who are vulnerable to stereotype threats and inequities in academia (Grant, 2012; Settles, 2020). Mentoring has shown to be an effective way to assist Black female students with making connections and navigating the spaces of inequity in their respective fields (Grant, 2012; Settles, 2020; Sanchez, Hypolite, Newman, & Cole, 2020). Mentoring allows places for Black female students a space to see themselves and develop a support system despite the micro-aggressive messages telling them they do not belong there. If they are getting these messages in class and on campus, and research supports they most likely are regardless of field, they are also hearing these messages in the workplace. Mentoring gives them a guide to overcoming these messages and navigating White spaces or finding more accepting spaces.

2.6: Conclusion

This research acknowledges students are owed an educational debt, and by extension, I argue they are also owed an employment debt. HE has long promised to advance social mobility through education yet has not produced the outcomes for Black students, especially Black female students. Colleges should invest in cultural competency on campus and in Career Development for students and move away from a 'one size fits all' educational model. The truth is the job market is not an equal playing field and continuing trends in employment rates, educational rates, and wage gaps reflect systemic issues in hiring and employability. In addition to promoting positive racial spaces and women-centered networks, university career prep programs need to acknowledge the systemic barriers in the workforce, as well as educational access, and create more opportunities for Black female students before graduation.

Chapter Three: Intersectional Framework and Exploring Student Experiences

3.1: Introduction

There is a good amount of overlap between Intersectional Feminism and Black Feminism Theory, and my research incorporates Intersectional Feminism theory. Black Feminism theory was developed by Black women for Black women to address their struggles and I want to honor their space. I chose Intersectionality theory because, although it was also developed by Black women and largely employed for research on Black women, it can be expanded to other historically excluded groups, which I hope would be the next phase of this research (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013). Both theories examine the multiple areas of oppression and demand social change derived from the experiences of Black females and I do want to highlight the important tenets of Black Feminism Theory in this work, as my research is only possible with the previous work from Black women.

Kimberlé Crenshaw is known for coining Intersectionality Theory, and the foundation has been built by Black women. Crenshaw approaches it as building on Critical Race Theory from a legal perspective for analyzing policing reform and public policy that build frameworks from Black male or White women perspectives, thus overlooking any other voices or perspectives (Crenshaw, 1989). Patricia Hill Collins works within Intersectional Theory to develop Black Feminist Theory, which examines the relationship of Black women by looking at the core intersections of race, gender, and class. Both theories agree that Black women have been left out of race and feminist conversations and their identity is not either racial or gendered, but both. They also both agree that oppression is not a sum of their oppressions but rather a more nuanced reflection of power and biases based on multiple identities of Black women.

While Collins builds on Intersectionality, she also finds that it can be misused to enable individualism and ignore the overarching needs of Black women as a group, and she finds that using Intersectionality as analysis at the group level can be difficult in describing social patterns (Collins, 2000; Gines, 2011). Collins also notes Intersectionality Theory creates equivalent oppression, meaning that class and race have equal oppressions and one may not be greater than the other (Collins, 2000; Gines, 2011). I believe Intersectionality Theory can use individual

experiences to identify overarching themes on the group level by showing patterns and reoccurring themes. This is not always appropriate, but in this research, I find the individual experiences of particular groups help identify larger themes of college culture that can then be used to investigate further for deeper analysis as needed. The goal is not to generalize about a particular group but rather, use their experiences to identify overall areas of larger blind spots or areas of concern. This research will incorporate a multilevel intersectional examination of individual lived experiences in Black female students to recognize global themes and inform social injustices and inequities in HE.

3.2: Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality Theory recognizes that social and political powers interact differently in multiple areas of identity (Shields, 2008; Mahler, Chaudhuri, Patil, 2015; Anthias, 2013). Shields (2008: 301) defines our identities as social categories that we assign ourselves to and the personal meanings we associate with them. Black women may subscribe to identifying as both Black and female, and they may also identify with other social identities, i.e., sexual orientation, class, ableness, and/or religious status that change their intersections of oppression and privilege. Identities and power structures are further complicated by social norms when they are not linear to standard identifying matrices such as bi and/or multi-racial, non-binary, and/or trans. Note the use of and/or because persons can identify as all the identities or some of the identities. This is important because what people choose as their identities or social categories, is not always congruent with how other people assess and determine identities and social categories. This disconnect can lead to oppression and unintentional (or intentional) silencing of voices.

Additionally, Intersectionality Theory shows the way multiple areas of oppression are so intertwined and cannot be pulled apart or separated for individual analysis, i.e., was that interaction more racist or sexist? A good, although extreme and tragic, example is the 2021 mass shooting in Atlanta, Georgia, in which a White male shooter targeted Asian women that he believed were tempting his sex addiction (Fausset, Bogel-Burroughs, & Fazio, 2021). In this extreme act of violence and refusal to take personal accountability, he targeted both race and gender as a source that needed to be eliminated. Furthermore, the media showed police empathizing with the shooter and allowed him to take charge of the narrative, saying that it was not racially motivated because he was troubled by his sex addiction. This is a common thread,

debating if it was racially motivated or gender-motivated instead of recognizing, that these victims were targeted not because they were Asian or women, but because they were both Asian and women (Lenthang, 2021). This reminds us not only of the dangers of not understanding the intersectional implications of the shooter's motivations but also the dangers for people in the overlapping historically excluded identities based on White dominated perceptions of them. When we talk about White supremacy, we must acknowledge that White supremacy operates on oppression and very much involves both racial and patriarchal oppression in order to maintain its power. Intersectionality looks at the *interlocking* forms of oppression and their subsequent consequences for women of color such as violence, stereotyping, exclusion, and othering. It also tells us the shooter targeted Asian American women because Asian American women are often stereotyped as sex servants or sex workers. For Black women, we can look at the Jezebel or the loud angry Black woman stereotypes that do not translate to a White woman stereotype. Gendered stereotypes do not translate the same for all women because these gendered stereotypes are also racial stereotypes.

3.2.1: Engaging in Intersectional Analysis

Intersectionality resists a single-axis approach for analysis and explores the multilayer levels of identity in relation to oppression and power (Carbado, et al., 2013; Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013). This allows intersectionality to be a work in progress and not limited to one identity or group (Carbado, et al., 2013). Rather, Intersectionality can be employed across identities and disciplines to examine the various axes of systemic exclusion. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) lay out three sets of intersectional engagements:

1. Adapt intersectionality to attend to a variety of context-specific inquiries.
2. Consider what intersectionality includes, excludes, or enables and whether intersectionality's contextual articulations call either for further development or disavowal and replacement.
3. Reflect the reality that while intersectionality has been the subject of disciplinary travel, it is far from being only an academic project.

Intersectional analysis can be a moving target and requires specifications for each application. It is intentionally a broad theory that can examine a multitude of identities, much like a telescope

that gives us the big picture of space and can also be focused on for a better examination of a specific area. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) state these engagement approaches provide the best patterns for knowledge production, meaning they resist drowning the data or evidence in individual experiences, but rather, allow for better interrogation of themes and patterns. This is done by setting parameters, i.e., understanding the analysis in a specific context such as HE, and understanding the intersectional lens changes as does the specifications. For my research, I'm exploring Black women's experiences in college using an intersectional lens, and the lens would need to be adapted, or refocused if I wanted to apply or expand it to other ethnicities, social identities, or settings. For example, the intersectional lens may focus on Black women in social sciences fields versus STEM fields to examine how gender and race play a role in heavily female-dominated majors versus heavily male dominated majors. The research would still be examining race and gender experiences, but narrowed down, or focused, on experiences where gender is the prominent praxis to determine themes and patterns. The fluidity of the theory is why it should also be open for debate because the more knowledge production that incurs, the increased ability to see what may have been excluded. Just as a high-powered telescope can see a wide variety of things like planets, solar, systems, stars, etc., our intersectional 'telescope' sees all the identities and the subsequent interlocking oppressions and power differences, and this allows the theory to be employed in a variety of fields and disciplines.

This research will center on Black women's experiences and employ intersectionality theory and feminist methodology to center both race and gender as the anchoring identities and advocate for social change. This research also uses the college culture as its praxis, examining the stories of Black females in the University setting; exploring multiple identities of participants while accessing college, on campus, and after college, and using their university experience as the common praxis across their stories to determine themes and patterns. This will allow the theory to help shape a deeper understanding of their perspectives and a broader picture of systemic injustices in HE.

3.2.2.1: Intersectionality and Class

The U.S. has historically fought against Black progress and created SES issues through discriminating and racist laws, policies, and procedures as described in Chapter 2. Therefore, the role of class cannot be independent in intersectional analysis, especially in HE as we know that

in addition to unequal access and retention outcomes, Black students take on the most student loan debt (Hanson, 2023). Additionally, HE plays a role in the economic development of the area (Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo, 2022) and makes a promise to end cycles of poverty for college graduates. However, arguments made solely around class often center on the struggles of White students and ignore or dismiss the struggles of Black students with class issues (Gillborn, et al, 2012). HE is considered equivalent to social mobility, and class is always a factor when discussing HE issues and therefore will be discussed through the experiences of students who are the first in their close family to attend college. To this end, this research is developed using gender and race as the primary axis for analysis to allow class and SES to organically manifest in participant stories to show the intersectional themes specific to Black female students.

3.2.2: Intersectional Need in Research

To fully understand why Intersectionality is needed, we must explore the blind spots in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the failures of White feminism. Intersectional Theory was born from these two theories, and it is important to recognize the history between Black and White women and how these theories incorporate blind spots that diminish Black women's experiences. Black women's experiences in the U.S. are deeply shaped by power differences between White and Black women and how this was used to control and silence Black women, even under the guise of 'sisterhood.' This brief historical analysis represents how Black women are often asked to show solidarity between their race and gender, while at the same time, being forced to compromise one area of oppression for another.

3.2.2.1: History of Failed Sisterhood with White Women

Angela Davis (1981) writes about the historical division between White and Black women, noting how critical White women abolitionists were of the treatment of Black people before and during the Civil War. However, once the war was over and slaves were free, the White middle-class women began to turn their backs on Black people when Black men started to get the right to vote before women. This realization among key civil rights White women leaders that Black men and White women would be treated the same began to breed racism among the

groups and clubs at the time. Very quickly, many White women wanted to separate their causes and allow Black people to exist, while free, still inferior to Whites. Even today in America, we continue to see a troubling pattern of White women attaching themselves to White power in order to protect or maintain the status quo, even when this status quo puts them socially inferior to their White male counterparts.

bell hooks (1994) continues this story with her experiences as a feminist scholar. She notes a few key points in the relationship between White and Black women, most notably the lack of trust between the two and therefore undermining the entire concept of 'sisterhood.' hooks, like Davis, links it back to slavery when Black women were considered sexual competitors of White male slaveholders. hooks writes that White women saw Black women as competitors whereas Black women were unable to consent to sexual relationships and were often, assaulted. As feminism literature grows, hooks also notes how feminist academic work at the time was largely written by White men and women. Black voices were left out, and often, writing feminist work without calling it feminism for fear of being perceived as aligning with White women scholars who minimized or ignored the role of race within women's rights. Both Davis and hooks write about how women's rights leaders and feminists align themselves with Black movements when convenient, but quickly distance themselves when they perceive a threat to their own access to power or political liberation. hooks (1994: 102) writes,

> Until White women can confront their fear and hatred of black women (and vice versa), until we can acknowledge the negative history which shapes and informs our contemporary interaction, there can be no honest, meaningful dialogue between the two groups. The contemporary feminist call for sisterhood, the radical White woman's appeal to black women and all women of color to join the feminist movement, is seen by many black women as yet another expression of White female denial of the reality of racist domination, of their complicity in the exploitation and oppression of black women and black people.

There will be no sisterhood or advancement of women's rights without a space for women of all creeds, color, and background to come together and understand all the intersectional areas and

identity that shape womanhood and oppression. Sexism and racism coexist very nicely together, and middle- and upper-class White women have often been used to aid in the oppression of Black people. This research will explore this complicated dynamic with a deeper discussion of feminist theory and why it alone is not enough to understand the struggles of Black female students.

3.2.2.2: Why Feminism Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT) are Not Enough

Author Kathy Ferguson (2017: 275) finds 'feminist theory is a change-oriented scholarly practice; challenging oppression and working toward justice are not separate applications of a theory made elsewhere but constitutive elements of theory making'. Feminist Theory has done a great deal to promote female voices and address gendered thinking. However, it cannot be ignored that it has also been problematic, especially second-wave feminism that operated with a single voice of White middle-class feminism (Zack, 2005). Derrick Bell Jr. (1980) also reminds us that White people may recognize that racism is bad in abstract terms, but few recognize how white supremacy promotes racial segregation and racism in daily, more subtle practices. This offers an explanation of why White women rejected bringing racial issues into feminist issues because they were not personally affected and therefore, had no incentive to listen and fight for Black women. The wave, whether intentionally or unintentionally, ignored and diminished the voices of women of color. bell hooks (2015) shows us that White supremacy is not about skin color but about a dominant way of thinking. Instead, it is visible and invisible and created to form interlocking systems to uphold the dominant culture (hooks, 2015). This makes it easy for White women to think their experience of oppression is a singular experience shared by women of all races. Scholars agree that Intersectionality Theory is needed to avoid either/or thinking, to explore the various areas of oppression, and to generate new thinking on critical issues affecting women (Ferguson, 2017; Zack, 2005; Gillborn, 2015; Esposito, 2011; Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013).

Additionally, CRT holds many of the same criticisms of representing a male-centered, single experience of race. CRT is essential to the idea that race is more than an abstract idea, but a central piece of everyday influences, oppression, and decision-making. CRT rejects the viewpoint of colorblind policies, meaning procedures, and policies put in place based on creating equality and assuming everyone is equitable without regard to race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Crenshaw (2013) notes that while race is prevalent, the struggles of Black women are often minimized in Black politics. Both Feminism Theory and Critical Race Theory can be subject to dualistic thinking and excluding those marginalized by multiple areas of oppression. Crenshaw was one of the first key theorists of Intersectionality theory and the examination of multiple disadvantages and how they affect social movements (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Zack, 2005). As the research has shown, women of color's experiences are overshadowed by White feminism studies and attention to Black male college students. This creates a blind spot in HE as we see women of color face increased barriers but cannot alleviate or address them if we are not hearing their stories. CRT reminds us that in education; Black students are prone to stereotypical thinking (both internalized and externalized), hostile campus climate, and racial microaggressions (Comeaux, 2013; Vue, Haslerig, Allen, 2017). This is especially dangerous when the vulnerabilities of Black women are ignored while they manage the same racial issues, but also harmful gender norms and sexist microaggressions. Black women can be especially vulnerable to sexual harassment of men of color as they are expected to adhere to 'racial solidarity' (Zack, 2005), and then forced to choose their race over their gender. As Zack (2005: 7) notes, 'the term 'intersectionality' refers to multiple oppressions experienced by nonwhite and poor women, but more generally to all women because differences in sexuality, age, and physical ableness are also sites of oppression'.

3.2.3: The Urgency of Intersectionality

Intersectionality shows the differences in oppression of Black women, and author Roxanne Gay (2014: 17) writes about her experiences as a Black Queer woman:

> 'On my most difficult days, I'm not sure what's more of a pain in my ass-being black or being a woman. I'm happy to be both of these things, but the world keeps intervening. There are all kinds of infuriating reminders of my place in the world—random people questioning me in the parking lot at work as if it's unfathomable that I'm a faculty member, the persistence of lawmakers trying to legislate the female body, street harassment, strangers wanting to touch my hair.'

The struggle for Black women has a long and complicated relationship with both feminism and critical race studies, and Kimberlé Crenshaw (2016) points out that Black women suffer from the oppression of a minimum of two oppressed groups and can be ignored and dismissed because of this oppression. In her TED Talk *The Urgency of Intersectionality* (2016), she uses an experiment with the audience and Black victims of police brutality. The experiment concludes that the audience was familiar with the names of most of the Black male victims, but very few, if any, of the female victims' names. This proves her theory that critical race is often viewed through the male lens and repeatedly, although unintentionally, overshadows the struggles of Black women who, at a minimum, wrestle with both racism and sexism. hooks (1994) adds her research by interviewing Black male students and finding they struggled to give a voice to their trauma associated with racism and oppression, and this made it difficult to see and understand their roles in the oppression of Black women. If one is unable to process their pain, it would be almost impossible to process bringing pain to others through normalized sexist behaviors. There is a discussion that a few Black men fetishize White power and may intentionally oppress Black women in pursuit of this power. This has especially come to light after former U.S. President Trump, who is openly racist and sexist, made small gains with Black male voters and several Black male entertainers who publicly endorsed him (Rascoe, 2020). While I do not think this would be a large enough sample to merit the argument, my research will not be exploring this discussion because as a White researcher, I cannot in good faith speak to those ideals nor do I feel entitled to analyze this research from a White standpoint. I will instead focus on the blind spot from Critical Race and Feminist Theory alone that creates the need for an intersectional feminism theory as the lens for this research regarding HE.

Additionally, this is also not to argue that any one oppressed group is more or less oppressed than another, or even to accuse White women or Black men of intentionally aiding in the oppression of Black women. It is meant to show that Black women have a unique relationship with identity and oppression, and sometimes have to find loyalty with one over the other. For example, it was recently reported that a female rapper named Megan Thee Stallion was shot in the foot (Bryson Taylor, Yuhas, Cramer, & Coscarelli, 2020). She initially refused to name the shooter but eventually was pressured to release a statement. In the statement, she admitted to not wanting to turn her shooter over to police because of the treatment of Black men by authorities and fear of what may unjustly happen to the Black male shooter. This was a

temporary buzz in the media and there was a failure by activist groups like Black Lives Matter to fully address, at least publicly, that it was a situation uniquely held by a Black woman to protect someone who shot her and publicly harassed her, based on the shooter's race. Furthermore, as she writes in an Op-ed published in the New York Times, 'The issue is even more intense for Black women, who struggle against stereotypes and are seen as angry or threatening when we try to stand up for ourselves and our sisters. There's not much room for passionate advocacy if you are a Black woman' (Stallion, 2020). It would be nice to assume that were the genders in the case reversed, the man would have done the same but there is not a lot of historical evidence to support this hypothesis. Particularly in this instance, it was reported that she eventually had to come forward because of misinformation online, and he continued to harass her after the shooting even though she was protecting him (Bryson Taylor, Yuhas, Cramer, & Coscarelli, 2020). This example is to show the complicated ways Black women navigate through life, and this is just in broad terms of identity. As intersectionality continues to show, oppression becomes more complicated and dangerous. For example, Black trans women have some of the highest rates of murder and violence (Martinez & Law, 2019; Human Rights Campaign, 2020). Intersectionality shows how multiple identities shape how the world sees and treats people, and that social constraints affect all these identities. The history of slavery has embedded and shaped systematic racism in the U.S., and feminism has often stood on the shoulders of Black women while pushing them aside at the same time, sometimes intentionally, and sometimes not, due to a lack of understanding of how racism and sexism help to feed one another. All of this has continued to weigh on the shoulders of Black women.

Collins (2000) uses a framework analysis using generational lived experiences of Black women to help inform social injustices, oppression, and social change, whereas intersectional theory examines the individual experiences to inform the framework for analysis. In Black Feminist Thought, Collins (2000:3) writes 'Maintaining the invisibility of Black women and our ideas not only in the United States, but in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Europe, and other places where Black women now live, has been critical in maintaining social inequalities. She goes on to inform that Black women have been intentionally silenced and used in supporting roles in Black and Feminist movements that ignored the complexities of Black women's oppression. Like Crenshaw, Davis, hooks, Truth and many other Black women before her, she

outlines the ways that Black women have come together as a group to help inform injustices developed from single axis social change. Crenshaw (1991: 1242) writes:

> Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and anti-racist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling.

Black women's voices are often dismissed or overlooked, even though they struggle and experience violence at almost the same rates as Black men (Crenshaw, 1991). Black women also find themselves silenced in class due to stereotypes that make it difficult to disrupt the harmful gendered and racial climate on campus. Schools and universities are becoming agents of oppression for Black women by not recognizing the intersectional barriers created around multiple identities. Microaggressions and stereotypes have been a theme in all three areas explored in this literature review, showing it is a constant and persistent lived experience for Black female students.

3.3: Intersectional Research on Black Female College Student Identities

Intersectional research in HE typically focuses on primary vectors of race and gender, then class or sexuality (Nichols & Stahl, 2019; Miller 2018). In addition to these vectors, studies using an intersectional framework also study disability, queerness, and Black women in STEM fields or other male-dominated areas of study (Brockman, 2021; Miller, 2018; Mickey & Smith-Doerr, 2022; Gutierrez, Gonzalez, & Seshadri, 2022; Chapple Bridwell, Gray, 2021). Intersectional research helps identify system oppression and areas of inequity within HE and this section will offer key examples of using an intersectional framework with HE as its praxis for analysis.

All studies used interviews to gain their data and thus were able to provide explanations for achievement and outcome-based gaps (Mickey, & Smith-Doerr, 2022; Lopez, Erwin, Binder, Chavez, 2018), while others used intersectionality to showcase the fluidity of identity and

provide explanations for participants feelings of isolation and reactions to microaggressions (Miller, 2018; Gutierrez, Gonzalez, & Seshadri, 2022; Hailu, 2022; Chapple Bridwell, Gray, 2021; Brockman, 2021). This research is important for understanding intersectionality and the way overlapping identities exist in systems of power. Their use of intersectional theory focuses on the participant identities, as it should, but never fully addresses the system and the systemic issues that are causing the oppression of these different identities. They all seem to gravitate towards studying Black women in different scenarios and education and not necessarily looking at the systems of power in HE.

The intersectional framework of these studies centers on Black women's identities but lacks analysis of the White supremacist culture in HE and how this enables oppressors. They provide important explanations for how the systems operate and coping mechanisms of protecting identity in White dominated spaces but offer little to challenge the systems further. Lopez, Erwin, Binder, and Chavez (2017) go deeper and develop a matrix of domination to emphasize how the oppressors enable a system that continues to create an achievement gap between historically excluded groups and dominant groups in HE. Additionally, Nguyen & Nguyen (2018) utilize both McCall's (2005) and Nunez's (2014) social category models to show how the interlocking systems affect the oppressed, going deeper into how HE's framework creates and promotes the spaces for oppressive behavior. My research will also be incorporating Nunez's (2014) multilevel approach (described in the methodology chapter) to intersectionality because it examines identity, including the social arena that causes situational identity, but also goes a step further and examines historicity and its relation to power structures.

For the analysis, Intersectionality Theory is my primary framework with a feminist methodology to explore all the identities of participants, and I will employ life history to give testimonial justice to the participants, allowing them to tell their stories without fear of diminished credibility (Walker, 2020; Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013). Intersectionality Theory is the best approach to my research because it allows for the experiences of multiple identities, perspectives, and vulnerabilities; and because I believe this research is not limited to Black female college students. Ideally, understanding the experiences and incorporating them into the college experience stands to benefit all other groups because the core of this research will be about listening and understanding the stories. Continuing to use this type of research to build resources, groups, and safe places for women will be more easily transferable for different races

and different social identities including trans, LBGQT plus, and ableism. Intersectionality has the best opportunity for growth for PWIs to start rejecting White supremacy policies that form systematic racism and start addressing the needs of a more diverse student body.

3.4: Critiques of Intersectionality Theory

While Collins (2000: 278) notes Intersectionality is too thin, others describe it as too thick, thus making it too complicated for a useful framework. This incorporates the belief that Intersectionality is too vague to serve as a framework for analysis because it is entrenched in individual identities. This idea is that Intersectionality 'muddies the water' and makes it difficult to find a clear resolution or theme for social change. Gines (2011: 280) finds 'most intersectional theorists embrace rather than deny the ambiguity of intersectionality...(it) does take seriously the connections between lived experiences and multiple identities'. Again, Intersectionality is not interested in creating a hierarchy of oppression (whose identity is more oppressed) but rather exploring the nuances in these identities to build more inclusiveness and social change (Gines, 2011). Zach (2005) says that intersectional feminism is not inclusive enough because it does not properly define feminism, as many feminist theories also fail to do unless it is defined by anatomy alone. However, Roxanne Gay (2014: xiii) reminds us 'Feminism can be pluralistic so long as we respect the different feminisms we carry with us, so long as we give enough of a damn to try to minimize the fractures among us'.

Bhopal & Preston (2011) write about the paradoxical nature of Intersectionality and how it can be used to dismiss racial context. Essentially, it can be used to dismiss a Black person’s experience with race and other forms of oppression. This argument allows the oppressors can use Intersectionality (although incorrectly) to placate their perceived oppression. For example, looking at the history of White feminism and the assumption that adding race would take away from feminist work, and more recently, the response of 'All Lives Matter' to the Black Lives Matter movement. Rather, Bhopal & Preston (2011) say we can use Intersectionality Theory with race as the primary and other identities flow out of a race first framework. Gillborn (2015: 279) adds 'to understand how racism works, we need to appreciate how race intersects with other axes of oppression at different times and in different contexts, but we must try to find a balance between remaining sensitive to intersectional issues without being overwhelmed by them'. Bhopal and Gillborn both find Intersectionality has merit and does not have to ignore the role of

race, but rather understand its critical role along with the other identities. Previous studies on the gendered experiences of Black women do present a dominant racial tone (Jones, Ahn, Quezada, Chakravarty, 2020; Chambers, Walpole, Outlaw, 2016; McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011; Bottia, Mickelson, et al, Giersch, Mickelson, Stearns, Moller, 2015), and I did not design this research as centered on race because I hypothesize that gender will be just as important as race in the analysis. However, I recognize this may be a privileged stance and designed the research to allow their life histories to define their oppressions and identities in their stories and experiences.

3.5: Conclusion

Intersectionality Theory builds on both CRT and Feminism to address blind spots that ignore the experiences of Black women. It allows the use of individualized experiences from personal narratives to provide context and a nuanced understanding of areas of oppression within inequitable systems. Intersectionality addresses the interlocking experiences that fail when systems attempt to address inequities through a single identity, typically race or gender as opposed to race and gender. When using a single identity lens, these inequities are often reproduced in the system and offer superficial inclusion efforts instead of advocating for meaningful change. Intersectionality Theory engages in both/and analysis and allows the research to have a deeper exploration of inequities and how they are replicated within interlocking oppression of historically excluded groups.

I will be incorporating Anne-Marie Nunez's (2014) Multilevel Model of Intersectionality which includes identity and the social arena that causes the situational identity, but also goes a step further and looks at the historical accuracy, giving us a bigger picture lens of the systemic barriers on campus (described further in Chapter 4). This allows me to separate out findings and identify themes, and then I will apply the core principles of Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory with the praxis of both gender and race in the discussion chapter. Chapter 5 findings will operate almost like a map, examining how participants guided their identities through a white-dominated system. It will also examine their experiences through the Whiteness of the institutions, largely focusing on how college culture affected these experiences. This research recognizes and empowers Black women as the knower of their oppressions, and colleges must create policies and support systems to address their intersectional needs on campus and in the classroom.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1: Introduction

The overall goal of this research is not to save anyone but to echo the concerns and issues of Black female students, identify the gaps in HE research, and promote anti-racist, intersectional policies, and recommendations. This thesis employs feminist methodology to answer the following research question: *how do intersectional experiences affect the journey of college for Black female students*? To help answer this question, this thesis also aims to answer the following research questions:

- How does Whiteness and college culture impact Black women's experiences in college?
- How does Black women's access to college affect academic confidence and sense of belonging?

I answer these questions using a qualitative research design by interviewing a sample of Black women who have graduated from a 4-year institution within the last 15 years. This section details my position as a researcher, my research design, my participant sample, and my justification for how I approached the research. It also describes how I sought and selected participants using social media and my personal network, the transcription of each interview, the software used to assist with thematic analysis (TA) and coding themes, and how I employed an intersectional methodology for data analysis of the themes.

4.2: Doubly Engaged Social Science Research

Epistemological and Ontological positions are still contested in research (Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2018) and most researchers agree they are the foundation of a complex system of beliefs (Grix, 2004). To this end, I believe knowledge is gained through lived experiences and listening to others speak about their oppression. However, in understanding both my role as a researcher and critical analysis of a community to which I do not belong to, I also employed reflexivity positionality to ensure that I am engaging with the research, promoting their stories,

and not exploiting them for my own gain (Secules et al., 2021). I relied heavily on doubly engaged research to both engage in the research while simultaneously reflecting on how my Whiteness, femininity, and SES position influences this research (Pacheco-Vega & Parizeau, 2018). Coined by Harvard Professor Thefa Skocpol (2003: 409), doubly engaged research aims 'to understand real-world transformations, its practitioners are simultaneously enmeshed in scholarly debates about casual hypotheses, theoretical frameworks, and optimal methods of empirical investigation'. Pacheco-Vega & Parizeau (2018: 2) build on this concept with what they have coined as doubly engage ethnography, centering the bridging social science research with 'practical applications for real-world issues'. They rest this philosophy on three fixtures of research methodology: positionality, engagement versus exploitation, and politics of representation. These areas are designed so the researcher recognizes their place in the research of historically excluded communities, the researcher's power to represent research participants, and understanding the communities that are represented in the research. Pacheco-Vega & Parizeau (2018) assert that engaging a doubly engaged ethnographic approach requires the researcher to understand their own positionality and biases by using a reflexivity approach. I find this is a critical approach for this research because I'm a White researcher collaborating with Black women to tell their stories, and I have a responsibility to ensure this thesis does not center my perceived understanding of Black female issues without first recognizing and challenging my preconceived perceptions. This section details my ontological position, epistemological assumptions, and how I employ reflexive positionality as a White researcher and outsider of the community.

4.2.1: Ontological and Epistemological Position

My ontological position—what is there to know (Grix, 2004) — rests in my belief that a) historically excluded individuals are knowers of their own oppression, b) that social reality is maintained through power differences and upheld through systemic inequalities, and c) justice-oriented research serves to both name social inequities and advocate for social change. As the researcher, I am integrated into this research and cannot be a neutral observer because of the power dynamics between myself and the research participants (Elfreich, 2019). This is not limited to whether the researcher is part of the community as intersectionality analysis concludes there can be power dynamics within the same communities. However, it is certainly amplified

when the researcher is outside the community. In order to determine what there is to know about Black female students in college and their intersectional experiences, I had to first examine my own assumptions to develop my epistemological approach.

From the beginning of this research, I knew I wanted to learn more about the intersectional context within HE. My epistemology—what and how can we know about it (Grix, 2004) —initially relied heavily on my own experience as an administrator and adjunct professor in HE. Being a feminist, I adopted a feminist ontological and epistemological position because I believe knowledge is gained from the knowers of their oppressions, but these voices are not equally heard and privilege and power affect both the researcher and participants and create an unbalanced knowledge pool (Bergin, 2002). Furthermore, feminist epistemology concludes that social context (SES, race, ability, etc.) is necessary to understand the knowledge gained and incorporates an intersectional lens (Bergin, 2002). This lens is not restricted to the research, but the researcher themselves, because of possible biases and systemic influences from socially dominant groups can affect the way research is produced and presented. For example, my initial research questions (developed prior to recruiting participants) relied on the assumption that Black women were victims of the system and relied on deficit thinking, a common perspective of White research. Increased research allowed me to recognize this perception and develop a more holistic approach by including questions about achievements and positive experiences in college. In order to contextualize the methodology, I recognize myself in the research and how my assumptions, although changing with the research, also guide my positionality (described in the next section) (Secules, et al., 2021). By contextualizing my methodology, I am acknowledging my experiences, assumptions, and biases that may direct my research. To develop my methodology and research framework, I acknowledge the following assumptions to inform my research:

- Feminist oral histories serve as justice-oriented research and give a voice to those individuals,
- Feminist methodology amplifies voices to women in patriarchal systems,
- Intersectional theoretical framework examines the lived experiences of historically excluded groups with multiple areas of oppression and power in White systems.

These are the assumptions that guide my research framework, and the next section discusses how my positionality informs these positions.

4.2.2: Reflexivity Positionality and Bias

As a White woman, for a long time I was not open to understanding race and privilege until other women shared their daily experiences that connected to my own. I began recognizing my own privilege and oppression through lived experiences and listening to people from other backgrounds in informal conversation. Once I was able to recognize and name the types of oppression that were affecting me and the dismissals I received when I tried to advocate for myself, I began to recognize this in others' experiences and see my role both as an enabler and oppressor. This is not to say that I always recognize my blind spots or that I am an expert in Black women's experiences simply because I am a woman, but rather that I have developed a small connection with participants because of some small overlap in experiences and my desire to be connected to their community and create solidarity drives my research (Elfreich, 2019).

I approached this research by recognizing the inequities in White feminism and wanting to be a better ally to other communities in my work. Reflexivity positionality involves the researcher actively identifying, examining, and owning their background and experiences that shape their perspectives (Warin, 2011; Secules et al., 2021; Lam, 2022; Pacheco-Vega, Parizeau, 2018; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). My positionality as a cisgender, lower middle class, White, female, single mother, able-bodied, academic with advanced degrees demonstrates that I have a lot of cultural wealth and privilege in addition to being outside the community I am researching. I initially approached this research very confident in my abilities as a White researcher and unintentionally put myself on a path to present myself as an authority on participant experiences. I was able to have this confidence because university institutional practices have traditionally favored White academics and co-opting others' stories and, in my mission, to reject White norms, I was again participating in the system (hooks, 2015). Due to this, I reflected more about my epistemological position and how I wanted to gain this knowledge. bell hooks (2015: 43) writes:

> In some cases, the individual who wishes to be perceived as 'the authority' may go to great lengths to emphasize to readers that, for example, she is writing from her perspective as a White woman intending to diminish in no way black women's experience or our right to tell our story. Given the structure of White

> supremacy, her version, her take on our past may be viewed as more legitimate than similar work done by black women. When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our action, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination.

My initial research made me question whether I should continue with this research and recognize that I did not want to be perceived as an authority on Black female experience over actual Black women or co-opt their spaces. Warin (2011: 810) writes 'A value for reflexivity requires that we should undertake a deliberate search for indications of the management of impressions, expectations, and a recognition of the mutual positioning adopted by research participants and researcher as they interact.' Using this understanding and from the readings and research, I adopted a methodology incorporating a feedback loop where participants get a say in how their stories are analyzed and how their stories are presented in my research. This loop allows for the participants, who are willing, to engage and collaborate in this process so the research uplifts their voices. This also allows me as the researcher to listen and learn from their experiences, and form an alliance with them (Warin, 2011; Goldstein, 2021; Pacheco-Vega, Parizeau, 2018). Creating this solidarity helps me to interrupt White spaces and help create more inclusive environments in my institution.

I believe I have become a responsible researcher by monitoring my own biases and being aware of my positionality in this research. Furthermore, I cannot be removed from it and instead, I collaborated with the participants to build trust and transparency, which I believe is the most effective way to limit my own biases (Goldstein, 2021; Pacheco-Vega, Parizeau 2018; Elfreich, 2019). The feminist methodology described later in this section is developed with my understanding of myself as a White feminist and researcher to acquire stories from Black women and analyze them more appropriately. Collaboration and transparency are critical to a feminist methodology because they help us value the voices of all women, not just those with privilege.

4.3: Feminist Methodology

Feminist methodology depends on the relationship between data (such as inconsistent graduation rates among races) and the stories of those who are marginalized (such as listening to

stories about hostile campus racial climates affecting student persistence) (Lauve-Moon, Enman, Hentz, 2020; Pacheco-Vega, Parizeau, 2018). Many of the widespread issues that affect disadvantaged female students may be invisible to surface investigations. For example, it is difficult to explain based solely on quantitative research why female college students are attending and graduating at higher rates and yet reporting higher levels of stress and barriers. A methodology for justice orientated work must be qualitative research rooted in exploring gender inequalities and valuing the participant stories over academic achievement for researchers (Lauve-Moon, Enman, Hentz, 2020; Pacheco-Vega, Parizeau, 2018).

> Traditional scientific research regards methodology as a formal set of procedures; however, we acknowledge that disciplinary traditions are also underpinned by a myriad of personal methodological choices. The intersection of identity and methodology has been previously documented, for example, in the infamous example of the injection of syphilis into Black men at the Tuskegee Institute (Brandt, 1978). This methodological choice was not dictated by scientific methodology; it was predicated on White researchers devaluing the bodies of Black men (Secules et al., 2021).

Feminist methodology examines gender inequalities in the social and political realms (Lauve-Moon, Enman, Hentz, 2020) and recognizes the power dynamics between the research and participants (Pacheco-Vega, Parizeau, 2018). Feminist research rejects absolute truths, such as biological sex serving as the only definition for gender, and rather, it embraces that feminist experiences are different and nuanced while still operating in a patriarchal structure (Lauve-Moon, Enman, Hentz, 2020). Criticism of feminist research often revolves around the definition of gender and what identity constitutes as feminism or woman (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). I believe that feminist research can be an umbrella term that includes any group marginalized by patriarchal values, including those that are non-binary, trans, use they/them pronouns, are gender-fluid, etc. and this language was explicitly used when recruiting participants. Feminist research positions itself in social change and must include all identities of historically marginalized groups. There is no way to advance feminist perspectives by using narrow definitions, participating in othering, or engaging in any exclusion of voices. These tactics have

already plagued and limited feminist research and do not bear continuing the same strategies (Ferguson, 2017; Zack, 2005; Gillborn, 2015; Esposito, 2011).

I am using a feminist methodology because this thesis is driven by my positionality in this research and motivation for social change in HE (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). My research will not include male student experiences and will acknowledge the gendered politics and power differences within the Black female student experience. Feminist methodology identifies how gender inequalities present at both individual and institutional levels and seeks out lived experiences to both amplify and prioritize historically marginalized communities (Lauve-Moon, Enman, Hentz, 2020). I chose this area of research because the voices of Black women have not historically been prioritized against White feminist voices, and this limits the ability of social change to be effective. A final tenant of feminist methodology is to advocate for social and institutional change:

> if a profession's research and practice agenda primarily consists of identifying the needs of marginalized groups and figuring out a way to best meet those needs, then it becomes a profession that most often reinforces inequality (or the status quo) rather than one that works toward a new and more equitable social order (Lauve-Moon, Enman, Hentz, 2020).

It is not enough to simply write about and publish these experiences, but rather push for systemic change based on these narratives. We cannot recognize that educated Black women persisted despite institutional barriers and then adopt a philosophy of 'it has always been that way' and allow these inequities to continue in the institution. That kind of research is complacent, at best, if it doesn't attempt to improve the inequities for Black women.

4.4: Feminist Oral Histories and Rationale

> The feminist embrace of oral history emerged from a recognition that traditional sources have often neglected the lives of women, and that oral history offered a means of integrating women into historical scholarship, even contesting the reigning definitions of social, economic and political importance that obscured women's lives (Sangster, 2011).

Feminist oral histories have allowed women to contextualize their experiences and give voice to their specific experiences. Oral histories allow for added perspectives in male-dominated historical perspectives (Sangster, 2011; Wagner, 1977; Anderson et al., 1987; Kesselman, Tau, and Wickre, 1983). This is critical in understanding the way gender influences our experiences and to see how it has been minimized in research. For example, Kesselman, Tau, and Wickre (1983) challenged the perception that when World War II ended, women who were working in the shipyards were happy to return to domestic life or other low-paid work when men returned from the war. Their research offered a deeper understanding of how women shaped their own experiences and the impacts on their lives during and after the war. Feminist oral histories allow researchers to inquire about context, meanings, and relationships with the researcher instead of assuming or inferring from written data (Sangster, 2011; Anderson et al., 1987). Feminist oral histories are often in comparison to men, but Sangster (1994) reminds us that oral history must minimally consider race, gender, and class to create meaning from the perspectives. Feminist oral histories involving Black women, for example, must concern themselves with their roles in the Black community (Grim, 2001) and their relationship with not only White men but White women as well. This is not to say Black women compare themselves to White women, but rather, they have a general distrust based on American history, and they make additional meaning of these relationships based on positive and negative experiences with White women in their lives and in authoritative positions, like teachers. Oral histories allow women to reflect on their experiences and their place in the world, and multiple power dynamics affect how they make meaning from their experiences and their understanding of self in their stories.

From the sample, participants shared their oral history stories using semi-structured interviews. Intersectional feminism says narratives and storytelling are essential to give voice to those being marginalized (Ferguson, 2017; Patton, Crenshaw, Haynes, Watson, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Furthermore, I gave participants options to share their stories through various methods including interviews, writing samples (essay, poem, short story), audio or visual elements they created, or a piece of artwork with a written description. Participant comfort and safety were prioritized in this research to allow for authentic histories.

Creswell (2013: 540) outlines the ethical concern in narrative research of participants unable to tell a full story. This could be due to participant concerns of retribution or unable to fully relive the trauma. I created transparency through the Google site and feedback loop and a

safe place for participants to tell their stories by offering multiple sessions as needed, providing the confidential measures outlined above, and allowing and encouraging participants to tell their stories in the method they feel most comfortable in (Goldstein, 2021; Pacheco-Vega, Parizeau 2018). I believe that their version of truth still merits some truth of the experience and therefore remains credible in addressing the issue (Creswell, 2013; Sangster, 2011). Moreover, I specifically sought women with degrees, as opposed to current students, because I believe their stories have the benefit of hindsight and reflection, and the women are more able to name their privilege, oppression, and trauma (Sangster, 2011).

4.5: Sampling Strategy

I used a snowballing sampling strategy to recruit participants via social media and personal referrals, and I began with the goal of interviewing 10 to 12 women of color who would share their stories for my research. I created a Thesis Participant Interest Form through Google Forms to select from a sample of people who identify as both Black and female, including trans women and non-binary participants, to share their life history stories. The Google form used basic background information to help identify a diverse sample if needed. The form included the following:

- Name and contact information
- Colleges and years attended
- Income while in college
- Interview form (in-person, Google Meet, phone, artwork, written piece)

I am using gender and race as my initial axes of oppression to develop my sample participants and will incorporate all other potential identities in the life histories. Gillborn (2015) and Bhopal & Preston (2011) argue that race can be erased or dismissed in an intersectional analysis and reduced to either/or thinking in research. Race will not be erased to other areas of reasoning, i.e., this was experienced because they were poor and not because of race, or folly to equivalent to multiple areas of oppression, i.e., this was experienced because class and race are the same. Rather, this research explores overall themes based on their individual experiences while recognizing the systematic barriers and influence of race in these experiences (Gillborn, 2015: Bhopal & Preston, 2011).

I created a Google Site [5] that outlined my project and included a YouTube video where I explained my goals and vision with the research in an effort to create transparency. The Google site included the YouTube video, my resume, and the core scholarship of my research. I felt this was the best way to build trust with potential participants since I used social media as a way to recruit participants (Secules et al., 2021). I shared my Google site on my personal social media pages (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn) and various alumni and HE media Facebook pages (HE in the Pandemic, St. Edward's Alumni, Keep Teaching ACC). Additionally, I also emailed it to professional Listserv groups within my institution (Advising Forum List Serve, Student Development Professor Listserv, Prof-Tech Association Listserv).

Where I did not expect to encounter resistance was using some of my professional organizations that are supposed to represent and support college employees. The Adjunct Faculty Association Listserv is known to assist Adjunct Faculty and share research requests. However, I received concerns from the Association President and was referred to the department that handles our data, even though I was not using institutional data for my research. I was redirected multiple times and completed various forms and ultimately, my participant request was never sent to the Adjunct faculty email list, although it was shared with four other internal listservs in the institution with no issues. It does make me wonder if I was not getting a response because of the discomfort of my research from authority figures of these groups, or if a general misunderstanding of the processes created an unintentional effort to uphold White supremacy. Furthermore, it was a simple request, and one White association president hid behind bureaucracy, I must wonder if it was due to fear of being uncomfortable with pushing out a message that would allow Black voices to be heard instead of addressing their own concerns as why he would be uncomfortable with this project. Bureaucracy can help hide White discomfort and results to upholding patriarchy and White supremacy within HE, and if we are doing it as employees, then what are we doing to students?

Once my Google site was shared, potential participants completed the Thesis Participant Interest Form Google form, and this was used to screen participants. I had exactly 15 women complete the form, and all but one matched the requirements for the study (they identified as White). I excluded the White woman, and two interested participants failed to make an

[5] https://sites.google.com/d/1iajh6LlTWHQWZ5Oyd1nA3o3z4d2fSoHB/p/1gVrxZYxhJ8RD_OOsYlR_guAt9a3EG-pu/edit

interview appointment after several reminders. 12 women were sent the consent form and a Calendly link connected to my calendar which allowed them to schedule their interview via phone, in-person, or virtual appointments using Google Meet or Zoom.

4.5.1: Profile of Participants

This research interviewed 12 participants who are

- Black Identifying (including bi-racial)
- Female Identifying
- Graduated between 2000-2020
- Graduates from four year undergraduate and/or graduate programs

Participants have been in their career field for at least 2 years and backgrounds varied by institution type, degree level obtained, and socioeconomic status to provide a rich sample of experience in which to address patterns from an intersectional viewpoint. I did not include a targeted age range as participants may have taken nontraditional routes and graduated at various ages, but I did seek out women who have had time to start their career after graduation. The life histories allowed participants to reflect on their journeys and better identify and name their experiences with the benefit of hindsight and general life experience. All participants were compensated for their time with a $20 gift card to a store of their choosing.

Figure 1: *Basic demographics of Interview participants*

Participant	Type on Institution	Income in College	1st Gen	2nd+ Gen
Nicole	PWI	$15,000-$20,000	YES	NO
Leah	PWI	$40,000-$45,000	NO	YES
Nia	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO
Alisha	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO
Jasmine	HSI/PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	YES	NO

Monica	PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	YES	NO
Sharon	PWI	0-$10,0000	NO	YES
Anita	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO
Kayla	PWI	$45,000-$50,000	YES	NO
Julia	HBCU/HSI/PWI	$45,000-$50,000	NO	YES
Sophia	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO
Emma	PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	YES	NO
	12 Participants	**9 earning < 20K**	**8 - 1st Gen**	**4 - 2nd+ Gen**

4.5.2: Interviews

All participants chose interviews and the data collected via phone, Google Meet, and Zoom interviews with participants. Participants scheduled their interview time and format for a time that worked for them. Research claims that face to face interviews are best for qualitative research and that other modes, including virtual options, build less rapport with the participant (Engward, Goldspink, Iancu, Kersey, & Wood, 2022; Lawrence, 2022). However, this same research acknowledges the benefits of virtual interviews including logistics, safety, and recording/transcription features. I did not find any issues building rapport with participants and online interviews were necessary as participants lived in different areas and this research is being conducted during the COVID pandemic. Both physical and emotional safety were my top priorities, and providing virtual options allowed more participants to be able to join and helped secure their physical safety for health concerns (Engward, Goldspink, Iancu, Kersey, & Wood, 2022). I conducted online synchronous interviews with web cameras because it most closely mirrors face to face interviews and allowed participants to remain safe during a pandemic, and increased accessibility. For example, one research participant identifies as hard of hearing and the online interview format allowed us to both provide transcripts and easily schedule an ASL interpreter. I believe this option benefited from all participants working in fields that were fully

remote for most of 2020 and 2021, thus allowing them to be more comfortable with the format and the software (James & Busher, 2016).

Online interviewing must consider a variety of things to be effective, including participant computer literacy, safety, and ethical concerns (Salmons, 2011; James & Busher, 2016). I believe all of these were considered and addressed with participants prior to interviews. Participants were able to select the best way to conduct the interview based on their preferences and were given a detailed outline of how the interview recordings would be stored and how their information would be anonymized. Informed consent was prioritized so participants were given this information both in writing and during the interview before the questions and recording started (James & Busher, 2016). Additionally, the Google Site used to recruit participants allowed them to verify me by posting my resume and video of myself outlining the research goals. My camera stayed on during the entire interview to increase transparency and to closely mimic face-to-face interviews.

Interviews were structured with a predetermined set of questions. In some cases, follow-up questions were used to clarify understanding or gain more information about a story. Interview questions were developed using open-ended questions to allow participants to answer with full, more robust, intersectional stories. McCall (2005: 1781-2) writes:

> In personal narratives and single-group analyses, then, complexity derives from the analysis of a social location at the intersection of single dimensions of multiple categories, rather than at the intersection of the full range of dimensions of a full range of categories, and that is how complexity is managed. Personal narratives and single-group studies derive their strength from the partial crystallization of social relations in the identities of particular social groups. Whether the narrative is literary, historical, discursive, ideological, or autobiographical, it begins somewhere, and that beginning represents only one of many sides of a set of intersecting social relations, not social relations in their entirety, so to speak.

Questions were designed in three specific areas: access to college, life in college, and transition from college to career, and were designed to gain information on motivations, influences, struggles, and achievements in college. Interviews were conducted from July 2021 through

November 2021, and participants were sent a consent form and calendar link to schedule their interview. Consent forms were emailed to me before the interview date to help ensure the participant was fully aware of the scope of the research.

Additionally, before recording the interview, I outlined the scope of the research and my goals as a researcher in this subject. Participants were informed of the estimated timeline of the research and notified that they could remove themselves for any reason from the research within two weeks of finalizing the analysis, approximately May 2022. Interviewees were also informed that anonymity will be honored to the best of their abilities by removing personal names and institution names, and all recordings are saved in the Lancaster cloud and will be destroyed on all personal devices after completion of the thesis. Moreover, participants were explained the feedback loop, and finally, participants were allowed to ask any questions or share any concerns about the research before the start of the interview. I would begin the recording once the participant felt comfortable starting the interview.

All phone and virtual interviews were recorded and then transcribed at a later date and interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai software and then reviewed again by myself, and any contextual errors in transcription were corrected manually.

4.6: Feedback Loop

Each participant was provided with an individual shared Google folder that included their consent form, interview recording, interview transcripts, and a Google document with my notes and interpretations of themes from their data. I emailed each participant requesting their feedback, and they were allowed to engage as little or as much as needed. Google folder items were shared in 'View only' so participants could not change the original documents, and they were able to add comments that I reviewed and transcribed as needed.

Contextual changes were minor (changing a word or phrase) and added to the transcripts. I listened to the recordings while reviewing contextual changes from participants to ensure they matched with the original interview. Several participants made grammatical suggestions to transcripts that were not changed, as they were not relevant to the context.

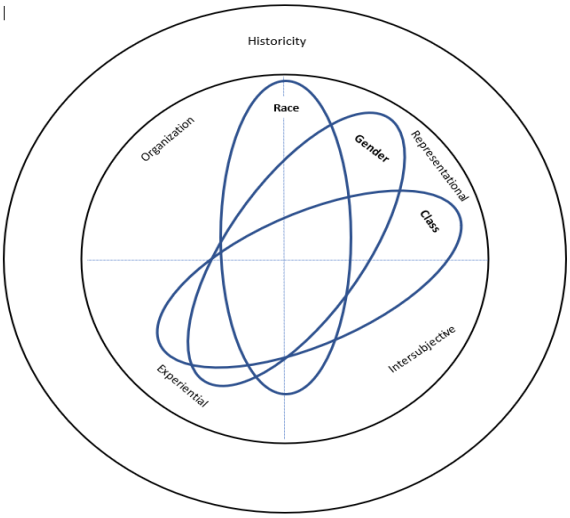
I also included a bullet point list of my interpretations of themes in the folder for each interview. I created a Google Doc template with the 3 overarching theme groups (Access, Journey, Entering the Workforce) and I also included a space for my comments to capture any

themes that did not fit in those levels. The template was used for each interview, and I added bullet points of themes I identified in each area and then added them to their shared Google folder for review. Participants were able to add clarifying comments to the document for me to include in the research.

4.7: Data Analysis Methods and Rationale

This research will draw on Anne-Marie Nunez's (2014) Multilevel Model of Intersectionality to analyze and understand intersectional relationships beginning with race, gender, and class (Figure 2). Nunez offers three levels of analysis: micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis' that help understand the relationships between multiple identities and the power systems. Nunez's approach addresses the criticism of intersectionality by recognizing that analyzing only one of these levels leads to a narrow individualistic lens, and overlooks the inequitable outcomes, and puts the onus of the inequality on the individual. Using the multilevel approach allows addressing the individual in their role of social categories and shift the onus of inequalities on the organization. Nunez (2014: 87) identifies 3 levels 'levels of analysis in terms of questions about what is being referred to (social categories or concrete relations), arenas of investigation (organizational, representational, intersubjective, and experiential), and historicity (processes and outcomes) for intersectional analysis.

Figure 2: *Multilevel model of Intersectionality using Race, Gender, and Class only*



The first level, social categories, involves defining the social categories and understanding their relationships to each other. Nunez acknowledges that looking at this category is not enough because it prescribes education inequities to the minority group and overlooks the institutional and systemic frameworks that oppress students of color, similar to Collin's (2011) analysis of intersectionality. This is the area where Crenshaw's (1989) work explores the identities of Black women as being oppressed, both as women and as members of the Black community. Black women do not exist in an either/or spectrum of oppression where they may be discriminated against either because they are Black or because they are women, but rather, they may be discriminated against because they are Black *and* women. These social categories also include many other areas such as class, ableism, and sexual orientation. Therefore, Black women may be oppressed or discriminated against because they are Black *and* female *and* queer.

The second level, areas of influence, explores the 'domains of power' that create inequalities by looking at the organizational, representational, intersubjective, and experiential. This involves looking at the organization's position in the structure of society, understanding the relationship between individuals and certain groups, and narrative sense-making. This level is multifaceted by exploring how the social categories overlap in the different structural areas, producing inequalities.

The second level also explores the pervasiveness of microaggressions and stereotypes and how they affect Black women's academic confidence and how it forces them to carefully navigate their relationships with non-Black peers, faculty, and staff. These relationships affect how they see themselves in universities, especially PWI's and eventually out in the world after college. The relationships to organizations and domains of power are influenced by assimilating White norms such as the high school support for Black female students and AVID classes rewarding the 'good' Black students. This level also represents how Black women are less likely to be in advanced Math courses or encouraged in STEM fields, therefore producing inequalities that are carried and reinforced in HE if not explored.

In short, this level includes how Black women see themselves and negotiate their roles on campus and in the classroom. Black women are constantly negotiating their race and gender in social settings in order to be heard and respected, while combating gendered and racist stereotypes. These stereotypes, whether internalized or externalized, affect their relationships with peers and faculty along with academic performance. The college campus culture also plays

an important role in either reproducing White assimilation or incorporating cultural competence in its program and procedures. This includes diversity in staff and faculty so Black women can see themselves reflected in their classrooms and organizations. Finally, Black women need to be heard and believed rather than dismissed or lumped into a broader group such as women's rights or Black rights. All of these factors play a critical role in the development of Black female college students and their academic success and eventual career achievements.

The third level, historicity, looks at the historicity by understanding the larger picture 'focuses on broader interlocking systems of economic, legal, political, media, and social power and classification that evolve over time in specific places, as well as social movements to challenge these systems' (Nunez, 2014:89). Essentially, the multilevel approach allows the analysis to look at the individual, the individual and the organization's relationship, and the organization's relationship role in society.

Universities were first built to serve White men, and the social outcomes show the organization still serves the same demographics. While women are enrolling and graduating at higher rates, wealth and cultural capital still allow for White men to have higher income levels, be more likely to serve in CEO and management positions and control the majority of the wealth and political positions in the US. It helps to understand that even when HBCUs existed at this time, Black women still had to create their own HE institutions to help them increase their social mobility. Black women have been failed by feminism and civil rights moments catering to women or Black people, often overlooking the intersectional needs within these groups. As such, Black women have developed a resilience to systemic oppression that requires them to be more accomplished and less successful than their male and White female counterparts.

4.7.1: Procedure

I used NVivo 12 Plus software to code and develop themes from participant interview transcripts. I initially followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for TA:

1. Familiarizing myself with the data.
2. Generating initial codes and coding interesting features of the data systematically across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.

3. Searching for themes and collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes: Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

The goal of TA is to use the interviews to identify universal themes accompanied by narrative analysis to explore the themes on a smaller scale level and give voice to those disproportionately affected. This method helped me with coding and defining themes in NVivo, and then I moved to Anne-Marie Nunez's (2014) Multilevel Model of Intersectionality for the theme and data analysis.

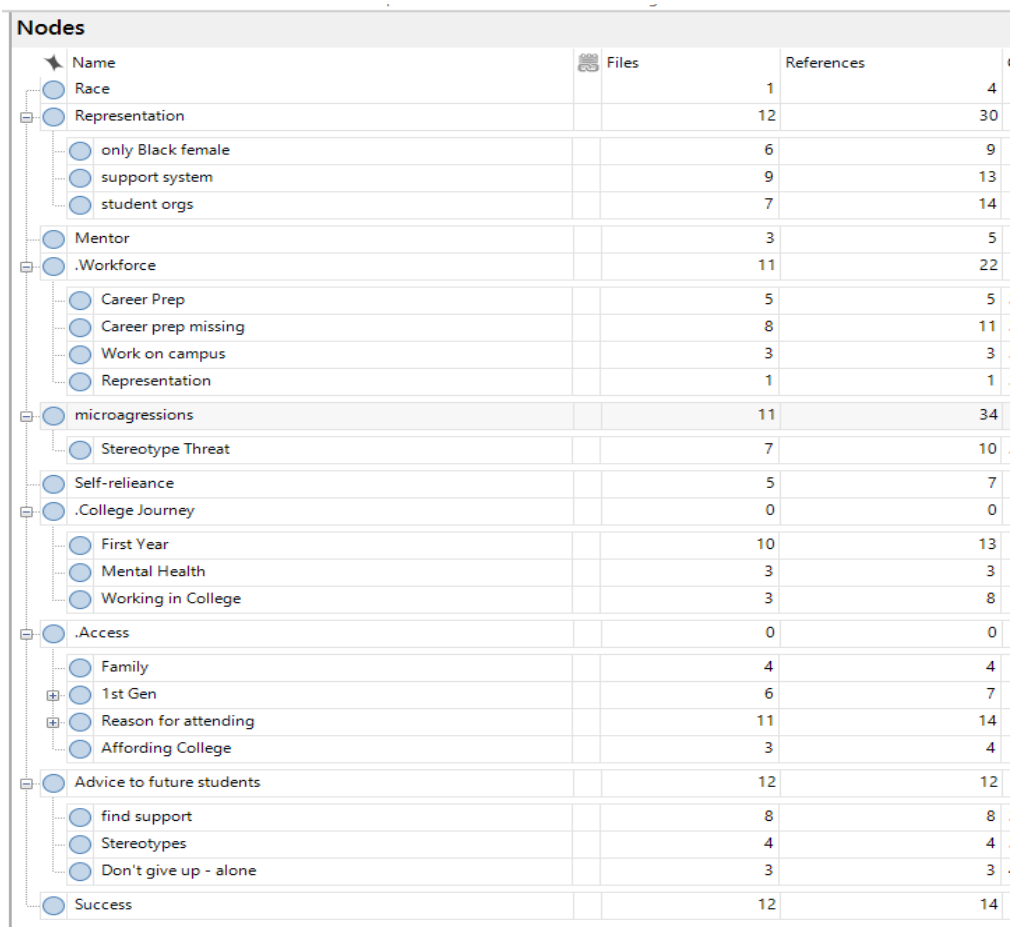
4.7.1.1: Searching for Themes

I summarized each transcript on a Google document and manually created codes from the areas of Access, Journey, and Career and then applied the same coding system in the Nvivo software to help highlight themes from the inquiry (steps 2-4). I employed NVivo's query functions to identify commonly used words and phrases, but ultimately found rereading the transcripts and making my own codes was the most effective method to identifying themes. I started with the areas of my research (access, journey, career) to create a Level 1 to categorize themes (step 4). Once I started coding, I was able to identify subgroups and begin to group the themes.

4.7.1.2: Reviewing Themes

My initial coding produced numerous themes that I needed to cut down to focus for the data analysis. I went back to steps 3 and 4 and looked at the number of files that were used in the code (From NVivo) and the number of references to help identify more robust themes.

Figure 3: *NVivo 12 Plus Screenshot of Coding and Groups*



Nodes

Name	Files	References
Race	1	4
Representation	12	30
only Black female	6	9
support system	9	13
student orgs	7	14
Mentor	3	5
.Workforce	11	22
Career Prep	5	5
Career prep missing	8	11
Work on campus	3	3
Representation	1	1
microagressions	11	34
Stereotype Threat	7	10
Self-relieance	5	7
.College Journey	0	0
First Year	10	13
Mental Health	3	3
Working in College	3	8
.Access	0	0
Family	4	4
1st Gen	6	7
Reason for attending	11	14
Affording College	3	4
Advice to future students	12	12
find support	8	8
Stereotypes	4	4
Don't give up - alone	3	3
Success	12	14

4.7.1.3: Defining and naming Themes

I then went back to my original research questions and the three levels of analysis (micro-, meso-, and macro-) from Nunez's (2014) Multilevel Model of Intersectionality and narrowed my themes for analysis:

<u>Themes:</u>

- Social Categories (Micro Level)
    - First Generation Students
    - SES
- Areas of Influences (Meso level)
    - Organizational
        - Family and High School Influence
        - Black Network

- Representational
  - Representation
  - Student Support
- Intersubjective
  - Role of University
  - Stereotype Threat/Microaggressions
- Experiential
  - Advice to future Black female students

- Historicity (Macro Level)
  - College Readiness
  - Career Prep

4.7.1.4: Presenting and Displaying the Data

I sorted the data in the following tables to help develop intersectional connections in the themes. This allowed me to see relationships between themes and areas such as class, first generation status, and experiences in college and career.

Figure 4: *Expanded with First Year Data*

Participant	Type on Institution	Income in College	1st Gen	2nd+ Gen	Struggled 1st YR	Reason for Struggle	Worked in School
Nicole	PWI	$15,000-$20,000	YES	NO	YES	Financial Struggles	Multiple Jobs
Leah	PWI	$40,000-$45,000	NO	YES	YES	Academics-skipping class	
Nia	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	YES	Microaggressions - racial disparity & othering	
Alisha	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	YES	Developmental classes	Multiple Jobs

Jasmine	HSI/PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	NO	YES	YES	Financial Struggles & Mental Health	Multiple Jobs
Monica	PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	YES	NO	NO	Focused on C's and D's to get degree (single mother)	Worked 1 job full time
Sharon	PWI	0-$10,0000	NO	YES	YES	Academics-skipping class	
Anita	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	NO	No academic issues	
Kayla	PWI	$45,000-$50,000	YES	NO	YES	Microaggressions - Othering	
Julia	HBCU/HSI/PWI	$45,000-$50,000	NO	YES	YES	Microaggressions - stereotype threat	
Sophia	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	YES	Feeling under prepared/Othering	
Emma	PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	YES	NO	YES	Developmental classes	Multiple Jobs
12 Participants		**9 earning < 20K**	**8 - 1st Gen**	**4 - 2nd+ Gen**	**10 Struggled 1st YR**		**5 Worked during College**

Figure 3: *Participant Data with Reported Microaggressions on Campus*

Participant	**Type on Institution**	**Income in College**	**1st Gen**	**2nd+ Gen**	**Microaggression Experience Overall**	**Microaggression from University Staff/Faculty**	**Microaggressions from Students**	**Off Campus**
Nicole	PWI	$15,000-$20,000	YES	NO	x			

Leah	PWI	$40,000-$45,000	NO	YES	x	x		
Nia	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	x	x	x	
Alisha	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	x			
Jasmine	HSI/PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	NO	YES	x			
Monica	PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	YES	NO	x		x	
Sharon	PWI	0-$10,0000	NO	YES				
Anita	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	x		x	
Kayla	PWI	$45,000-$50,000	YES	NO	x		x	
Julia	HBCU/HSI/PWI	$45,000-$50,000	NO	YES	x			x
Sophia	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	x			
Emma	PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	YES	NO	x		x	x

Figure 4: *Participant Data with Reported Stereotype Threat*

Participant	**Type on Institution**	**Income in College**	**1st Gen**	**2nd+ Gen**	**Microaggression Experience Overall**	**Stereotype Threat**

Nicole	PWI	$15,000-$20,000	YES	NO	x	x
Leah	PWI	$40,000-$45,000	NO	YES	x	
Nia	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	x	
Alisha	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	x	x
Jasmine	HSI/PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	NO	YES	x	x
Monica	PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	YES	NO	x	
Sharon	PWI	0-$10,0000	NO	YES		
Anita	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	x	
Kayla	PWI	$45,000-$50,000	YES	NO	x	x
Julia	HBCU/HSI/PWI	$45,000-$50,000	NO	YES	x	x
Sophia	PWI	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	x	x
Emma	PWI	$10,000-$15,0000	YES	NO	x	

Figure 5: *Participant Data with Transition from Student to Career*

Participant	Income in College	1st Gen	2nd+ Gen	Advanced Degree	Job After College
Nicole	$15,000-$20,000	YES	NO	Yes	Unemployed for over a year while job searching
Leah	$40,000-$45,000	NO	YES	Yes	Job salary was not realistic - went back for advanced degree for career
Nia	0-$10,0000	YES	NO		Worked in retail after college
Alisha	0-$10,0000	YES	NO	Yes	Worked in HE in college - stayed in field after graduation
Jasmine	$10,000-$15,0000	NO	YES	Yes	2 part-time jobs after a year of zero full time job opportunities related to degree

Monica	$10,000-$15,0000	YES	NO	Yes	Full time job after college-not in major of study
Sharon	0-$10,0000	NO	YES	Yes	Recruited for a job in college after graduation
Anita	0-$10,0000	YES	NO		Worked in HE in college - stayed in field after graduation
Kayla	$45,000-$50,000	YES	NO		Working in career while in school
Julia	$45,000-$50,000	NO	YES	Yes	Career right after college
Sophia	0-$10,0000	YES	NO		Found job 4 mos after college
Emma	$10,000-$15,0000	YES	NO	Yes	Retail - went back for advanced degree for career

4.8: Ethical Concerns

My primary ethical concerns are protecting the identity of the respondents, providing transparency in the research, and building trust with participants for sharing experiences. I employed the following strategies to address these concerns:

- Protecting Identity:
  - Names have been anonymized in this literature and
  - Colleges will be identified only as PWI or HBCU
- Transparency:
  - Creating a feedback loop
  - Ensuring research questions did not include offensive language or stereotypes
- Building Trust:
  - I informed participants both in the consent form and before we started the interview of recording the session and how it will be stored with my university but will be destroyed from my equipment.
  - Participants had the freedom to finish the interview at any time they felt uncomfortable, but none did so.

- All participants were notified and reminded in the consent form and at the end of the interview of their ability to withdraw from the research anytime within 2 weeks of the finish date.

4.10: Conclusion

This research must be conducted with care that centers on the participants. To do this, I examined my assumptions and motivations for conducting this research. Feminist methodology concludes that Black women's voices need to be heard and feminist oral histories are the best way to achieve this goal. I believe this research framework meets this goal by employing doubly engaged research for myself and providing a feedback loop for participant collaboration.

Using Nunez's (2014) Multilevel Model of Intersectionality, I examine the multiple identities of Black female students accessing college, navigating college, and seeking employment after college in the next two chapters. The two defining frameworks of this research are gender and race and include additional intersectional factors such as (but not limited to) socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and ableism as they make sense in the research. This research structure and methodology intend to promote voices to these stories and highlight gaps in research intersectional experiences of female students of color within HE to career.

Chapter Five: Intersectional Identities and Navigating White Spaces in HE

5.1: Introduction

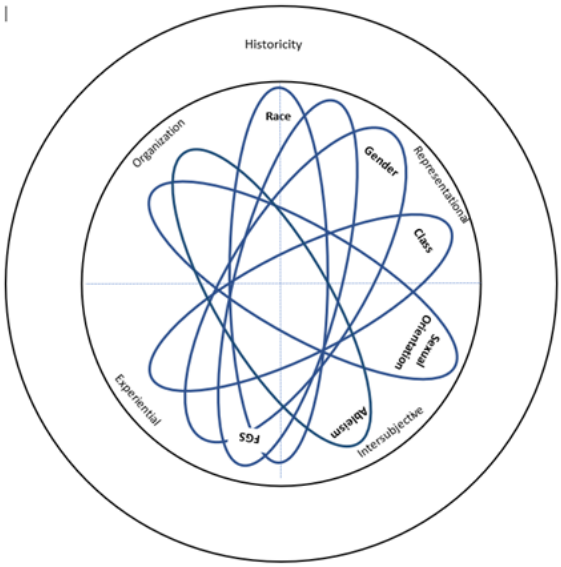
This research aims to answer the question of *how do intersectional experiences affect the journey of college for Black female students*? The findings of this research answer this question and explore the relationship between college culture, systemic barriers, and the influence of social categories. Identity and social category perspectives are critical to understanding intersectional lenses on campus as social categories are often thrust on us and can conflict with how we see our identities and social categories. The disassociation between the two, for example, how a Black woman sees herself versus how peers see her, creates a space for microaggressions, stereotype thinking, or general othering when the dominant culture systematically categorizes historically excluded groups. She then must reconcile the difference between the two categories and navigate through the dominant culture.

This chapter will focus on the participant's journey of navigating White spaces within their social categories and examining the institutional role in career preparation after college. This chapter will serve as a map of their experiences, beginning with how participants accessed college, their first-year experiences and effects on academic confidence, navigating White spaces, looking for employment after college, and ending with the advice they would provide future Black female students. This allows us to understand how intersectional experiences affected their decisions and journeys, and how they persevered through college.

5.1.2: Multilevel Model of Intersectionality and Summary of Themes

Using the expanded Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (Figure 2), we see the overlap of the multiple social categories of all 12 participants, including expanded sexual orientation, ableism, and first-generation student (FGS) that appeared in participant interviews.

Figure 6: Expanded Multilevel model of Intersectionality.



Several identities emerged from the data analysis, and race and gender presented as the primary influences on their college journey, and intersectionality shows us that race and gender cannot be inherently separated (Jones, 2020) and there are times when Black women must pick race over gender (Zach, 2015; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). For example, participants sought out support services for Black students and not female students, either because the services didn't exist by gender or more likely, based on their stories (explored later in the chapter), they would rather have support from students with similar ethnicities than those who identify with the same gender regardless of race. It's difficult to pinpoint a specific reason for this but I would argue it can be traced to the turbulent history between White women and Black women (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1994). Participants also discussed finding race-based student organizations and developing networks with other Black students or students of color, but they continued to say phrases 'someone that looked like me' or 'I was the only Black woman', indicating they were missing being fully represented. Participants rarely used 'the only Black student' and typically deferred to 'only Black woman' showing those two identities do not compete but rather serve together in how participants see themselves in the world. For the rest of the discussion sections, this research will recognize both gender and race as both a unified identity and a single praxis that cannot be separated when discussing the influence of other identities.

The themes that presented themselves in the narratives included representation on campus, SES status, first year experiences, and student support for Black students. Notably, one

theme that did not appear was any mention of sexual assault (SA). I was surprised because 1) it has been normalized in the U.S. for women to avoid certain behaviors to lower the risk of sexual assault, 2) it is a HE issue between student alcohol intake and living on or near college campuses, and 3) it affects Black female students differently than White female students. This could be because the participants chose not to share those stories, but it is important to note that all the women were more careful when entering college. None of the participants discussed partying or traditional college student risky behavior, with one participant noting 'she was married to college.' Empirical research finds that Black women have lower rates of incapacitated assault but higher rates of physically forced sexual intercourse (Lindquist, et al., 2013; Krebs, et al., 2011). Krebs, et al. (2011) also find Black women have lower odds of experiencing any form of sexual assault at HBCUs than PWI counterparts, and racism may be a leading factor in sexual assault against Black women in their study. This suggests the participants understood the inherent personal risks in their college experience, and knowing they have different dangers associated with partying in college, and they inherently chose to minimize their risk with more controlled behavior.

Two subgroups that emerged from the interviews were first generation college students and non-first generation. First generation students (FGS) are defined as being the first in their immediate family to attend college, and this often comes with certain disadvantages compared to non-first generation. As Nguyen and Nguyen (2018) note, FGS is difficult to define and more difficult to understand the complexities of inequality. Like the other social categories, first generation status operates together with an individual's other categories, and with the interlocking systems of oppression. While a FGS is more likely to be female, low income, and a person of color (Nguyen & Nguyen; 2018:148), and in the case of this study's research, the FGS participants did have lower income levels than their non-FGS counterparts. This is another social category that warrants exploration on how class, gender, and race influenced participant's decisions about college and experiences on campus.

5.2: The Role of High School Support and Self-Determination

High schools in the U.S. typically have a College and Career counseling office to assist students, among other things, with applying and finding financial aid for college and yet, none of the participants reported having or using this office in their process. It is unclear as to why these

services were not used, whether they did not exist at the participants' high schools or were unavailable for other reasons, but four participants did report high school counselors who undermined their efforts. They reported counselors or staff discouraging them from pursuing college or advising them to lower their standards in the colleges they chose to apply to. Emma (FGS) describes her experience with the high school counselor:

> I had a guidance counselor in high school. Who actually told me that the schools that I was deciding to apply for were that I was aiming too high. Yeah. And I thought it was strange because I'm thinking I'm a straight A student. I like I have a 4.8 GPA...And so she actually discouraged me from applying to NYU, and all the places

Jasmine (non-FGS) adds her story:

> I found out as a ninth grader that basically, my high school administration basically told my parents, I'm probably not going to make it successfully through high school. So that actually made me motivated more than the people who said that I couldn't do it because like, oh, okay, hold my rootbeer like, let's do this

Sharon (non-FGS), a student from a middle-class income background, describes a similar experience:

> I had too many of them laugh when I felt that I wanted to be an attorney, or that I even wanted to go to college.

In sum, 50% of participants (6 out of 12) discussed the role of high school staff and in that subgroup, double the participants had negative interactions for college compared to the two who reported positive encouragement. Showing the diminished role of high school support reinforces the theme of self-reliance among Black women because family support and self are the primary influences for college from this interview sample.

> So I would like spend each day in the library because I would only attend school for half the day because I had pretty much I received all of my high school credits up to the point. So I would do my classes like in the

> morning, in the afternoon, I would spend the rest of the day in the library like researching, like the application process and scholarships and financial aid and stuff like that (Sophia, FGS).

Whether it was a first generation or second generation, Black women either supported themselves or were supported by their Black family members (some specifically mentioning their mother, also Black women, as the primary familial support) as they navigated the processes on their own.

> we just were trying to figure it out on our own, like, she would ask her colleagues and people who maybe have sent their children to college, and then my dad was just trying to be helpful wherever he could. But again, with neither of them having a real college experience like they did do some [community college] stuff, but not too deep. It was just really hard for us to navigate that and to even find out how to pay for college and stuff (Nicole, FGS).

> I did not know where I should be applying or, you know, what was really like, within my reach. My mom got me a computer programs...So this computer program, you could see, like all these different colleges, and you could sort them like, Okay, I want to go to a big university, when I go to a small university, I want to go somewhere where people go home every weekend. And well, you could sort it by that. So that kind of started giving me an indication of what was out there. So from that, I sort of narrowed down where I should apply (Nia, FGS).

This represents the vulnerability of Black women, regardless of class, when reaching outside of their comfort circle to ask for help, only to be told they are not good enough for college or their career path (Xu, Solanki, & Fink, 2021; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021; Chambers, Walpole, Outlaw, 2016; Bottia, Mickelson, et al, 2016). Historically, education for Black women has been marginalized and difficult to access (Thomas & Jackson, 2007), and created an education debt that has yet to be fully repaid. Due to these inequities produced in the current US. education systems (Bottia, Mickelson, et al, 2016; Bhopal, 2017; Thomas &

Jackson, 2007), the participants in this study are relying on themselves, and other Black women present largely in their journey in college, and even into their career paths. Intersectionality tells us that participants understand their vulnerability as their identities overlap and are more cautious to rely on non-Black spaces for help, largely because they are more likely to be let down when they do ask for help. This also makes them less likely to seek out college resources as the risk for more harm can be greater than the reward of the service. This is critical for universities to understand and work on more culturally responsive services that resist White thinking, deficit thinking, and limiting participants for being Black women. This also reminds us of the perseverance of Black women accessing college despite these factors and the educational climate.

5.3: Class Status Influences on Identity Intersections

All participants understood college was necessary for Black women. However, FGS participants were more aware they needed college to end the cycle of poverty (Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo, 2022; Garriott, 2020). Non-FGS students still recognized they needed college to maintain their classes and they needed credentials to prove competence in a White dominated system, but they were more relaxed in their approaches to college. Unlike their FGS counterparts, non-FGS participants used family connections and an understanding of college culture to determine where to apply. On the other hand, FGS had to be more self-reliant to pursue and access college because of limited resources. Simply applying to colleges is a financial burden when considering application fees, assessment testing fees, etc. Nia shares how she used the computer program her mom gave her to sort colleges and classmate input to narrow down her options because she had no formal guidance:

> So I kind of stood by and like listen to the kids in my classes. And they were talking about where they were applying to and I'm like, Okay, write that down. You know, go look that up on my Princeton Review tonight...And they're like, oh, yeah, my parents helped me with this application. And I'm okay, I don't have that. But I'm, you know, I now know what I should be looking for (Nia, FGS)

Lower income FGS participants utilized more waivers and community college transfers to pay for college, and still often worked multiple jobs. While there are benefits to working in college,

specifically working on campus, and building a cultural capital, working too many hours can have a negative impact on student engagement and confidence (Nunez & Sansone, 2016). This shows the fine line between building work experience and the exploitation of student workers. Working multiple jobs to afford tuition and living expenses limited their opportunities to join student groups and engage in networking opportunities, thus further isolating them on campus and increasing their stress as a student.

> I had work studied federal work-study, and back when I was in school, and how it's different now, I guess it's different, depending on where you go to school. But we could work 19 hours a … My office where I was working actually paid me separately, to work additional hours. Like, pay me the full amount. So I was working probably 25 hours a week, going to school full time…I would leave my apartment at around. I don't know, 730 in the morning, I wouldn't come home till sometimes 1030 At night (Emma, FGS)

> Because it was a women's college who weren't supposed to have sororities and things, though, people could go off campus and join a sorority. And then just, you know, obviously still be part of it, or whatever, like the black Greek letter organizations and all that. But I didn't. Again, I was working all the time. So I really did not have the time to do it. And then it was just expensive to do that. So it was like, I can't really do it. (Nia, FGS)

This is especially troubling as this research shows the importance of social support and Black spaces for Black female students, a support that some participants had to sacrifice and thus manage the effects of isolation on their mental health and academic confidence.

5.3.1: Invisible Burdens of Class and FSG Status on Campus

This research allows us to see how class and FGS status affect participants decision making and experiences in school. It shows their effects on affording college and first year experiences. Lower income students struggled more than their middle-class counterparts. All participants experienced racial and gendered microaggressions that were influenced by a college

campus that favored White comfort over conversations and safe spaces for students of color. They believed they needed to go to college to improve their social mobility, whether it was a familial expectation, encouragement from teachers, or self-motivation. In all cases, college was expected to be the path to career and financial stability. This research is not to say that it did not improve their social mobility, but there are still glaring limitations and undue burdens in their journey.

> There is a danger of treating outcomes (e.g. gendered or racialized violence) merely as relating to the processes that produce them in the most mechanical way, i.e. to do with sexual difference and 'race' difference. What this means is that you cannot invoke only gender processes to understand gendered practices or outcomes, you cannot invoke only 'race' and racialization to understand racist practices and outcomes and you cannot invoke only class processes to understand classed outcomes. This is one of the important insights of intersectional frames found in both the earlier versions of intersectionality and the more recent contributions (Anthias, 2013:12.)

The core of intersectional analysis is determining voices that are overlooked when focusing on one axis of oppression, and this research does not focus on race OR gender OR socioeconomic status OR first-generation status, but rather how they all work together using Nunez's multilevel model.

For participants, class was most prevalent during the first year, and understanding the impact of finances was not always clear to a first-generation student. Participants followed the steps and received the grades they needed to access college, and then discovered money would be an issue. Emma (FGS) described her process of applying to colleges and not thinking about tuition and fees because she had done the work, meaning she was an advanced student with a strong academic record, and in her mind, that was what you were supposed to do to get into college (after being told by her high school counselor that she would not get into NYU):

> I was really oblivious to all of that, like, I've I filled out the FAFSA...And I got accepted to all of them, and really, really wanted to go to NYU. And so I learned that my mom had contacted, at least she wrote a letter, like literally

> putting a letter explaining to them my our financial situation. And they wound up giving us an extra like $5,000 or something like that. And on top of like all of the grants and loans and all that would have already been getting. And, and even with that I was $13,000 shy of what I needed to go to attend for the first year. So that just wasn't a possibility.

She continues:

> And so that was kind of my first indication ...Oh, wait pay for this college is not not only not free, but not inexpensive. So that piece, you know, it was kind of eye opening for me because I realized, oh, like, there's a door, right? Here's a path for me to get in, I did what I was supposed to do, I make good grades, and I got accepted to the school that I want to go to, I still can't go. Because it's too expensive, right for me to go to the school.

Additionally, Nia discusses attending a private PWI because 'They came to me talking about money first and foremost, I didn't have any money. They offered me money. So that was great. So yeah, that was kind of my, my admissions process' and this made the school affordable. FGS and lower-income students have less of a selection of colleges to attend when affordability becomes the top priority, thus restricting their freedom of choice (Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo, 2022). This removes the ability for low-income Black women to find a college that is a better cultural fit, but rather place themselves in campus cultures that may be harmful to them. Nia also discusses attending a PWI as a Black female student while working three jobs in addition to her financial aid package, along with rich, White classmates who did not understand the stress of being 'different' or 'othered' and worrying about paying tuition in addition to academic stress:

> It was kind of scary....[the school] had never seen so many black students at all. And you could tell, so we get onto the campus. And people are, you could tell they're not really comfortable....They were just wholly annoyed that we had that presence. Then they thought that, you know, we were sucking resources, like money that could have gone to them or something, I don't know. And then they just made us feel like animals at a zoo, just, you know, othering us. And then

> making their comments and asking questions that weren't so much questions, but just make statements (Nia, FGS).

This participant sacrificed her personal comfort to attend a fully funded PWI because she had few options. This is a balance she navigates as a Black woman in White spaces, and then her SES status causes additional stress and fear. She goes on to describe an incident of nearly being evicted from her dorm due to an oversight with her financial aid:

> And they gave me my award letter as if the money was going to back to the school for my work study. But actually, the money was supposed to be coming to me and I indicated that but my award letter for two years said that it was coming, or said that it was going to the school and it was all kinds of messed up. So I get to my junior year, and security comes to my door and tells me I have to leave. It was really embarrassing..... And I just remember thinking it's 1000 something dollars. A lot of my friends could pay that. Just like that. I am struggling.

We see that Nia did not have the same resources as her peers at an affluent school, and it was very noticeable. She was constantly aware of how that affected her identity as she struggled not to be viewed as the 'poor Black' stereotype on campus. She continues with additional sacrifices she made to work while her White higher income classmates had different experiences. This participant is very aware of how they see her both concerning race and class:

> I worked a lot in school. I gosh, I babysat. I worked on the phone upon doing like annual giving fundraising. I worked at Lens Crafters. I worked at Chili's, I worked at Hampton in some of this was all at the same time. So our friends always joke, they're like, Yeah, you missed a lot of stuff like social stuff because you were working. And I'm like, after that incident, I never wanted that to happen to me again, ever, ever, ever, so I worked my ass off just to, to not be in that position. Because, you know, again, like the embarrassment, you're already in a school where they think you're not supposed to be there anyway.

This last statement recognizes how intersectionality develops in her experience. She knew how the White students viewed her, and how her SES status played a role. She knows that even if she had money and did not need to work so many jobs, she may be more accepted by her friends, but her race would still affect their impression of her because their approval is based on Nia's ability to prove that she deserved to be there.

The non-FGS participants did not report using waivers or concerns about the cost of tuition. Two discussed knowing which school they wanted to attend based on family experiences, and the other reported not being interested in college and choosing one based on not needing to write an admissions essay. They also reported attending college because they were expected to but did not mention the need to attend college for social mobility. It can be implied that the expectation was due to advancing social mobility, but rather they did not have to think about the need for more job opportunities the same way first generation students did need to think about it. Figure 1 shows that nine of the participants were earning less than $20,000 while in school, and this was predominantly the first-generation students. The data reveals the great pressure on the first-generation students to break poverty cycles by using HE to advance their career and financial opportunities. Emma also reports how the pressure of being a FGS student affected their academic progress:

> But for me more than anything, it was this anxiety, I started having really, really bad anxiety to the point where I even at a point, right before I left, not before I graduated, but it was in my final year...the biggest struggle that I had was dealing with anxiety that I think stemmed a lot from being a first generation student wanting so badly to make not only my parents proud but to like succeed because I had had this pattern of success

Participants for this study were recruited based on their racial and gender identity, and those social categories have been embedded into this research and I isolated class and FGS here because they were the most influential identities in choosing colleges. None of the participants discussed considering or applying at HBCUs or Women's Colleges, although several mentioned being inspired by the fictional HBCU 'Hillman College' from the American sitcom *A Different World*. The FGS participants' primary identity for choosing a college was most often SES and needing an affordable college, and the non-FSG students had the privilege to choose colleges

based on convenience. FGS students had higher rates of hardship and anxiety about funding for tuition, resources for classes (books, technology, etc.), and food insecurities. All participants had big dreams about how college would improve their statuses, and FGS students were less prepared for the hardships of lack of funding because educational policies often fail to meet student's material needs (Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo, 2022). Additionally, even funding supports still had systemic racist associations for students. Alisha (FGS) described how mostly students of color were 'randomly' audited for their financial aid applications and eventually, they built a support system to help navigate the paperwork and requirements because they knew the 'random' audits were only happening to them. Furthermore, Jasmine (non-FGS) describes not applying for Black scholarships because they could be potentially labeled as 'affirmative action' and how that would be viewed. This is important to hear as she internalized the stereotype of being lower income and Black, thus preventing herself from applying for funding that may have eased some of the stress during her college experience.

This is the fluidity of identity in intersectionality because all the participants have higher stakes for needing a degree for social mobility and less room for failure because they are Black women, but changes in SES and generational knowledge of college culture from non-FGS participants show a bigger division and how they approached college choices and how they were viewed on campus. FGS students felt more anxiety and stress in applying and finding financial resources than their non-FGS counterparts where money and research were not a concern in accessing HE. Additionally, not a single participant applied to an Ivy League school, which is concerning as Black students have historically been underrepresented at Ivy League schools (Bhopal, 2017; Hartocollis, 2021). Even with the division of poverty and class showing how they approached college and the stressors related to class, all women still had overlapping experiences as Black women navigating the White structures on campus. Women from lower-income households had significantly more stress and barriers in college than their counterparts in this study.

5.4: Developing Academic Confidence during the First Year

In order to have a deeper understanding of their experiences in college, we need to explore how their high school expectations influenced their journey. Seven of the twelve interviewees report deciding to attend college because it was simply expected of them by their

family, some from their high school peers and teachers. This expectation is derived from the belief in meritocracy and that attending college would lead to more opportunities and financial stability later in life. The expectation to attend college after high school is not necessarily reserved for minority communities, but the idea that it increases job opportunities does carry greater weight when we examine employments rates. Knowing that Black women consistently have the highest employment gaps of any other gender and race, it stands to reason the expectation for them to attend college was greater. This section examines the role of high school college readiness in their experiences during the first year of college to better understand how the participants see themselves on campus as Black women looking to improve their social mobility.

5.4.1: College Readiness and White Assimilation

It is critical this research highlights the successes and resilience of the participants and does not engage in a deficit-only lens of analysis (Yosso, 2006; Hoffman, et al., 2019). The research sample focused on stories from Black women who graduated from college, specifically to explore how they navigate Whiteness on campus in order to be successful. I also found that the areas that allowed them to be successful in college are not present in the career transition, which will be discussed later in this chapter. This section details the areas the participants and their experience affected their academic confidence in academics and identity, and how they found support within the PWI system. This allows us to isolate the participant's academic confidence and explore how it was affected by their experiences on campus.

Ten of the twelve participants reported struggling during their first year of college for various reasons (Figure 4). Two participants found themselves in developmental classes (courses reserved for students considered not academically ready for college-level classes and which do not count towards a degree plan) despite being in advanced courses in high school:

> And two of my classes were considered workload classes. So they didn't actually count towards credits, they were considered remedial. And for me coming from like, I was an IB, I was in the top 10 of my graduating class, like, why am I in remedial classes, that was a huge shift for me (Alisha, FGS).

> I was realizing that there was all these things that I didn't know that I should have learned in high school. And so it was a struggle, that first year getting through academically because I wasn't realizing that I didn't learn the things I should have learned. And I was having to play catch up. Even to the point of having to take remedial courses, which was like, a huge blow to my ego at the time was I'm like, a straight A's... I had no idea...that I was behind (Emma, FGS)

In both cases, being enrolled in developmental courses affected their academic confidence as learners and created doubt in their readiness for college.

> The academics at first, like making that transition was so tough. And in many ways, like me personally, because I had done so well in high school with very little effort. Having to try with the academics for the first time was kind of mind blowing. And to some extent I attributed to just like, maybe I'm not cut out for this. And there's a lot of self-doubt around that (Alisha, FGS).

Additionally, both participants attended high schools that were largely students of color. This suggests there was unofficial segregation practices that may have influenced their education journey before arriving to college.

> I very quickly realized coming into is because of my background, and the location that I grew up, you know, yes, I was at the top of my class...my experiences were very different in high school, from the experiences of my peers, like even my roommates, I had two roommates, my freshman year, and they had come from more affluent areas, more athletic backgrounds, better schools. And so I very, very quickly realized...Even though I was a straight A student, I was very much behind my students and my peers and had to learn how to study because I didn't have to study in high school, it was easy for me (Emma, FGS)

Based on previous research on the experiences of Black female high school students and college prep programs, these participants may have been affected by lack of school funding and/or they were not assimilated into White academic culture, thus making them unprepared for the academic culture at a PWI (Thomas & Jackson, 2007; Bottia, Mickelson, et al, Giersch, Mickelson, Stearns, Moller, 2015; Jacobs, 2013). Students can struggle with their first year in college regardless of race or gender, but I argue these participants were underprepared for the culture by their advanced high school courses, rather than the academics, causing them to become enrolled in development courses. Sophia (FGS) notes feeling underprepared and needing to learn about time management and study skills:

> even like saying enrolled my first semester, the biggest challenge was just not feeling academically prepared to go to college...I remember my first round of exams… And I didn't understand how to study because up to that point, I never had to study for exams and stuff like this. I just felt super behind.

All three participants were FGS who needed to adjust from academically excelling to barely meeting academic standards in college. This is not a new experience for most college students; however, the two participants also worked multiple jobs and had an added layer of stress of being able to afford college while balancing academics and work.

Two participants listed struggling the first year due to struggling with money and paying for tuition and fees, and two others listed struggling academically by not attending class and letting their GPA drop. It is important to note that the participants who struggled financially and felt underprepared were all FGS and the two who listed not attending courses and doing their coursework are non-first-generation students. This is relevant because it reflects the continued themes of first-generation students struggling with the realities of college life and financials.

> I think actually, the first credit card…Like a Chevron card. And I remember getting to the school and putting all of my books like to pay for my books on that, on that first, like a credit card that I maxed it out. And the books for my first semester alone at over $500 Just for the books (Emma, FGS).

Non-first-generation students did not cite finances and underpreparation as reasons for struggle, but rather just personal choices they made in school. The FGS participants struggled with things they could not control (high school preparedness and cost of tuition and fees) whereas non-first-generation students struggled with things they could control (attending class). Most striking is that four of the participants directly related microaggressions as reasons they struggled during their first year. They listed everything from othering by classmates and instructors to more overt racism:

> I'm exhausted, just trying to figure out who's safe and who's not. So it's like, I don't want to deal with anybody (Jasmine, non-FGS).

> It's you just having to deal with all of these kind of stressors as a person of color. So at what point can you really, really truly be your authentic self, and I think that a lot of times is, can be a barrier, and depending on the environment, in the institution, and kind of where you're always having to think about what you're going to say and how you're going to say it (Julia, non-FGS).

Another non-FGS participant noted that attending a PWI grad school after an HBCU undergraduate school was a very different experience, and she felt the need to remind herself that she was smart and belonged there. On the other hand, Alisha, an FGS participant, described the bridge program that helped prepare her for the culture shock of a PWI:

> the program is set for first-generation low-income students of color, they warned us, they're like, I'm telling you right now, when everybody gets here in the start of the fall, it looks very different than what it looks like for us right now. And they were so right. And kind of navigating that. It almost felt like a sense of betrayal, it was very much a culture shock to see that difference. But because the program had that built in support network that really helped like with making that transition. And so for the campus to have those types of resources available, I think were totally influential in my success (Alisha, FGS).

These experiences are crucial to understanding more about the journey of Black female college students and noting that microaggressions were the most cited reason for struggling during their first year. Students often experience culture shock in college, as the college experience is so different from the high school experience. The piece that makes it unique for Black women on campus is negotiating the same culture shock and experiencing stereotype threats and/or microaggressions at the same time. Alisha reflects on when she started to feel good about her academics:

> I ended up graduating with a 3.4. And to know that I went from a point nine to a 3.4 and made the Dean's list, I like to think like, there was a point where I was just like, holy shit, I'm not cut out for this, like this, this was a bad idea. And I'm going to fail at this. I'm on the Dean's list, and I'm graduating. Gosh, like that transition felt so good in, like, I'm still proud of having made that jump, and to continue to be improve my GPA.

Alisha discussed how her academic confidence changed over time and the experiences she shared with many first-year college students, who often struggle with college strategies as they are self-regulating for the first time.

> So there's stuff available. And obviously you can't expect the hand holding. And so for me, it was that transition, I also did great in high school. So when I got to college, it was way different because they don't, you know, they're not no one, no one's gonna follow you around to get your own work done. So that was definitely something I had to adjust to (Sharon, non-FGS).

It's important to remember how intersectional oppression affects Black students differently on campus. A White female student may struggle with time management and self-regulation during their first year, and a Black student may struggle with time management, self-regulation, microaggressions, and racial isolation.

> one time a student made a comment like me being ghetto and stuff like this just trying to find figure out like where I would fit in like within the college population. So I felt like that was challenged and then also just honestly like getting this vibe from other students that I just wasn't wanted at the campus…I

> just felt like I didn't I wasn't wanted at the school honestly is like a challenge that I felt because of my skin color (Sophia, FGS).

This is where we see how participants struggled with adapting to college culture, as many first-year students do, and adjusting to Whiteness on campus. This research recognizes that the FGS students, especially those who participated in advanced classes, were not thoroughly prepared for the White assimilation that comes with academic success in White spaces, whereas the non-FGS were more prepared, likely because their parents were able to help the preparation. That being said, the PWIs failed to have representation and a positive racial climate on campus in the data, adding additional burdens on participants navigating college for the first time.

Only 4 participants discussed academic successes as their biggest accomplishments in college, although all 4 also identified as FGS so their connection to college readiness, culture, and academics is essential. They discussed not seeing themselves as college students or feeling out of place on campus, further diminishing their academic confidence.

> I guess one is just the fact that like the semester I saw my GPA rise up and to the point that like the last semester I had like straight A's I thought that was awesome. And then also I received an award.....where one of my professors nominated me to receive some type of award just because of my outstanding performance and one of my classes so yeah, that was one of my greatest accomplices accomplishments...I started you know contemplating even being here in school so you know going and making straight A's and receiving awards for my academics (Sophia, FGS)

> my first semester...I made Dean's List and because those math and science classes at community college kind of set my average coming down as one can imagine so being able to go from like I was never on academic probation but those Ds did not help in terms of my GPA...I got into a university like nobody saw that one coming in, and everything like that, like I did that (Jasmine, non-FGS).

These participants' academic confidence improved as they saw their academic work pay off and were recognized by the universities they attended. While the PWIs did not address their

stereotype threat as FGS Black women on campus, recognizing their academic accomplishments did assist in their persistence. Intersectionality tells us that one identity was rewarded while the other identities were minimized. This is not to say PWIs should adopt a 'Dean's List for Black Women' to be more intersectional, but rather explore the intersectional ways to increase academic confidence during the first year to help more students of color achieve similar accomplishments, such as interrogating the culture on campus. Intersectionality holds that these participants raised their GPA while struggling with stereotype threat AND navigating predominantly White spaces AND navigating college policies and expectations for the first time.

5.5: Historicity and White Supremacy

The participants in this study persisted not by assimilating to White culture, but rather by creating or finding their Black networks, changing institutions, taking leaves to address their mental health, and ultimately, finding mentors and staying focused on their academics and, for those who needed them, working multiple jobs. This required them to celebrate and recognize their race and gender in a color-blind setting and avoid being 'unhinged', or compartmentalizing, their racial history and experiences to increase their proximity to Whiteness (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019). As discussed, the stakes were higher, and they had little room for failure, both financially and academically. Yet, they still found additional barriers in their journey based on White norms. For example, Leah (non-FGS) describes being an on-air personality for the school radio station:

> I was told in certain terms, essentially, that my voice was not distinct in the sense that basically, I think they wanted to say it's like, because, for me, you don't sound Black...And also because I was checking boxes for them, because it's like, oh, if I have to fill up my EEO report, or whatever, I've got this box, or it's like, I've got a black woman, blah, blah, blah

This experience acknowledges the insidiousness of racism because no one told her specifically 'you cannot sound Black' but praised and rewarded them for not sounding what they perceived as Black on air. This shows how Whiteness has an active rejection of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a significant marker of Blackness and Black culture. Additionally, she sees that

she served another purpose by checking diversity boxes for the station while simultaneously being praised for adhering to a perception of how Whiteness sounds on air.
She continues:

> it was feeling like a lot of othering like, and also kind of one of those where it's like okay, how vocal am I going to be about this? What do I call out if I can't explicitly state what it is.

Additionally, further in the interview, Leah (non-FGS) discusses the opportunities they received due to this work and building a portfolio, which unfortunately points to the missed opportunities for students who may 'sound Black' to the people overseeing the program. Leah notes the guilt associated with her achievements when she says, 'so I feel like, in a way it gave me opportunities, but not in the way that I wanted, just because of what they thought someone should sound like or wanted someone to sound like', suggesting her achievement is tarnished by their perceptions of how she sounded racially. The next section continues to explore the additional hardships that helped build their resilience in the classroom and on campus by examining racial and gendered microagressions and stereotype threat. It's important to note that participants did build resilience and persist in college, but that resilience includes additional stress and mental health concerns (Jones et al., 2020; Comeaux, 2013). These stories represent the daily lives of Black women and how their colleges did and did not meet their needs in these cases. The journey of the college participants is explored through microaggressions from staff and students, stereotype threat, and representation on campus.

5.5.1: Microaggressions on Campus and Black Spaces

Student Kalah Brown (2018) writes in *The National Association of Independent Schools* how persistent microagressions have a lasting impact on academic confidence and identity. In this research, all but 1 of the 12 participants reported experiencing some degree of racial microaggressions on campus, regardless of their first or 2nd+ generation student status (Figure 3). This is the one theme that is represented in almost every interview, more prevalent than overt racist or sexist events.

> it didn't really bother me too much also probably because I came from a small town and the racism is less hidden like you know I actually appreciated the people who would say what they were thinking because then you know you could mark them versus the ones who you know the hidden do things to you behind closed doors but um yeah in the classroom (Anita, FGS)

It's important to note that while microaggressions occurred in some form to all participants, at least half were experiencing them alone in the classroom. The importance of representation provides a more secure and supportive environment for students, and opportunities to minimize microagressions or provide spaces for Black students to heal from the trauma. Monica (FGS) describes issues with other classmates in a school for the deaf because she is hard of hearing and not fully deaf:

> And I could speak, and then they would call me hearing in this the head is it's a term that they use is that people for people like me, that went to mainstream school, can speak can get on the telephone. And so they do this sign in to say that mentally or psychologically, were hearing. And so then here, I am able the only black girl in the class, and I'm hearing in the head, and, and then Oh, I miss and then she's trying to get some brownie points, because look at her how she practices her, her voicing with the teacher who's hearing. And so they, they leave, they just say those derogatory things towards me.

In this situation, the microaggressions were not centered on race or gender, but the lack of race and gender representation in the classroom further isolated the participants. She is already surrounded by people who do not share the same systemic oppressions as her, and she is further othered by not being the 'right kind of deaf.' Monica attended a school for deaf students and was still isolated in attending a PWI because only one identity was being supported, and even, then, not well, by the culture on campus. It does suggest the White classmates may have been more comfortable saying derogatory things because she was a Black woman and already marginalized.

Microaggressions were presented in a variety of ways and participants described numerous ways they were affected in the classroom by other students as well as university staff and faculty, and even off campus.

> I had a lot of professors…looked at it as like, oh, you little poor Negro children. And you know, it was, you could feel that they felt that way, and you didn't quite feel welcome. And they just, they kind of made you feel like an outsider. Or they didn't really believe that she was supposed to be there. So when you have that general feeling about, you know, what's going on, you don't… reach out and use those resources (Nia, FGS)

Author Sherry L. Deckman (2022: 34) discusses the importance of authentic Black spaces on PWI campuses and helping Black students 'in navigating race among their peers in ways they hadn't had to deal with prior to college, struggling to find belonging both among the majority white students and fellow Black students'. Several participants discussed having designated spaces for Black students to get together and discuss racial issues on campus. Some referred to their African American studies as the only class willing to discuss campus racial issues, and Emma (FGS) describes her experience:

> I didn't necessarily feel like I could be open in speaking about certain things in certain classrooms in most of my classrooms, to be honest, other than I had one like African American Studies class, where like, is where we all talked about all that stuff. And then every other class was very much, very much not that way. Like we just we didn't touch on it, and it wasn't something that was that you could talk about, openly. And I think that was just a general culture in the atmosphere of the school that I went to was like, This is not your space to talk about those things. You'd go talk about that in the ...lounge, with your people.

The lounge was not a required space for Black students, but rather an understood location for Black students to congregate and build their own safe space. This issue here lies with the campus cultures of the universities. It would not be expected that the University can control White students thinking and behavior in regard to microagressions, but they did create a culture where White students felt comfortable in their ignorance of Black students and participated in more

unofficial segregation by allowing the culture to push Black students to one lounge and one type of class in order to be heard and seen.

It's important to recognize in the U.S., Black Americans have built a counterculture in which to express themselves in ways like music, fashion, and the use of African American Vernacular English and rebel against being absorbed into the White dominant culture (Deckman, 2022; Mcknight, 2019; Lu & Steele, 2019). Providing spaces for Black students to express their culture and not addressing the overall campus culture reinforces segregation on campus and the isolation for students who do not immediately connect with other Black students:

> with me not attending the Black Student Orientation…I still felt kind of like an outcast just because they had already started to form like their friend groups and stuff like that. And since I was not there initially to be a part of like when everyone initially started to form their friend groups, I still kind of felt like an outcast (Anita, FGS).

Anita continued to feel like an outcast on campus because she missed the one opportunity to connect with other Black freshmen. She admits that missing the opportunity to connect early on affected their journey and led to feelings of isolation for much of their time on campus. I argue that universities are not meeting student needs by providing limited interactions for Black students and doing nothing to address the overall culture of the campus and ensuring there are multiple authentic places for Black students to connect. Providing limited spaces and no other support or education tells Black students these are the only spaces to be yourself and be comfortable in their skin (and if you miss the opportunity to connect, well, too bad), and more critically, it tells White students that their comfort is valued everywhere but these spaces. Every other space on campus, including the classroom, caters to White comfort and everyone else on campus should adjust to their comfort.

Participants also cited not feeling as though they belonged in college. Participants described dealing with the 'Superwoman syndrome', (referring to feeling as though you must do it all), feelings of not belonging at the university due to skin color, or being assumed an 'affirmative action' student due to being Black:

> And I knew there were a few scholarships for black students. But then at the same time, I was like afraid because there was like a big thing about

> affirmative action going on at the same time. And I didn't want to be labeled as the affirmative action case. And so it's like if I get these scholarships, well, they just didn't have an affirmative action case (Jasmine, non-FGS).

Two participants discussed researching online prior to attending to prepare for potential stereotypes and build a Black support system. They used social media to read about other Black college students' experiences, and one participant used Facebook to friend other Black students from the college group page before starting their first semesters. This allowed them to be prepared for uniquely Black experiences before they encountered negative racial experiences on campus. Additionally, Julia (non-FGS) described difficulties being themself and trusting others due to stereotype threat:

> It's you just having to deal with all of these kind of stressors as a person of color. So at what point can you really, really truly be your authentic self, and I think that a lot of times is, can be a barrier, and depending on the environment, in the institution, and kind of where you're always having to think about what you're going to say and how you're going to say it. Rather than just being able to freely say, without the perception being placed upon you, because of you just expressing these are my thoughts.

Both participants directly related feelings of not belonging in college to race and nearly giving up. These experiences shaped the way students prepared themselves for college, their willingness to engage with students and staff, and their academic confidence in the classroom.

Intersectionality tells us that even within this culture, the proximity to Whiteness is affected by other identities and there are different power structures based on the different intersections of power and oppression. Therefore, it’s not enough to simply address what appears to be the most dominant equity issue of race, rather, institutions need to look at their equity and inclusion blind spots with an intersectional lens. Patriarchy and White supremacy are deeply entwined, and we cannot pull up the roots of White supremacy without also addressing the systemic patriarchy that also exists on campus. PWIs should be building a campus culture, policies, and procedures with the mindset of what helps the most students. When examining the

interlocking areas of oppression, they can build an inclusive space that inherently includes those with fewer areas of oppression by default.

5.5.2: White Peers and Undermining Black Spaces

It is noteworthy to see only two participants discussed microaggressions from faculty members, and the majority of the other stories were microaggressions from students both on and off campus. I expected to see more issues of racism or stereotype threat in the classroom from faculty or staff, but very little was reported in the interviews. Rather, this research suggests that both overt experiences of racism, microaggressions, and stereotypes were experienced from peers and classmates and reinforced by campus culture. White students often come from predominantly white neighborhoods and schools, and thus have their own framework for racial meaning-making that conflicts with their interpretations of the Black experience (Whitehead, 2021). Nia (FGS) describes othering, assumptions about Black students, and expectations to assimilate to the dominant culture for opportunities.

> I did not know that so many White people thought that black people went to college for free. And that is what they thought we got there on campus that we had all, you know, gotten this full ride. ....So it was a lot of microaggressions. A lot. And I did not have that warning back then to say, this is a microaggression. And this is how it affects me. I remember one girl saying the only thing colored allowed in her house was the TV.

Whiteness, the idea of superiority over Blackness (Di'Angelo, 2018; Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019) permeates all spaces for Black women on campus. Sometimes, whiteness is reinforced by white peers with a mix of ignorance and complacency from being raised in the dominant culture. Other times, it is much more insidious and motivated by white fragility and/or white rage. Another participant describes how other students would disrupt a class dedicated to African American studies:

> Particularly my intro to African American Studies class, you would have these dissenting voices that actually is no secret so the young conservatives of Texas would put plants in classes that were suspected to be liberal and so you would have you would have these kids in there who

> would like argue with everybody and you know, it was dumb like why would you spend this money to take a class as you clearly have no interest in (Anita, FGS).

This is more damaging when it's realized that courses like this are a safe place for Black students, and the student 'plants' were there to take away this safe place and is relevant as the research shows they were limited in safe places to express themselves. Author Robin Di'Angelo (2018:2) defines white fragility as 'triggered by discomfort and anxiety, born of superiority and entitlement...it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage'. White students were comfortable enrolling in classes with a majority Black classroom and voicing their opinions from a White-centered experience instead of listening and learning. These students see all campus spaces as spaces for them because they have never been denied or are not centered in public spaces. Black female students cannot say the same, and several participants in the research mentioned not speaking up or being too opinionated in White classrooms. This is additionally unfortunate as African studies courses have been tied to increasing academic confidence and confidence in their own Blackness for Black students (Adams, 2005), thus triggering White discomfort on campus. This is even more troubling when research shows Black racial positivity and rejection of White assimilation has been linked to African studies courses (Adams, 2005) and the White students are actively undermining their racial positivity.

All participants discussed feeling microaggressions, othering, or stereotype threat in some way on campus. The majority experienced it from White peers, which still speaks to the college campus culture. White peers were both emboldened to register for classes to disrupt safe places, reinforce their stereotypes, and otherwise feel comfortable on campus. Participants, on the other hand, often reported feeling stifled by not adhering to stereotypes or not being able to speak up about them and dealing of the daily stress of microaggressions (such as in-depth questions about their hair and hair care) while worrying about studies and in several cases, funding, and employment. The interviews consistently showed how the college's culture catered to the dominant White culture and minimized other cultures and this theme was overwhelmingly present. The interviews also aligned with the research that Black women do not experience microaggressions and stereotypes as either racial or gendered, but as both. Participants navigated their journeys not as Black students, but as Black women students. They never described gendered only microaggressions but had multiple examples of racial and racially gendered

microaggressions and stereotypes. They looked for support in places like sororities catering to Black women because those were the safest spaces for them.

5.6: Intersectional Social Support and Solidarity on Campus

Participants also discussed their other social categories such as being Biracial, queer, and/or disabled in college. They discussed trying to find a place where they felt seen and represented, sometimes compromising in joining multiracial or LBGTQ+ organizations that were limited in understanding identities. As is shown in Figure 6, these identities overlap with each other, so a student identifying as biracial and bisexual is trying to find a space that sees both identities but has to compromise by joining a Black student organization and a Gay and Lesbian organization, where both organizations have gaps in knowledge, resources, and supports for students who do not identify solely as Black or solely as bisexual. Emma and Alisha share their stories of trying to find support for all of their identities:

> So I wound up joining this...multicultural sorority, because, okay, these are my people, I'm mixed. So I'm just gonna be with the people who are mixed. They're like, all cultures, all races, all ethnicities, all the things, all colors, all, whatever. And I got, that's where I'm going to feel the most comfortable. And I, if I did for him, you know, it helped me to find a space where I felt like, I didn't have to choose any of my identities (Emma, FGS).

> So I would say one identity that I struggled with to feel represented on campus. Okay, so two identities. One, I would say so as like, I came to identify as queer and bisexual. And our LGBT Center was very much like gay, straight binary, like that's what they were focusing on. And even so identities like pansexual, bisexual asexual, there would be kind of like one off events, but it wasn't something that felt integrated into the center. ... Then the other identity, I'd say, where it's actually a very similar story. So particularly is a mixed black woman... I couldn't go into like the Hawaiian space without being questioned (Alisha, FGS).

This is critical because it is far more nuanced for Black women, who already must contend with multiple areas of oppression as a default, compared to White women, who contend with a single area of oppression as the default. Navigating additional areas of oppression, especially in an institution built and maintained by White people, makes it even more difficult to be heard and seen. This research shows that recognizing that several participants discussed feeling isolated on campus and knowing that they managed to persevere and succeed in college indicates that other students who did not graduate were likely feeling the same levels of isolation, loneliness, and difficulties with mental health.

> I had, let's say, three strikes against me, being a woman, black and deaf. So those were three, three identities that intersected and, you know, like that sisterhood organization. A lot of us had those three strikes, and they felt like we were automatically out, and then there is the struggling to be accepted in that environment. I mean, that's one of the main reasons why we set up that organization to build strong bonds with among each other, with between us and among us (Monica, FGS).

Deckman (2022) notes the shallow versions of identity politics in PWIs lead to student support groups that disregard the intersectional needs of students in a singular 'group', for example, Black student groups that are unable to recognize the needs of identities such a gender, ability, multiracial ethnicities, etc. These groups are possible to create, as Deckman's research focuses on one such group at Harvard, and the spaces must be in full recognition through its mission and purpose of celebrating and encouraging all identities. Without such authentic spaces on the university campus, feelings of isolation and loneliness erode the persistence of students of color. This happens when the PWI fails to acknowledge the needs of their students of color and fails to maintain a diverse and culturally competent faculty and staff pool. Alisha (FGS) provides much-needed insight for when a university listens to their students:

> I'm listening to feedback from students in the community, the LGBT Center was like, okay, the week of bisexuality, visibility day, we're going to do a whole week of programming. We want y'all as the students to help us with this...And we called ourselves the non mano sexual students support group. So by pan, everyone in between gay and straight, was

> welcomed in this group. ...there's no other space on campus where we can have these conversations. And nobody in this group questions, my identity. And I feel supported as a bi person here without having to explain myself

Recognizing historically excluded groups as knowers of both their oppressions and their needs allows the university to grow its network of support spaces for intersectional identities and can be a critical step to reshaping the campus culture from White norms. Starting from an intersectional standpoint, it is possible for universities to listen and shape student groups and institutional policies that recognize multiple areas of struggle for Black female students. One important step is having authentic Black spaces that allow student members to recognize their struggles within the solidarity of their space (Deckman, 2022; Sonu & Deckman, 2021). This allows Black women to see themselves in a community of belonging that recognizes differences among its members. We see this need for community and belonging as participants describe finding and building their Black networks.

5.6.1: The Black Network

Participants described creating their own Black networks, either by using social media or befriending any Black student in their classes. We see both the resilience of these students and also, their understanding of their social categories. They anticipated the need to prepare for racist and gendered micro and macro-aggressions and knew they would not have a support system built into the university.

> I had made a lot of friends on Facebook before actually getting to move in on campus, which apparently a lot of our class was doing just going through. It's kind of funny. We had a Facebook group of people that were accepted that would have graduated in 2013. And I went through and added all of the black people (Nicole, FGS).

They protected themselves by researching online and connecting to build their own support systems. They developed or found spaces on campus, both in conjunction with student organizations and outside these organizations, to better arm themselves. Alisha (FGS) describes

mostly students of color being 'randomly' audited for their financial aid applications and eventually building a support system to navigate the systemic racism:

> So for the five years that I submitted the FAFSA, I was always selected for random verification...eventually it was kind of like, oh, okay, we're doing verification. Again, we got this, we've done this before, and me and my friends are helping each other. We know, Oh, yeah, yeah, talk to this person, fill out this form, and you'll be fine. Here's the deadline. And that information sharing in my network was really supportive. But realistically, there's no reason like, why the same people get chosen for this random, supposedly verification

Building on representation and identity, it is important to understand how participants built their support networks. Anita and Sharon discuss how they sought out Black networks with peers and staff to minimize their racial isolation in PWIs.

> And the other thing was, I think at the time, there was about three to 4% African American students. So even though there was like 50,000 students, we kind of all knew each other if I didn't know like, if I didn't have never talked to you, I know I knew who you were, and like you know, or somebody else knew Oh yeah, that especially said so it …like a small community, even though we're in such a large university (Anita, FGS).

Sharon also discusses the benefits of participating in Black female sororities, and all participants agreed that identity-based student groups are highly important resources.

> Like the we had a Student Activities Board where we would plan in, but it was black students, so we would plan them in specifically targeting the black campus population, because [the school] considered a predominantly White institution. So that was important to me, but yeah, I felt like the supports were there. I just had to go access them because that's kind of the kind of the accountability you have to learn in college (Sharon, non-FGS).

This research finds that participants benefited from both rigorous and flexible academic programs and representation via staff, faculty, and student groups.

> I was like we're involved on campus. And so being able to participate in those clubs and organizations that were run through the university. We're a big piece of that success. And within those I was able to build community and I had a network and friends who functioned as my second family that were able to support me in choosing all of those opportunities (Alisha, FGS).

Every student of color is different, and intersectionality informs us that the dimensions of inequity are in conjunction with the relationships with each other and the nature of the oppressions (Anthias, 2013; Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013). Analyzing how the participants developed and maintained their support networks on campus gives us insight in how to encourage and grow support networks, again reshaping the campus culture.

5.6.2: Finding Representation on Campus

The need for representation on campus cannot be understated. Authors Mitchell and Stewart (2013: 338) note that 'In the United States, the historical experience and racial socialization of African Americans have been extremely socio-political and culturally repressive'. Black students have grown up in a culture that has marginalized them since birth. Their research finds that identity development is essential to education and should be one of the first priorities.

> once I got to school, it was also like I said lonely because I didn't really know anyone and then I didn't really see anyone day to day, that look like me. And it didn't help that I chose to be in like the natural College of Natural Sciences. So like STEM programming... most of the class is probably the only black student but at most maybe there would be one other students in these large class sizes of like 500 students, are you lonely? (Sophia, FGS)

This includes seeing themselves and their identities mirrored in positive ways on campus. In my research, participants discussed having spaces for Black students and African-American classes, but no one discussed seeing their identity promoted in a positive light on campus.

> [State Univeristy] was a good reminder of how racist [the Sate] really is...communication courses were very biased, and very one sided. Like even the examples that they would show would be TV shows that I had never heard of, they always tried to have you worked in groups, I was usually the only black girl. So I didn't really get a lot of people wanting to work with me. And I didn't really want to work with a lot of people either (Nicole, FGS).

Solorzano et al (2000) define a positive racial climate meeting the following: (a) the inclusion of students, faculty, and administrators of color; (b) a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color; (c) programs to support the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of color; and (d) a college/university mission that reinforces the institution's commitment to pluralism (Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000, p. 62). None of these markers were present in the data and contributed to the mental health issues and racial isolation presented in the narratives. This adds to the need for a decolonized framework that assesses the campus climate inside and outside of the classroom (Etieyibo, 2021). Rather, several participants discussed feeling siloed, that they could only discuss racial issues on campus or in the world in these dedicated spaces or classes, but not anywhere else on campus.

> And it's so weird the experiences that you had, I grew up in a high school that was predominantly black...And that's how all of my primary schools work. And then I went to college, and it was a PWI. And very, very different. Very, very, very, very white to the point to the point where so I lived in a dorm....They're the largest dorms in the country....which is where I lived, there was a lounge on the first floor, and it was called the Malcolm X lounge. And this is where the black people can meet. Right, we had a lounge, on this gigantic campus, we had a lounge (Emma/FGS).

Colonizing strategies use microagressions, othering, and marginalization to silence historically excluded groups (Bhattacharya, 2016). Even these spaces can be co-opted by White aggressors, as one participant noted about student plants in their African American studies class, meaning the Black safe places are never truly safe. Participants also shared the ways representation helps them, emphasizing the need for increased representation on campus.

> It is so important because you need to be able to talk to somebody with your same experiences. I mean, because we did it like just very informally, you know, sitting there with our little Pooled Money dinner, just talking about like our various experiences on the campus, but having a place to vent, and then maybe even having somebody be able to put the right word. So because we didn't know the word microaggression. We didn't know what some of these comments mean...And you know how some of these interactions with professors just weren't right. So I think if we had like, an official, like faculty sponsor to, like, help us to sort through those things. That would have been awesome (Nia, FGS).

> But then I found a harder hearing group of students that I could connect with and socialize, they were in the same, they were experiencing the same thing where they were just blown into the signing environment. And they were having to acquire while they were there, and they also use the phone, but they felt lost. And so we connected. And we created this group. And we had shared experiences (Monica, FGS).

We see that being involved on campus and finding other students, university staff, and faculty positively benefited participants in their journey, and these themes may indicate how they persisted in college in spite of the barriers on campus. This research also shows that the representation available to them was few and far between, and they had to seek it out through student organizations and networking by themselves. Additionally, having limited spaces to feel represented and build community only adds to the racial isolation on campus and fails to promote a truly inclusive college culture.

5.6.3: Seeing Themselves in Campus

One participant discussed a Black female faculty member who oversaw all the Black students on campus. They took on responsibilities from contacting family members to intervening with Black students to help them recognize microaggressions from White peers. This is a heavy burden for a faculty member to bear, and it shows, again, the higher stakes for Black

students than their White peers. Overall, most participants reported looking for 'people who look like me' and not finding a lot of representation in staff, faculty, or other students. One participant attended an HBCU for undergraduate studies and reported no feelings of exclusion or isolation. However, they did experience these feelings in their graduate and doctoral studies at PWI institutions.

The most dominant theme from the interviews was the lack of representation by both faculty and peers. A word search for the phrase 'only Black' appeared in 7 of the 12 interviews, where participants discussed either the pressure of being the only Black student or the only Black female student in their program or the few Black staff members who carried the additional responsibility of overseeing all Black students on campus, otherwise known as the Black Tax, meaning Black people have to work harder and care for others in White environments (Arday & Jones, 2022). Nia (FGS) describes the additional labor the staff member took on to ensure the Black students at the PWI to ensure they were prepared and understood their Blackness in a culture meant for White students:

> she was the dean of all the students of color. Um, really fiery woman really controversial because a lot of people did not. A lot of people didn't just want to come to college and just, you know, be black. She was like, No, you are a black student. And you know, you need to realize your blackness, you need to recognize your blackness.... lot of these girls are, you know, first generation and we can't let them mess up. So I did have like her as a support (Nia, FGS).

She goes on to share the Dean chastising the Black students who planned to attend a 'ghetto party' hosted by White students. She recognized the stereotypes of Black people associated with 'ghetto' and this party was more likely to embrace these stereotypes. Unfortunately, themed parties like this are fairly common on college campuses, encouraging damaging stereotypes and sometimes Black face (Deckman, 2022). Having a Dean like this is rare on PWI campuses, and half of the participants noted being the only Black woman in their program and the pressures associated with the lack of representation, much of which is discussed in the previous section on microaggressions. Participants discussed ways their identity was challenged or supported on campus, and 7 participants reported increased academic confidence in their identities through

their college experiences. Those who felt supported and seen focused on the representation of student support. Two participants describe their experience in sororities on campus:

> And then I....joined a sorority, which I'm still a part of now. So that was like, another major influence in my development to be able to, to see these prominent Black women who, at a time, the founders of our sorority, they were college women, starting a sorority...In terms of me as a young black woman, and, you know, just putting it presenting it out there that you're capable of doing, you know, going out there and doing great things (Julia, non-FGS).

> I think, on the whole, like, I grew in maturity, and I grew in, in my compassion and my empathy for I mean, I've always been an empathetic person. But I grew a lot in a very short amount of time. And I and I do credit that a lot to putting myself in the space to be in like in the sorority that I was in, because I was I did start surrounding myself around a lot of people who were very different from me who had all different cultures and backgrounds (Emma, FGS).

Monica (FGS) discusses growing in her hard-of-hearing identity by attending a deaf school:

> Yes, because If I didn't go to....I probably would not have come to terms with my deaf identity, I would still be in denial, probably pulling my hair down to my year. So you couldn't see my hearing aid...And again, is because I was the only one in high school with the FM system with now I really thought I was the only one in the world like this, I really thought that I was like, were the other people like me

It is important to identify the ways in which participants thrived and grew into their identities. This does not change the structural oppressions on campus, but it does show how representation is essential to academic confidence and student engagement, especially in White and privileged spaces.

Finally, research does show that mentors can be effective in helping in spaces of inequity (Grant, 2012; Settles, 2020; Sanchez, Hypolite, Newman, & Cole, 2020) and most participants

did benefit from mentors in college for academic support. They did not specifically identify mentors by race or gender and sought mentors via the staff and faculty at universities, colleagues in the workforce, and peer mentors. All the mentor relationships shared the same benefits of making the participants feel as if someone was looking out for them, introducing them to resources and/ or opportunities, and helping them navigate their environment. Mentoring is a powerful tool to help Black female students help them recognize elite hiring obstacles that focus on White assimilation (Grant, 2012; Settles, 2020; Sanchez, Hypolite, Newman, & Cole, 2020). Participants did not spend much time discussing their mentor relationships, likely because it's integrated into the Black network and more of an expectation in the community and most participants are currently mentored themselves to current Black female students in their respective institutions.

5.7: Career, Whiteness, and Cultural Wealth

All the participants recognized themselves as Black women in a White world in their approaches to college life and evidenced by their understanding of at least their race and gender social categories. Intersectionality agrees that identities can be negotiated in circumstances (Anthias, 2013) and Nunez (2014) shows us how they overlap and cannot be fully separated. Participants in this study sought out Black and student-of-color networks but showed a preference for seeking out Black women in peers and student organizations when these connections were available. This research shows how they navigated spaces often as the only Black female or one of a few but recognized the importance of needing a Black women's community that would have improved their experiences.

I initially approached this portion of the research as uncovering more about the transition to the workforce but found career prep was richer in data. The interview questions included questions about finding work after college and participants had many paths to their careers, including three participants who worked for the university in college and stayed in HE, regardless of their major of study. This section had the least conclusive results in offering insight into racial and gendered employment gaps; however, it does provide conclusive insight into improvement in career prep for colleges and universities. This section explores participants' experiences in trying to find work after college and examines the role of cultural wealth on campus and post-college.

5.7.1: Employment After College and Managing Career Expectations

Nunez's Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (2014) allows this research to interrogate the social categories and the areas of influence in finding employment after graduation. This section specifically explores the role of the university's career preparation programs as they relate to Black women by listening to their stories where the programs either supported or were inadequate for their needs. Applying and interviewing for jobs have increased stress and anxiety for Black women as they adhere to certain levels of Whiteness, recognizing the role of gender and race in employment gaps, and careful to not encourage stereotypes by not being too assertive, too Black, or too feminine (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019; Dill, et al, 2009; Mandel & Semyononov, 2016; Salami, Lawson, & Metzger, 2020; Grant, 2012; Settles, 2020). Seven of the 12 participants spoke of struggling to find work after college and working in retail for months to years after graduation, which reflects the trends and gaps in employment data to this day. While none of the participants blamed their respective colleges for how their job opportunities proceeded, it is worth exploring how their colleges supported and prepared them as students entering the workforce. Universities are highly aware of both the graduation and employment gaps and therefore, they can take a bigger role in preparing Black women for a White-centered job market, preferably while rejecting Whiteness as the elite status (Gaztambide-Fernandez & Angod, 2019).

> you're the person that is kind of responsible for them graduating...you should have made sure that we were a little more on the successful side when it came to finding jobs. I think, I mean, you go to college, you pay for all of this so that you're knowledgeable to get the job. So I think that that's the next piece is making sure that they get the job (Nicole, FGS)

I define career expectation as understanding the work and time involved to build enough experience to be hired based on participant responses. This is critical because for Black women, it includes understanding the proximity to Whiteness and managing the stereotypes that may be put upon them, for example, what constitutes a professional hairstyle (Grant, 2012; Settles, 2020). Black women do not get to have the same career expectations as their male and White

female counterparts (Arday & Jones, 2022; Dill, et al, 2009; Salami, Lawson, & Metzger, 2020).

> I think if you did have connections, somewhere, with people that you know, are going to respect my resume respect, what I bring to the table respect me, as a human being, that would be very helpful instead of just kind of throwing up to the wolves (Nicole/FGS).

These are women who were discouraged from attending college by their high schools and persisted in White spaces to obtain their degrees. They are more likely to retraumatize their first-year experiences as they prepare for or experience microagressions and stereotypes and must negotiate their identities while trying to get hired (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). When Universities recognize the need for inclusive practices on campus, even if they participate in shallow efforts of inclusiveness, they are also recognizing societal inequities that do not end for Black women at graduation. Therefore, this research reveals a failure in the university's efforts to prepare Black females better for spaces that are not built for them.

5.7.2: Career Preparedness for Black Women from Universities

Yosso (2005) defines cultural wealth as an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society and can be essential tools for people of color. Here, I argue that the PWI programs did not understand or utilize cultural capital for participants to help them achieve gainful employment after college. Participants built their own cultural capital on PWI campuses where Whiteness was considered the norm by creating Black networks. These networks and cultural capital existed in a bubble on campus that did not transition to the workforce and many of the university's career prep programs were too passive with the most vulnerable population. Participants noted areas that were missing or could have been improved upon in regard to career preparation. The top themes that emerged as areas they felt they could have been better prepared for were career expectations, networking opportunities, and the importance of and the ability to negotiate salary.

> more about like negotiating salaries and valuating, like the benefits and like cost of living in different areas to determine like, what is a fair salary, because I felt like

> that kind of held me back professionally as I move forward, is not really knowing like my value as a professional (Sophia, FGS).

> no one really kind of explained the job market, they made it seem as though my communication studies degree was going to be so well rounded, that there will always be a job for me (Nicole, FGS).

It's important we analyze the themes that were presented when participants discussed what was important to them from their college's career prep programs and initiatives, as it shows what resources are important to them in finding gainful employment. In discussions about both strong programs and programs that were lacking, participants noted employment expectations were important. They did not want to be sold a promise of a high-paying career directly out of college if that is not how the world works, which oftentimes it does not and, as employment numbers show, is even less likely for Black women. Participants who struggled to find work described feelings of failure and disappointment with themselves.

> And so I was putting in hundreds, literally hundreds of resumes that most of them I heard nothing back from and the ones that I did hear back from it was like, they entertained me, maybe because of the institution that I graduated from, who knows why. But at the end of the day, it was like, Well, you don't have the experience, and you don't have the degree (Emma, FGS).

They internalized a lack of value in themselves because their colleges failed to properly prepare them for finding employment as Black women with a single degree. In this case, the universities perpetuated White norms of assuming students would have built-in employment networks and would easily be called in for interviews because of their privilege in society. Furthermore, similarly to how they had to develop their academic confidence within white-dominated spaces, not being able to obtain employment started to erode their confidence. Three participants discussed feeling as though they failed themselves or their families by not being able to find employment after college, and two had to move back in with their families while looking for work.

> I ended up working in [car rental company] when I first got out, and it was, that was miserable. That was absolutely miserable washing cars in a suit. I felt like, I had failed, I was lying. I am standing in the back in an alley, washing cars in a suit, and I have a college degree. There's a dumpster, and there are rats jumping in and out of this dumpster, not 10 feet away from me. What the hell is my life? Like, I just, I needed it so much. And I'm, you know, thinking they're friends of mine out there making so much more money, how? How are they making this money? So looking for a job was definitely not easy (Nia, FGS).

> I was unemployed for a year and maybe three months? Yeah, right after undergrad. So that was devastating. To be honest. I ended up actually going back to retail. And not that retail is a bad thing or a bad place is just, you know, I thought I would be making a little bit more money after I had my bachelor's degree (Nicole, FGS).

The college preps were passive and lacked an understanding of the role of race and gender in finding employment. The two most successful career prep programs came from stories from HBCUs, one a direct story and another as second hand. Both programs were aggressive in either bringing employers to the college to interview students or requiring students to take on internships and build their resumes while in college to be more competitive with employers.

> So we had to research the companies that were coming. ...And we had to dress up in the suit, we had to, I mean, the whole, the whole shebang. So that was like our, our preparation. So and usually before the forum, usually the day before you or the night before they would have what they call a reception. So then they would teach us the etiquette and networking, how to shake hands. You know, we had to research the company, we had to develop questions to ask some of the leaders that were that were there, whether they were HR people or there so there was there was all that that preparation. And my experience was, by the time I got to my senior year, I had I had completed an internship with a with a company for a semester. And so by the time I was getting ready to graduate, that senior year was all about interviewing with companies and I think I interviewed with about 80 different companies. I went on

> about 10 site visits and are our second interviews. And then I got about four job offers during that time (Julia, non-FGS).

These are programs built on the understanding that their students need to work hard and be more impressive on paper to get a foot in the door, something that seems to be missing from many of the PWI career prep programs. Empirical research also finds that HBCUs offer better social support than PWIs, thus having higher graduation and employment rates for Black students compared to Black students at PWIs (Perna et. al., 2009). This shows that PWIs can build social support systems for Black female students in career services by having a deeper understanding of the barriers that face this population. However, as long as proximity to Whiteness is the academic mission, these universities will continue the cycle of over-credential Black women in underpaid positions. For example, participants, likely knowing they are part of an underpaid group in the current job market, expressed wanting better support with salary negotiations.

> I just think more exposure to that would have been really helpful, especially for black women. Hey, we already don't get paid. So, we know that there's not a lot of people who want to hire us either. Unless they're, you know, okay, well, we're gonna take it from a black man because they have they check more boxes on the form. Have access that and what we're trying to do is we're not trying to get into, you know, this space and still be oppressed or have to be your White ego (Nicole, FGS).

A culturally competent program employs salary negotiation, interview skills, and resume help to better ensure students of color can be more competitive without assimilating to White norms to get a job, such as speaking 'White' on the air to make White listeners feel more comfortable with their radio stations.

These strategies fail Black women in the transition from college to career because they are unable to develop their Black networks in the world the same way they did in the college setting to get interviews or get hired. If they did not join a sorority in college, they struggled to find networks and organizations that supported them in the industry when they were just getting started. This research shows the different ways participants entered the workforce, several of them were hired as students and continued to work in HE, while several others struggled to find

employment after college. This is where we see a deficit in the universities' understanding of Black women's social category in the employment world and their often lack of cultural wealth, especially for FGS, to help garner networking opportunities. Emma (FGS) discusses trying to make ends meet until a Black woman provided her first career opportunity:

> I was getting in a situation where I was working two jobs to make ends meet. Living on people's couches, or in the rooms, or, or in roach infested apartments … I was hired by a black female director, you know, and I 100% like believe that I was, you know, people like I had the skills for the job. But I also know that having a female black director helped in that process in getting hired and getting that first job with no experience.

Emma (FGS) highlights there is also a social capital issue and reveals a lack of cultural and social wealth. The FGS students sacrificed a lot of networking opportunities in order to work and afford college, including not being able to participate in Black student groups or internships to gain experience. PWIs greatly underestimate what the job market looks like for Black women and the necessity of adopting intersectional and culturally competent approaches for career development programs.

All the participants attended PWI whether it was for undergraduate or graduate programs. This shows their resilience in navigating Whiteness on campus and persisting to graduation. They did so by building their own networks and support while overcoming academic under-preparedness, racism, SES struggles, mental health struggles, and systemic barriers. This highlights the crucial need for representation and multiple strategies of assistance and support for students. Intersectional thinking requires casting a wide net, meaning employing multiple opportunities to address student identities, needs, and areas for engagement. Universities are gaining ground by expanding DEI programs and student programming, but they will continue to fail students if they do not address the racial campus climate and systemic barriers to employment and career preparation. College career prep programs cannot control discriminatory hiring practices or sexist wage gaps, but they can help better prepare Black female students by building Black employment networks, partnering with hiring institutions that practice equitable hiring practices, and empowering Black women for salary negotiations and interview strategies. Essentially, as we see with the HBCU examples, colleges and universities should listen to the

Black female students and adopt more aggressive career prep programs that help Black women build cultural capital in the workforce.

5.8: Advice for the Next Generation of Young Black Women

The last question posed to interviewees asked 'what advice do you have for future Black female-identifying students entering college?'. This question gave insight into how participants constructed narratives about their experiences by using their reflections to produce advice for future students. This question was imperative to the research because it targeted participants who have the ability of hindsight to understand their processes and participants have a better understanding of their experiences. Much of the advice included not giving up and utilizing campus resources, and I want to highlight that eight out of twelve participants focused on finding support and community, and four participants discussed breaking stereotypes.

> definitely find your community, like find the folks who understand you where you don't have to explain yourself, and you just feel like you belong. Because without those kinds of experiences in those people, like, I don't think I would have made it to where I am now. So definitely find your community to use the resources that are available to you (Alisha, FGS)

> I would say as much as you can be prepared to be uncomfortable. And that seems like oh, why would you say be prepared to be uncomfortable, because you're going to be, you're going to be uncomfortable, you're going to be put into situations where you feel othered. And you're going to be put into situations where you are, you either feel or are being discriminated against. And so being prepared for that means recognizing that it's not, you know, if it's going to happen, it's win (Emma, FGS).

Participants understood when their stereotype threat and their identities on campus, and both themes illustrated the importance to Black female students of building support networks in class and on campus or finding sororities and other student organizations.

> my first piece of advice would be not to give up, not to feel out of place, because that's how I felt that's out of place...find someone at the college or university that they can lean on for support advice, to help them keep their grades up....have that support system to build their own support system, surround themselves around other like minded individuals that will help them get through school that will help them help push them through school (Kayla, FGS).

Finding these support systems includes combating stereotypes and microaggressions, and four participants specifically mentioned being prepared for externalized stereotypes and having coping mechanisms in place, so the oppressors do not prevent them from reaching their goals. This reflects that while all incoming students need to find support and resources to help with academic and social achievement, Black women had additional needs to find support for their unique journey on campus and in the classroom.

5.9: Conclusion

Nunez's Multilevel Model of Intersectionality (2014) helps to identify both the way a person sees their identities and how the system barriers play a role in their areas of oppression. Recognizing the participants' social categories and areas of influence, we cannot put the intersectional burden on Black women to figure out how to persist within their multiple and overlapping areas of oppression. Looking at the broader terms of this research, we can see how the lines of White supremacy were upheld by the institutions in their college culture and severe lack of representation.

All Participants, regardless of FGS status, agreed that accessing college was relatively easy and lower SES participants benefited from State programs that assisted with application fees, waivers, and automatic admissions. However, their stories also pointed to the larger issues of systemic barriers from high school experiences when some participants reported being specifically discouraged from certain schools or fields, or failures from schools to academically prepare them for college-level academics. The participants who reported the most college readiness issues also graduated from more diverse high schools and then attended the PWI campus. This leads to the question of whether participants felt underprepared because they came

from under-resourced schools, or did the school failed to assimilate them into the White supremacy culture that was dominant on their college campuses?

Once in college, the first year was critical in building their academic confidence FGS status played more of a role in feeling like they did not belong on campus. FGS students struggled more with assimilating to college culture, making connections and social networks, and struggling with paying for materials and fees outside of the cost of tuition. Participants who struggled with making networks in their first year struggled more with racial isolation and mental health, and all participants felt supported when they found or built networks around their identities. These networks varied from Black student groups and sororities to connecting with one or two Black students in class, creating a small social group around a shared disability, groups for mixed race students, and finding queer student groups. Race and gender were the predominant identities used to connect with other students, and other identities were seen as equally important by participants. In short, they wanted to be fully supported on all of their identities and be fully seen as multi-faceted individuals rather than just a Black student or a female student. While this research led with gender and race identities, it celebrates and acknowledges participants have multi-faceted identities.

This research also finds the college culture values and operates around White comfort on campus and employs racial isolation for Black students to have authentic spaces. These spaces were limited to specific places on campus or in specific classes, and otherwise, participants felt as though they could not talk about issues they faced as Black women in 'unauthorized' spaces. They also experienced microagressions by peers and were left on their own to navigate the White spaces and classrooms. Black female social support and representation was the most predominant theme in helping to navigate these spaces and build confidence for participants. Universities faltered by not recognizing the need for social support and failing to incorporate this type of networking in obtaining employment after completing their degree. Most participants struggled to find gainful employment after college and the universities assumed all graduated students had access to cultural wealth without using an intersectional lens. In addition to ignoring the known racial and gender gaps in the job market, universities also failed to recognize the FGS students who were working multiple jobs and had no time to build professional networks while in school. Overall, the universities created more access to HE, but failed to recognize or address the hurdles they put in place for historically excluded students on campus. Racial isolation was

employed in the name of inclusion, the additional cost issues of attending college (dorm fees, food insecurity, textbook, and materials, etc.) were not addressed, and colorblind career preparation programming ultimately failed for many participants, potentially leading them to work in HE to help future Black female students. In short, the participant stories shared common themes that while HE helped improve their social mobility, the participants succeeded by resisting assimilating to White culture in addition to working while in school to make ends meet, taking care of mental health from racial isolation, and developing their own communities to build authentic and inclusive spaces for themselves.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Discussion

6.1: Introduction

My research undertakes a qualitative study using Intersectionality Theory and feminist methodology, drawing on the oral life histories of 12 Black women who graduated college. Thematic analysis was used, applying Nunez's (2014) Multilevel Model of Intersectionality, to analyze the data as they told their stories of accessing college, the journey while in college, and obtaining employment after college. Chapter Two points to established patterns of persistence and employment rates, and the oral histories give a voice to the struggles the Black female participants faced in college in order to provide a deeper understanding of intersectional needs in accessing and persisting in college, as well as career preparation for graduating students.

In Chapter One, I outlined the aim of this research is to understand the hidden barriers for Black female students and provide more understanding of the role of college culture and support for students. I set out to do this by asking how do intersectional experiences affect the journey of college for Black female students? This thesis also aims to answer this question with the following supporting research questions:

- How does Whiteness and college culture impact Black women experiences in college?
- How does Black women's access to college affect academic confidence and sense of belonging?

Chapter 2 outlined previous research on Black female students in HE, including the history of segregation and racism in the U.S., and insight into barriers for Black female students in accessing college, graduation rates, and dismal employment rates with a college degree. I address the research questions in the following sections namely 6.2: College Access's Effect on Academic Confidence and Sense of Belonging, 6.3: Whiteness and College Culture Impacts on Experiences in College, and 6.4: Contribution to Knowledge. This research provides insight through participant life histories, where they described their experiences, both good and bad, and how they affected their identities and perspectives of college and post-collegiate employment. Participants described their experiences accessing college and first-year experiences. This includes the effects of first generation and SES status on their journey in

college, and how university career preparation programs helped or lacked support for historically excluded populations.

6.1.1: Intersectional Engagements in Research

Intersectional theory was critical to this research because it allowed me to identify the different ways areas of interlocking oppression operated for participants. An intersectional lens showed that SES and FGS status affected college access, adapting to college culture, and the financial burdens differently from the non-FGS students. All participants experienced microagressions, but those microagressions had different impacts depending on the size and culture of the campus and the amount of social support the participants had access to. This research also shows that while finding other Black females in classrooms, faculty, and university staff was critical to them, participants were able to discuss other identities and recognize the importance of needing support in those areas as well. For example, Monica (FGS) discussed feeling even more isolated by being a Black female student and ultimately finding support when connecting with other hard-of-hearing students, regardless of race. Intersectionality allows us to see the role of race and gender in building their communities, and how their other identities need support and, in this case, the hard-of-hearing community was a more important support for her as well. Monica could have also benefited from social support for Black students as race was certainly a concern, but she needed the hard-of-hearing group to build her confidence and engagement on her college campus. These types of themes are discovered with an intersectional lens because they show the line of White college culture's impact on participants and the different identities they encompass. It resists the either/or type of thinking in this research and recognizes that participants were Black and identify as women, including additional social categories that affected their decision-making, comfort levels, and communities on campus.

6.2: College Access's Effect on Academic Confidence and Sense of Belonging

This research was not built specifically around class but allowed it to be presented organically within interviews. First generation status students did more research, applied for more grants and financial aid, and had more urgency in the admissions process compared to their non-FGS counterparts. One commonality from the entire group was that college was an expectation. How they approached it may have been different, but the expectation is likely

because it was impressed upon them that they would have to be more competitive on paper in order to enter a white labor market. However, it was more of the university setting that FGS students struggled with once they were attending college. Several of them were working several jobs and feeling isolated and/or a low sense of belonging when they did not see themselves represented on campus and they struggled with a new academic, and white, culture on campus.

The first year is key for building academic confidence and participants struggled mostly from trying to determine their finances to afford college and several feeling unprepared despite taking advanced classes in high school. This showed effects on both mental health and low student engagement as participants were realizing college is more than getting good grades but had higher pressure as first generation and Black students to be successful. While not all participants struggled academically in their first year, zero participants discussed attending parties or engaging in drinking that affected their academics during this time. The participants who struggled the most academically were represented by internal stereotype threat or learning that their high school did not provide the proper academic support to prepare them for college. Participants were eventually able to persist and cited seeing their GPAs improve and academic recognition as their biggest successes in college.

6.3: Whiteness and College Culture Impacts on Experiences in College

Participants understood their place on PWIs and sought out mentors, peers, and student groups for Black students. Research was clear that they preferred social support from Black female groups such as Black sororities, and second from Black student groups. No participant sought out women-oriented social support groups and that is important to note which identities offered safety for them on campus. Participants who were not able to connect with Black groups experienced diminished mental health and racial isolation. Every participant experienced microagressions, although they varied in intensity and number of occurrences. Microagressions were more severe for first generation students who were already experiencing feelings of not belonging academically and were further amplified by racial isolation. This research indicates that Black female students expected microagressions and stereotype threat and prepared themselves by seeking Black student organizations or creating their own network of support with other students of color. There was an emphasis on Black female sororities and a very clear

message that all participants could have benefited from more Black female students, staff, and faculty.

Participants persisted despite the Whiteness on campus and showed signs of strong racial identity. The research did not reveal participants accepting or assimilating into White norms on campus, but rather, finding ways to navigate around it. This included finding Black spaces like specific lounges, African-American classes, and student groups. Additionally, some were served by having Black faculty or staff, and mentors to look out for them and have their interests prioritized. Others suffered quietly but found their own reasons to persist, even though the journey was significantly harder. Participants did not have the privilege to give up as they were invested in themselves and understood the inequities in the job market that required them to have a degree. This deep understanding of their identities motivated them to find their safe spaces, accept help from mentors and staff, and ultimately persist despite academic setbacks and continue to build their own academic confidence. Academic success and peer recognition were the biggest areas of positive experiences on campus and overcoming the negative weight of microagressions and stereotypes on campus.

6.3.1: College Prep and Career Placement

PWIs struggled with setting Black women up for career success in any other industry besides HE. While we have an enormous need for more Black women to be employed in HE, the solution cannot be that HE is the only industry where they can find employability. Participants found they had trouble finding employment or were not fully prepared for a low-paying or more volatile industry. University career preparation programs that were successful were more intensive and included job fairs and interview preparation. This study finds that HE in the United States continues to perpetuate white cultural norms after college and is still limited in serving Black women's success. Additionally, most participants are currently working in HE, suggesting they went into the field either because it is where they found employment, or so that they could help advocate for other students of color so they wouldn't have the same experiences.

This research found that while access to certain colleges remains rooted in equality, the journey on campus and transition to career continues to overlook the need for equity and inclusion in college culture and cultural wealth. There were benefits, however, in the colleges

that employed peer mentoring and outreach from staff and faculty during their first year of college, which appears to be the most vulnerable year for participants. Colleges and universities struggle with creating an inclusive racial climate and creating spaces for in-depth conversations about race and gender. Rather, the college cultures seemed to create more safe places for white ignorance over conversations of Black student issues. Student organizations do help with providing support for Black female students but are really only reserved for those students who have time to be involved, whereas several participants were busy with jobs instead. Overall, college support is inconsistent across the research and never shows a comprehensive understanding of the intersectional needs of students.

6.4: Contribution to Knowledge

This research documents the experiences of Black female students on accessing college and experiences both on campus and inside the classroom. This offers a holistic perspective on how Black female students engage with higher learning, knowing they are accessing colleges with a campus culture centered on Whiteness. The contribution to research is threefold. One, much of the research on racial climate and concerns about Black student experiences center on men (Gillborn, 2015; Comeaux, 2013; Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000; Vue, Haslerig, & Allen, 2017; Hope, Chavous, Jagers, & Sellers, 2013; Massey, & Owens, 2014; Mitchell, & Stewart, 2013). None of the research claims the Black male experience deserves fewer resources and attention, only that it adds to the diminishing experiences of Black women and female students of color when it is used as the dominant lens of racial issues (Patton, Crenshaw, Haynes, Watson, 2016; Crenshaw, 2013). It is a disservice to both HE and social justice if a group suffers silently so another group may advance, and this research seeks to add those voices.

Secondly, if they do center on Black women, they tend to focus on one identity and do not explore where multiple identities intersect (Lewis, et al., 2016, McDaniel et al., 2011; Morales, 2008; Pittman & Kaur, 2018: Pyant & Yanico, 1991; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). This research gives room to explore all the participant identities as relevant to their journey. Participants shared struggles of additional identity intersections including disability, multiracial identities, queer orientation, and first-generation status. This research shows how all of these identities impacted their experiences and led to feelings of isolation and not belonging on campus. Furthermore, their understanding of their identities influenced how they accessed

college, where they found safe places on campus, and how they coped with microagressions, mental health, and academic confidence on campus. The strongest support for participants came from representation (although scarce) on campus and either finding or developing Black networks. Additionally, we see that low-income students suffered when not having access to Black networks because they were working multiple jobs, and this led to issues of racial isolation and a low sense of belonging for Black female students.

And third, I could not find research on university career preparation or development programs and the impacts on Black female students, despite vast amounts of research on graduation and employment gaps based on race and gender (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Mandel & Semyononov, 2016; Bloch, et al., 2021, Mintz & Krymkowski, 2010; Hinchliffe, 2021). This research shows the barriers for participants finding employment after college and the need for more wrap-around and culturally competent career preparation services. Career services programs should understand the inequities in the labor market and how that impacts their graduating Black female students. A brief comparison from the participant narratives between how HBCUs and PWIs approached career development shows the impact on Black students finding employment. This area needs additional research to determine all of the ways identities influence job obtainment after graduation and the responsibility of the university to address these inequities. Finally, this research also implies that participants may have been drawn to working in HE to help address the needs of students that were not met by the college when they were students.

This research supports the idea that universities should focus on creating spaces for students to be authentic in all their identities and all students, staff, and faculty should have a deeper understanding of an inclusive college culture. By creating a space for their voices and experiences to be authentically heard, participant stories showed how their identities helped them navigate a white campus culture and find confidence in their academic achievements. Furthermore, Black female students benefit from mostly Black spaces but showed a strong preference for organizations and spaces specific to Black women. Other organizations included queer orientation and multi-racial spaces to find representation, a strong theme for universities to understand how supported social categories and identities improve student academic confidence. I do want to note this research does not advocate that student programs are the only solution. Rather, as intersectionality shows, solutions should be multi-faceted and

reject a 'one size fits all' approach to Black female needs in accessing college, on campus, and post-graduation.

6.5: Recommendations

PWI's need to concentrate on their diversity and inclusion efforts to expand them to cultivate a college culture that rejects white supremacy norms. This includes creating more social spaces for Black and students of color, ensuring BIPOC students have access to support networks created for them, and increasing representation among faculty and staff. This is shown in how participants created their own Black networks and from Sherry Deckman's (2022) work in 'Black Space.' Here, she researches the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College and highlights how creating and maintaining an authentic Black Space, although open to all races and ethnicities, allowed students to connect and share the history of Kuumba. Further recommendations from this research include:

- Focus on increasing representation on campus while resisting tokenism and overreliance on Black peer and faculty mentors (Arday & Jones, 2022). This means including a robust degree of representation, so a small pool of Black faculty or staff members are not responsible for an unmanageable caseload of Black students.
- Employ intersectional inclusion training in addition to increasing spaces for students of color. This includes in addition to cultural spaces for students, integrating a campus culture of learning and acceptance so difficult conversations are not regulated to only the safe places but can be open in any space on campus. This incorporates intersectional training beyond a handful of professional development classes, but rather, including culturally competent and inclusive training in all services and curricula, from the top of the university to the bottom.
- University goal for all students to have a shared understanding of inclusion. Participants offered several experiences of microagressions from other students and the university can and should make this a learning opportunity for privileged students on campus. Students should see and understand the university

vision for inclusion everywhere on campus with easily accessible resources for everyone to learn more about other identities. These resources should not be regulated to a DEI space only and should be in all highly frequented spaces and in the syllabus for each class.

- Colleges and universities should employ culturally competent career service practices to ensure they are helping FGS and working students with building networks before they graduate. This can include helping students find paid internships, working with business partners for flexible internship options, holding regular career fairs on campus that includes a diverse network of industry employers, and utilizing career mentors to assist student applying for jobs that were created without communities of color in mind (Yosso, 2005; Arday & Jones, 2022).

Colleges and universities should invest in culturally competent student resources that understand systemic privilege and inequalities for BIPOC and female students, both on campus and after college. PWIs should research more into HBCU strategies that can be adopted or create partnerships and pathways to better serve their BIPOC students. They should employ intersectional strategies that help with improving social mobility. For example, if policies target low-income Black women, white women, Black men, and other low-income students will in inherently benefit. The goal should not employ exclusionary practices but rather build systems with a deep understanding of those with the most to lose or the most barriers to success.

6.6: Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Since I used my personal networks and social media to recruit participants, this sample was heavily represented by participants local to my country and state and employed within HE. This research can be further expanded with participants from a wider range of employment fields, especially STEM fields which operate differently than Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, and a broader range of geographical backgrounds. Additionally, this sample includes queer people and a person with a hearing impairment, and all intersectional analysis benefit from more identities in areas of oppression. While more identities would help further this research, I believe this data is valid and necessary as several overarching themes and smaller individual themes are still present in a random small sample.

6.7: Final Reflections

As I write this, several states in the United States are actively trying to remove Advanced Placement African American courses in public education, banning both Critical Race Theory and criminalizing equity and inclusion practices content within HE. This is a time when we need to advocate for inclusion in HE while it is under attack from State leaders. The college I work for publicly announced that ahead of the State's move to ban DEI staffing, admissions, and campus programs from HE, they would end all 'new' DEI programs until the law is approved or vetoed. Unfortunately, I feel this was a time for the University to step up and publicly support its students, faculty, and staff from historically excluded communities by refusing to suspend or end DEI initiatives in the college. The State, and possibly alumni may have threatened to refuse funding, and I feel the University should have taken that risk to show the campus supports inclusion over White supremacy.

I have been made highly aware that HE has for far too long been using band-aids to cover bullet holes when it comes to inclusion on campus and equity gaps. This research shows that layers of isolation are created when more identities are not seen by students on campus. I work dual roles in HE as both an adjunct professor and as a Student Affairs administrator and this grants me the opportunity to work with students and college professionals in a variety of settings. I will use the key findings of my research to promote authentic spaces in my classroom and in my office that are not centered on White comfort. Additionally, I will continue my reflexivity approach in engaging with students, listening to their individual experiences, and reflecting on my privileges and perspectives to ensure I am not centering their needs on my experiences. Finally, as I stated previously, I will use this research to continue to be a better ally to historically excluded groups and advocate for them in White spaces whether it be through future publishing, conference presentations, or in routine meetings that affect campus culture. I believe my biggest strength in this research is to share the findings with other White HE professionals and White students to promote truly inclusive practices and spaces.

My research highlights how participants navigated college as Black women, and thus showing that colleges were not able to recognize and meet their needs which affected their mental health and academic confidence. It is important to recognize this research focused on Black women who successfully graduated college, but their experiences can also be used to understand why other students of color did not complete college. The first year of their college

experience is shown to be critical to creating a strong foundation of confidence and belonging for all students, especially the first-generation students. Universities can target the first year to focus on building academic confidence and Black female student engagement to promote authentic spaces for them and reject the assimilative culture of Whiteness and white middle-class norms as factors of success. In short, HE needs to stop reproducing social inequities within its systems and adopt a deeply inclusive campus culture and culturally competent programs and practices, especially when it means standing up for our students against White supremacist expectations.

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Appendix

Participant Information Sheet

Participant information sheet

Invisible Barriers in HE

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am a researcher/PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about: This study seeks to uncover hidden barriers in the college experience of students who identify as Black females by using life history stories from persons who identify as Black females and graduated from an undergraduate and/or graduate program between 2005-2020.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

This study will use an intersectional feminism lens, this research will put forth the question: *How difficult was the journey to graduation* and let you tell the story in the format of your choosing. I am seeking participants who graduated from an undergraduate or graduate program between 2000-2020 to participate in an interview or storytelling format about their experiences in college. I will create

feedback loops to allow you to be included and actively participate in the analysis of your stories, thus protecting your voices and minimizing myself as a White researcher having authority over your experiences.

Why have I been invited?

I have approached you because I am seeking the insight and experiences of college complete persons who identify as Black females.

I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decided to take part, this would involve the following: an interview process where you choose the format (in-person, virtual, phone, or writing sample). Interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and your name and University name will not be used or published in the research. All transcriptions and recordings will be destroyed after the research is published.

You will have access to all transcriptions and research analysis via a shared secure folder. Your input will be asked during the analysing and discussion portion of the research to ensure you are the authority on your narrative. All comments and changes during this process will also be transcribed to ensure I do not take credit for your feedback and changes.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

Taking part in this research will allow you to give your insights on the college experience of an identifying Black female. Your participation will add to the small existing research on the intersectional experiences that may be overlooked.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 6 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part. Taking part will mean investing a minimum of 30-60 minutes for an interview and time to read and provide feedback on the analysing process (this is voluntary).

Will my data be identifiable?

After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study will have access to the ideas you share with me.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. (For more information, please see https://ico.org.uk/media/1061/anonymisation-code.pdf)

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example, journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in our publications.

If anything you tell me in the interview (*or other data collection method*) suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with (add who you would turn to in the first instance*,* probably your supervisor and/or colleagues)**.** If possible I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

How my data will be stored

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic).In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact Talisia McHugh at t.mchugh@lancaster.ac.uk or my supervisor Dr. Melis Cin at m.cin@lancaster.ac.uk. Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University.

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact

Paul Ashwin Paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk Bailrigg, Lancaster LA1 4YW, United Kingdom

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Invisible Barriers in HE

Name of Researchers: Talisia McHugh

Email: t.mchugh@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 6 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within [6 weeks] of taking part in the study my data will be removed. If I am involved in focus groups and then withdraw my data will remain part of the study. PLEASE NOTE: Withdrawing from a focus group can be difficult and if your study involves focus groups you may want to add the following: I understand that as part the focus group I will take part in, my data is part of the ongoing conversation and cannot be destroyed. I understand that the researcher will try to disregard my views when analysing the focus group data, but I am aware that this will not always be possible.	
3. If I am participating in the focus group I understand that any information disclosed within the focus group remains confidential to the group, and I will not discuss the focus group with or in front of anyone who was not involved unless I have the relevant person's express permission	
4. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. 5. PLEASE NOTE: if you intend to make your data available to future researchers via a data archive, you need to add a sentence to point 4 or add a separate point to request consent for this. You could say: Anonymised data will be offered to ..(name of the archive) and will be made available to genuine research for re-use (secondary analysis)	
6. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	
7. I understand that any interviews or focus groups will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	
8. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	
9. I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____ _____ _____

Name of Participant Date Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____ Date _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Participant Interview Questions

- How do the intersectional experiences affect the journey of college for female students of color?
    - Why did you want to attend college?
    - What was the process like of apply and getting accepted to college?
    - Did anyone in your life at the time influence your decision to attend college?
    - What was life like while attending college?
    - What were some of your biggest challenges getting into and/or persisting to graduation?
    - What are some of your biggest accomplishments or positive experiences in college?
    - In what ways did the college support your success?
        - Did the college ever hinder your success? If so, in what ways?

<u>Sub questions</u>

- What is the role of gendered and racial microaggressions, from students, staff, and faculty in women's college experiences?
    - What was your experience like in your classrooms?
    - Were you involved in any student groups or organizations?
        - If so, what was your experience with these groups?
        - Based on your experience, what is the importance of race and women-centered student organizations?
    - Were aspects of your identity challenged or supported?
    - Where did you find support in your university, if any?
    - How did you find mentors to support you if any?

- What was your major?
    - Why did you decide to go for an advanced degree?
- What was your experience like look for a job during or after graduation?

- Did your college help you prepare for your career in the workforce?
  - Is there anything they could have done differently?
- What advice would you give other identifying Black women looking to enroll in college based on your experiences?

Participant Transcript

Sat, 10/30 4:38PM • 52:38

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

college, people, students, school, feel, question, graduate, campus, east texas, support, sorority, gpa, requirements, year, wanted, degree, stations, group, graduate program, meet

00:00
We're gonna do record to this computer

00:03
consenting to being recorded. Yes.

00:06
Okay. All right, so we're gonna jump in. Um, so I know you've listened to me talk about this on end. But really my research is just in the the, looking into the experience of students that identify as female and identify as Black or African American, and just kind of seeing what themes and things emerge out of that. So we're gonna talk a little bit about like, your access to college, your experience in college and some of your experience after college like getting into the career workforce. So starting off, let's start with why did you want to attend college?

00:45
So I wanted to attend college because it was almost like, not a requirement. But, but my grandmother had gone to college, my mom had gone to college, my dad and my stepdad had all gone to college. So it was kind of, you know, that's the thing that you do. And then also, I remember, I was like, I found an old thing, and I was visiting my parents one day that, you know, so what do you want to do when you grow up? And apparently, I was watching a lot of like, different world, things like that, where it's like, featuring HBCUs. And I said that I wanted to go to Spelman. This is before I realized, out of state tuition was a thing. So that was definitely something that I had to consider when I did get ready to go to college. But essentially, it was just, this is something that your family does, this is something that they're going to support you doing. So that's essentially why I said I was going to go to college, it wasn't anything that I hadn't thought about before. But then when it actually came time to it, it was like, Oh, now it's time for me to go to school, where am I going to go to school? But essentially, it was just kind of ingrained that that's what you do after you graduate from high school is you go in to HE. So yeah.

02:09
What was the process of applying and getting accepted to

02:12
college like for you. So that was a struggle, because at some point in high school, I don't know. My mom was like, always says that I went crazy, because at some point, like I just either stopped caring about school or just wasn't in like the mindset to do all the things that I needed to do to prepare to go off to college. My stepdad, at the time, was a recruiter, and had actually visited the college that I ended up going to and was like, hey, this actually might be a good fit for you. And then it turns out, it was located in East Texas, which is where my family is actually from originally. And one of the things that when it got closer to applying to schools, they didn't require that I write an essay. And then other schools did. At the point where I was like, Yeah, I meet the requirements to go to the school that you're going to make me write an essay to attend things I don't think so. So I essentially just took the easy way out, it applied for a school, where I just met the requirements. And I could do the bare minimum. And some of that, too, was because my parents were like, fully expecting like, you take care of this, this is what you want to do, you're going to do what you need to do to get it done. And then when it was like, Oh, I wasn't accepted to these schools, it was like I also didn't apply to those schools, because I didn't want to write an essay. But the school that I ended up going to actually ended up being a really good fit. And I don't necessarily think I would have considered it if my stepdad hadn't brought it up to me. But yeah, the process was essentially what schools don't meet the requirements for that I don't have to put a whole lot of effort into

04:08
what was your life, like while attending college

04:12
of first year was probably really rough. So and that was probably played into the fact that I was, you know, number one putting like minimal effort and didn't go into college in the first place. It's like, I knew I had to do it, and I want it to go away because I wanted to get out of my house. But then when I got out and I went off to school, I wasn't exactly thinking like, Oh, I'm hearing college so I could learn it was more. I'm here in college and I'm going to make new friends and I'm going to have fun. I'm going to do all the things that my mom told me not to do when I went off to school. And honestly thinking back, we were talking about this one day, I probably should have gone to like community college or something first But I think that experience of getting out of the house and kind of failing as miserably as I did in that first year, kind of helped propel me after that. But basically, it was like my first year didn't exist. Because I wasn't really attending class. And when I was attending class, I would go home or go to my dorm or whatever, and I wasn't doing my homework or following up like I was opposed to. And basically, after the first year, it was, you're going to be suspended, unless you come back for summer school, show that you can meet the grades that you need to to stay enrolled. My parents weren't having it. Because apparently, you know, of course, I just wasted a year of tuition, and their time and money. And they were like, if this is what you're going to do, and you're off at school, we're not

going to support that. But my grandfather was like, I'm gonna give you another chance, drove back with me, to East Texas got me signed up for summer school paid tuition for that summer. And he was like, This is it, and he's like, I'm gonna support you. I know you're better than this. And I passed my classes that summer, because I was really in my mind, like, oh, my gosh, I do not want to go home, I can't believe I did this. And I wasted this opportunity. I did this so I could get out of my house. And I don't want to go back. And I think that's really kind of what snapped and made me go, Okay, I really have to try and do better and find something that makes me want to do well in school. Because at this point, I've had all the fun that I should have after this first year. And I need to snap out of that. So after that, though, I wouldn't say necessarily smooth sailing, but I definitely got a handle of what I needed to do and what I was supposed to be doing. And if I just follow the advice, like my mom was like, if you go to class, just go to class, like she's like, I'm not saying that you have to pay attention. But half the time, it's just showing up. And after that, I realized, especially as I got into my major, there was stuff that I would do that was just because I would show up to class that I would do well in the class, it wasn't necessarily about the work. It was just oh, hey, I see that you're here. Is he that you're trying or whatever? And I was like, Oh, if I had just learned that earlier, I wouldn't have wasted a year of college, but But yeah, after the first year, things went a lot better. And then I graduated, I guess, five years instead of four because of that waste that year.

07:36
So you may have just answered this. But my next question is What is your biggest challenge is getting into or and or persisting through college through through to graduation? So was that your biggest challenge? Or was there other ones that you feel are bigger ones in the long run?

07:54
That probably was my biggest challenge is knowing how badly I have messed up. And even kind of seeing some of the consequences of what happened that first year kind of playing out. And a future semesters. Like, there was a point where, like, the sorority that my mom was part of came back on the campus, initially they had been kicked off of my campus. And then when they showed back up, they were like, Oh, these are the requirements went to a meeting. And I was like, Oh, I meet everything except the GPA requirement, because it was just low, it was just lower than the minimum requirement. And if I hadn't messed up so bad that first year, wouldn't have been that way. And so when I had to tell my mom, I was like, I can't believe I did this. But I was like, Well, that's what you get, you know. And now you just have to do better. And so that always just kind of like, okay, you're better than this, you know, anything to do you know what you need to do to like, get through this. Because at that point to just the career path I had chosen. It's not like I necessarily needed a degree, but I want it to have it as a backup. And so I was like, if I can at least get this and have this piece of piece of paper that says, I have this degree, I can get through this. I'll be alright, regardless of what my GPA or whatever is. But yeah, that was a challenge is like seeing like after that first year, how it kind of played into other things. But once I got through that and said, Okay, well I need to do better to graduate to reach this end goal and to go into the career path that I want or whatever. Then it was, it was fine after that. But

09:46
what were the requirements to get into the sorority and were you ever able to get into it?

09:51
So they had at the time I think it was like you had to have it like at like a 2.5 and I have like Good 2.4 something or whatever. And they were like, oh, no, we don't care if it's like, right on the past for whatever. And then you had to have so many hours of community service and all this other and I, at the time, I was part of this organization where I gotten like, even like a presidential award or whatever that you get from the state of Texas, we're having so many community service hours, I was like, I'm doing things that I that I've wanting to do that wanting to get involved in that are going to look great on this resume, whatever, but then it was just the GPA was just Yeah. Because essentially, like the money that would have cost for those already wouldn't have been an issue because my mom always was like, this is, you know, for my girls, if anybody joins, none of us have actually ever been able to get in and she was upset, but but that's also because like, the entire time I've lived here, like there's a graduate chapter now. And now if you have like a master's degree, whatever, it's just, oh, you have to meet these requirements. And I have all that it's just a local chapter does not, has never had an opportunity for me to join. But yeah, back then, it was 2.5. So many community service, our certain amount of money that you have to pay, and then a commitment to certain community service and things throughout your time, once you were able to join, but yeah, that's what blocked me with my GPA.

11:35
Is it a sorority? And I'm just curious, because of the nature of my research, is it a sorority geared for all women? Or is it specifically for women of color, or black woman

11:45
It’s historically women of color, black women, but of course, all were invited. But it's one of the, I guess, they call it the divine nine. So Delta Sigma Theta sorority. But yeah, it was started initially, like in 1930s, with HBCUs. And there's the divine nine is part of like the fraternities and sororities that are part of that. And so I will, of course, was like, I will join this one, because my mom was part of it, but also because they were community service based or focused. And they did have that requirement that you know, had to have a certain GPA that you had to maintain a certain standard or whatever, throughout your time in school, because there was another sorority like an opposing sorority that didn't have that. And I was like, I don't want to join that. And then of course, I was like, probably Sure. They would have exempted me with my low GPA. No, I would. They just didn't have like the geared towards the, you know, community service. And I want it to be the time so. But yeah, that's what that's what that sorority was.

12:58
Okay. So what were some of your biggest, like accomplishments or positive experiences while you were in college?

13:06

Oh, so I would probably say, because everybody in my family and of course, have, I'm in HE or education right now. But every one of my family comes from an educational background. My grandmother was a teacher, mom, speech language pathologists, dad was an agricultural agent and a four year university teaching, and I was like, Oh, that's not what I want to do. I want to go into radio, which is, you know, completely out of left field for them. And at one point, I was like, crying because my grandparents were like, Why do you want to do this, of course, we'll support you. But I was like, it's something that I really want to do. And I've always wanted to do. And so for me, it was really important if I was going to pursue this degree, and I was going to graduate and this at the time before I understood, like the realities of like, the low paying outcomes of this job is that I could show them the things that I was actively viewing and they could see me being successful, whether it was, you know, like, being able to hear me on air or being able to like, show them the work that I was doing and producing that was showing up on, you know, local radio stations or whatever. But during my time in school, I was able to and at the time, like you had to be a graduate student to be a station manager for the college radio station that they had. And one of our, the person who was in the graduate program at that time actually ended up getting a job and leaving early and I was news director at the time and our station advisor was like, basically asked me over other graduate students that were in the program to run the station, just because of the experience that I've had, I had already had an internship working for a clear channel station. And so I, you know, had helped kind of like, change the format of our college radio station and do different charting things. So I was already like implementing stuff that you would think that someone who was in a graduate program running that would want to do, but they just hadn't taken the initiative to do. And so for her, she said, it just made more sense, to allow me the space to grow into the things I'd already been doing in that official position, until I guess, that next academic year, because essentially, I would be graduating anyways. And they would have to bring in somebody from that graduate program. But just being able to use that time in that space to build my resume to build out that station, and then be able to like, show my parents and grandparents like, look, this is why I'm doing this, this is why I have a passion for this. And you can see the work that I'm doing. It also helped with me landing an actual job after, you know, well, even before I graduated, because I started part time working at a radio station in the next town over essentially. But then, I realized I just didn't want to stay in East Texas forever. So that's why I left but it was like all the things that I was doing that I could show visible, I have a passion for this, this is why I'm going to be successful. And as I'm really trying, I'm really showing effort and these things are paying off. That was like a big accomplishment for me, is to have something tangible to show people as to why I was doing what I wanted to do.

16:54
And what ways that the college support your success.

16:58
So I, I had a radio advisor who was employee, with some prodding, let me do whatever I wanted to do, just because I was producing and putting out work that was just better or above, you know what someone would typically turn in. Because we would have. I mean, we were essentially a real radio station, even though it was a college radio station, we still had promos

that we had to tape, we'd still had community service projects and things that we had to put on air, we still had new segments that we did. And so using all of that, not only to create an outlet for myself, so that I could build my resume to build my reel to send out other like, actual professional stations and things but to help kind of like, build up other people who had a true interest in it. Because of course, there's people in the program that are like, Oh, this is just easy. I think it's fun. I'm not necessarily going to do anything with it while I'm here. But then there were people who actually legit wanted to learn the things that they needed to, to go into that profession afterwards being able to help them. And that was nice. Repeat the question again, because that's possible.

18:25
Just um, in what ways the college supported your success. And that can be anything from student groups, faculty, anything that from the college, so to

18:35
speak. Yes. So besides having an advisor who let me grow and do what I need to do, I had a really good Dean who because, of course, I had already, like messed up, my GPA is going to take me a little bit longer to graduate than it should have, just because I wasn't there making up credits or just, you know, having to take things later on that I could have taken, you know, my freshman year and just didn't know or withdrew from or whatever. When I got an internship, some of the things that I was learning that were part of my degree plan, he actually was like, when I went to go meet with him, said, Oh, you're actually doing this already. And so he essentially just gave me credit for those classes. So that I did graduate a little bit earlier than what I was expecting to. And so that was super nice. And I didn't even know that was a thing until I met with them. And then another thing that kind of kept me on, on pace with graduating and trying to do well. I joined Student Activities Association and one of the requirements of that is if you want to participate if you want to do programming for the college or if you want to be part of this group, you actually have to maintain a specific GPA throughout your time in the college. And so that was kind of a motivation For me, because I would see people, you know, that I've met throughout the group that I consider friends or whatever have to drop out because it would be a semester where they didn't make the grades that they needed to. And that was something that I use, along with my time in my program to like, I was able to bring in bands, that essentially I would use, like, Oh, I'm gonna use this programming group that I'm in to pay for and book bands that I would personally like to see my school, and then use that as an opportunity to interview them or whatever. But I'm not going to be able to do that if I'm failing all my classes, or if I don't maintain this GPA, and have this voice here. So. So that was another thing is having, you know, student groups like that, where they expect a certain standard of you. And they would help support you in that if you wanted it, to be able to do the things that you wanted to do. So that was and then they had other things too, like tutoring, I did not use those things, even though I should have. I think the one time I finally use it was like in my senior year, because I waited so long to take math. And even that almost didn't go very well because I got like a D in the couse. But at the time, because I was a non STEM major, they're like a D is fine. It's fine, we'll consider that a pass for you to graduate. But I think that was the only time I actually legit use tutoring. And then I still almost failed the class. But anyways, but I feel like

there were there's programming and things in place for students if they wanted access to those things to help them either academically or to help them success in school. And it helped to that people that either I was friends with or had like, like, things of interest or whatever were in that group too. So that kind of pushed me towards those organizations as

22:00
well. Okay. Do you? Were there ever experiences where you felt the college whether it was faculty member, again, a student, group and administrator, anybody assigned to the college basically, hindered or put barriers to your success?

22:19
Oh, no, that's a good question. I wouldn't necessarily. I will say there were some faculty that probably shouldn't have been teaching. They had just been there too long, and are set in their ways and didn't want to learn things. And so it wasn't helpful when you're trying to go into an industry that's essentially dying. And then they're teaching you things that are no longer being implemented in that industry, and then getting upset with you for questioning their, you know, not not even like questioning their teaching methods. But asking or saying, why aren't we looking into this, or implementing these things in our program, and just getting a lot of kind of push back from that. So in that sense, it was kind of a hindrance. But at that point to me, and some other people that will, will seek it out other ways to figure out what we need to learn which, if you have a program that is meant to teach you and prepare you for a certain field. Ideally, those things would be taught at that institution, by professors who are supposed to be updated on those things and the classes that they're teaching, instead of you having to go outside for it, or even asking for you to update your information. But it wasn't anything that like they were actively trying to do. It's just they really needed to not be teaching. Or they they needed to have newer people and that were more open to what they needed to learn to teach upcoming students. Yeah.

24:22
So that kind of because my next question is we're going to drill into what it was like in the classroom. You talked about being involved in student groups and organizations and how they helped you. So let me just look at my questions, because you've already touched on a lot of them. I do want to chat real fast, a little bit about, like, like your identity on campus. Were there any aspects that you felt like any, any part of your identity, whether it was race, gender or anything else? They were challenged in a way on the college campus Yeah, that's it's a big question. So

25:07
I know and I'm, and it is a weird thing to think about, like, because I went to a school, that was a PWI, in the middle of East Texas, and I feel like I think initially when I went there, there was some apprehension about it out, number one, just being away from home. Number two, just trying to find my identity and what that was going to look like in school. And thinking that I was going to maybe struggle with that more. Being at a school like that. I know, it's like, I feel like, personally, I didn't experience a lot of but there were not things that happened to me, but other

people. Whether it was some that somebody that I was dating, where I could actively see things that were happening to them where I was like, that could have easily been me in that situation. Yeah, that's. And I feel like that's a weird thing to like, have to say like, oh, you know, not that I didn't necessarily grapple with those things. But I could, I could see it happening to other people. But not that it necessarily happened to me. And I don't know, that was just by nature of being sheltered with either the groups that I was in, or the people that I was with, but I never felt like that. And I don't, yeah.

27:06
Based on your experience, especially since it sounds like you did a lot of work with student groups, what do you think is the importance of having either racial centered, or women centered, or, you know, race gendered centered organizations and groups on campus for students.

27:25
Um, all of those I think, are really important. And that was an I think that was initially one of the reasons also, the sorority that I was going to try to join until I realize I didn't meet the requirements is, number one, having something that connected me with, like, my mom is like, you know, like, historically, people in my family have joined this organization or been part of this, and to see, you know, even just the people who have been connected with that organization or sorority over time, that was something that I wanted to connect with, but also to have, you know, just like historically, a group of black women who were interested in the same things, especially community service, although I was not able to join that there were other organizations that I did work with instead, that I feel like in other ways, like helped kind of connect me to the things that I I did personally want to do. But like those student organizations, it was a pretty diverse group with Student Activities association. So just being connected with different people that I probably wouldn't necessarily have reached out to myself and gotten to now just just by nature of the person that I am, I'm not someone who just like goes up to someone and like, Oh, I think we should be friends or I see that we have these interests, let's talk about that. But being kind of not forced to this group, but just being in that group and working towards certain common goals, rather, you know, programming for different things on on campus and getting to know people that way. I think it was really helpful. And it also kind of helped connect me more to my school. Because instead of just, oh, I'm on campus, going to classes. Now I'm on campus, doing programming for students, you know, trying to get them brought in possibly trying to get them to join that organization. And if they're in a place like I was after that first year, where it was like, I need to really get my act together, try to do better try to have a reason and a purpose to get through school. Whether it was you know, just to get a degree or whatever, but having something that I enjoy doing that would benefit myself and other people. I feel like that really helped ground me and connect me with what I was doing over all is having that organization that I could go to, that I could work with. And even, yeah, like I just are just having a support group too. So even if it wasn't anything connected to the school, just the people that I met, I feel like we're a big support group. And even, you know, to this day, it's like, and that's been, you know, for 20 years now. It's like people that I can connect with and talk with that, even if our interests and things have diverged over the years. Just that connection that I built with them all

those years ago, has carried on to things. And people that I feel like I can reach out to, to for certain things, even now.

30:45
Okay. And when you talk about the student groups, I just want to make sure I'm understanding you picked groups based on on your interests related to your majors, is that right?

30:56
Essentially, yeah. It's like other than this already, that you couldn't join? Yes, yeah. So Student Activities Association essentially did programming on campus for all students. So they would do like a Spring Fest, or they would just do like organizational fairs or whatever to tell students about. Other, like, even other organizations and things on campus, but they also allowed people in the group to choose their own programming. So whether that was having movie nights that people in the college could come in and attend or, like me, even though I wasn't like, oh, yeah, I'm gonna get you know, but they were like, Oh, if you want to propose this idea, and you have something that's going to work for it, that's where I was like, Oh, my major is RTV. I have this interest in this, if you're going to fund it, and I can propose it, and it's going to get voted, and I can do it. Great. So it just, I guess create, like a lot of creative outlet that I wouldn't have been able to do by myself and things that I didn't see that were currently happening on campus. So I think I've wanted to join that organization for that reason, as well. So it was kind of like selfish reasons. To see if some of the things that I had ideas for could get proposed and brought onto campus.

32:36
Were you able to find any mentors during your time in college to support you? Or were you interested in mentors at the time?

32:46
Oh, I know like, I know like, so we had an I don't know that…

33:04
Probably the people that I found that were mentors, were outside of my college environment. Because I think at the time, the people that I would have said, Oh, it would be good if I had this person as a mentor that were, you know, like, related to my program. Or even just like helping me get to the next step of what I wanted to do outside of college. And now, it's like, I feel like I had more success with that, like, when I was in my internship, or I was working part time, and I was meeting people in my industry who, you know, could actually lay out and things that I needed to do to be successful or to help promote myself or to even just like, listen and give give me feedback, because I felt like the stuff that I was getting in college wasn't necessarily getting me there. And so yeah, I think it was important to have those mentors, the people that I found outside of school because otherwise some of the things that I needed to do especially trying to go into like that radio industry and trying to figure out what is it going to be like as I was like, I got this job because of an internship which turned into an actual paying position, but what if I want to market myself in other cities? What if I want to connect with other stations that are

outside of this area? What does that actually like? And so I had people who were able to mentor and prepare me for those things, but it didn't necessarily happen in my college environment. Gotcha. Okay.

34:52
I'm trying to think where I want to go with my questions. Um, so it sounds like, again, if I'm understanding it, right, when we talk about like, biases and stuff, it sounds like you've, it affected you more, because you saw it happen to other people. Were there any instances where you felt like stereotypes or you felt like there was extra stress either because of your race and or gender or both during college, or you feel like it just really just affected you secondhand?

35:40
I feel like I was like, I feel like it could be both second hand and personally, because, in a way, the, I guess the way it affected me personally was almost being othered. Without it being said or stated that way. So. And I, and I feel like even you know, like, when I started working kind of professionally on radio, some of the things that I would hear as not even like a critique. But I was like, I know what you're saying. But you're just trying to say it without implying it is, like, I feel like some of the things that I was able to do, or the reason why I was able to get on air in certain markets is because I was told in certain terms, essentially, that my voice was not distinct in the sense that basically, I think they wanted to say it's like, because, for me, you don't sound black. And I, and I know that they were probably trying to be PC or go around it in certain terms or whatever, without actually saying that. But when you see someone I'm like, That person has more experience than me or whatever. But if if the tonality of their voice or the way they come across comes out a certain way, or whatever, it's like they either want to pigeonhole that person into certain positions, or even certain stations or certain things that they should be eligible for, versus we're going to send you in this direction, or allow you to do these things. Because for us, this is what it sounds like, or this is what you're being perceived as. And so I feel like, in a way it it gave me opportunities, but not in the way that I wanted, just because of what they thought someone should sound like or wanted someone to sound like. And also because I was checking boxes for them, because it's like, oh, if I have to fill up my EEO report, or whatever, I've got this box, or it's like, I've got a black woman, blah, blah, blah, but when she presents on air, this is what I assume that she is or sounds like. So I feel like there was a lot of othering without it being explicitly said, but knowing what was up just based on how others were treated in comparison to me, and that was problematic.

38:41
And was that at like your internship or the workforce? Or was that also when you were on campus? Or was that just kind of everywhere? For you?

38:50
That was I know, like that was probably like the things that happened while I was in school to get to the point where I was in the workforce. I feel like that was one of the reasons why Yeah, it it Yeah. So

39:12
yeah, it was feeling like a lot of othering like, and also kind of one of those where where it's like okay, how vocal am I going to be about this? What do I call out if I can't explicitly state what it is like if I think it's I'm you're selecting me because Oh, you think I'm one of the good ones or I have like it was like off I'm not gonna say that word but it was definitely like messes with you in terms of like thinking about all that. Yeah. know how else to describe it.

40:01
So that kind of leads into that very much leads into my next question. What was your experience like looking for a job after graduation? So you talked about that and how it prepared you for that. What else? Do you think that you've graduated and you're looking for work, there's what was that kind of general experience.

40:27
So affiliate, that wasn't extremely hard. But at the same time, I don't know that I was ever. And at the time, too, because this is like, let's see, I graduated in 2006. moved to Austin in 2007. Right before, it's like the economic downturn and also going into a dying art form. But the economic consequences of looking for a job in that field and being able to actually support yourself, or even just like the amount of work, an effort you had to put in. So, I will say that I had a really good support system coming into the workforce, initially from that internship opportunity to prepare me to get to finding a job in Austin, but it just didn't pay very well. And the things that I feel like I like it was like, Oh, you're going to work 60 hours a week across multiple stations, just so you can try to somewhat support yourself. And still, you now have to get like another job outside of that. And also to try to, especially starting out in a different market. How are you is, because at the time, too, it's like going into an area like radio during an economic downturn, when they're flipping stations or firing people left and right, trying to figure out how do I make myself not disposable? No, yeah. Man, that is, I feel like there's like a lot of nuancing things in that, like, it was easy in the sense that I feel like I had good support good mentors and good connections. But I, I think it was just not having everything explained in terms of, and then seeing it too, like when I moved into a bigger market, and I was working 60 plus hours a week and seeing other people in my position who were, you know, trying to secure full time jobs or trying to support themselves. And working all these different jobs. I was like, Oh, I was like, so after that, I was like anybody who I talked to who was like in the program coming up behind me, or even when I started working at ACC, and then I had people who were like, Oh, you can help you now bring people in for internships or whatever I'm like, Y'all look like, it's like, this is what it is. If you want to work X amount of hours for all these different things and still be barely making ends meet, like, cool, at least, you know, what's what it is going into it instead of getting thrown into and be like, Oh, dang, like, that's why I was like, Why did I get a degree in this? I could have gotten a degree in something else. Because I'm gonna help you pay off my, my tuition, but, um, yeah.

44:11
What advice would you give other students who identify as black women looking to enroll in college based on your experiences?

44:24
So with that, I would probably say, first school that is a good fit for you. Um, that was one of the things I feel like, you know, besides me just being lazy at the time and going through whatever I was going through in high school where I was like, I need to enroll in school because I know it's a thing but I'm going to do minimal effort. But still, I had like college campus visits and I feel like that helped. Because I you know, like I visited oh gosh, like smaller really like smaller state schools and Texas just to kind of see like, what does it actually look like on campus? What are the things they offer? Who's on campus when you go? And I think that was one of the things too, is even being in an East Texas. During that time, like, going to visit that campus, I was like, Oh, I actually, surprisingly, I saw a lot of people that looked like me, a lot of people that looked like me on campus. And then, like, there was just something about it, when I showed up, I feel like I felt comfortable there. So, yeah, so if you're looking for school, at school visit, look like, like, get a vibe for, you know, for the place that you're going to attend. And if if you get there, and it doesn't feel right, keep looking, or do some research about things that if you do decide to go to that campus, how they can support you through that journey, because it can get hard. And if you don't have that support group or possibly even organizations, groups, people or whatever, that you can reach out to you and help support you through that. It could be unnecessarily harder than it needs to be. So yeah, that would be probably the biggest thing.

46:26
And this will be my last question. In regards thinking about college, either getting into college, your experience in college, or maybe even transitioning into your career. Are there any areas that you feel in the in the lens of racism or sexism or other biases that I should have asked you about? That didn't come up in my questions on your experience? That's a big umbrella question.

47:14
Good question. And hard question to.

47:20
I just want to if there's any gaps, anything that you felt like that jumped up, and it may not have for you that my questions to cover?

47:34
And it was like, I feel like you covered everything. Yeah. I know. And I also just feel like, almost like I had, like, a weird, unique experience with college just because of my, my background with my family, like, like, when I talk with students now even it's like, oh, I'm, you know, first gen, I'm trying to figure this stuff out. And, you know, it's like, I'm going to school and messing up after having, you know, it's like, even like, because when I was working in radio, my family came to visit me one day, and one of the guys that I used to produce for, and I was telling him, I was like, Oh yeah, my grandmother, you know, went to PV for her Master's, or whatever. And he was like, I don't even have my master's degree. And he was like, how hard was that, for her to do that, and the time that she was able to go and do that. And so it's like, I had all these examples of people who it was much harder for them to get through school and to know what they went

through. And then I still chose my opportunity to go to school and mess up. And they were like, it's fine. You're human, who will support you, and know how lucky I am to have that. And know that that's not everyone's experience. Like, that's hard. So it's like, how do I relate, you know, and other senses to people? So, like, when students were like, don't judge me, but this and I'm like, oh, no, it was like, you look at my transcript from my first year looks like I didn't go to school. Like, just like how, okay, it's like, even though I have these experiences, I definitely have instances where I can relate and still give support, hopefully, so that even if it's like their first time going through this, it's like it doesn't matter if this is your first time going through it. Or if you had, you know, influences that told you what to do and what not to do or whatever. You could still go through this and you can come out the other side and be okay. It's just how you choose to deal with it and persevere and get the support that you need. And it's okay to ask for that support. or realize that you've messed up and do what you need to do to get through that. So, yeah,

50:05
since you touched on it, what, what like inspired you or influenced you to go for your graduate degree.

50:13
So that was an I, honestly, because it did take me a long time. And I think that was another thing where it was like, I feel like my family was always the one pushing me to, like, get more education, because that's just that they're like, this is what we do, everybody gets their master's degree, and I was like, but I don't necessarily want to do that, especially the field that I was, you know, I started out with at the time, but I think it really was, when I got cuz I, you know, it's like, besides, you know, advising students and telling them, even for an associate's degree certificate, whatever, if you want to do this, you have to be ready for it. Because when it gets hard, you have to understand that when it is hard, you have something that's driving you to want you to get through it, instead of quitting. Because ultimately, it's on you for that. And so I never thought I would get a graduate degree just because I had no interest in it. School initially during undergrad, especially like that first year, so it was just super hard. And I was like, I don't want to go through that again. But I think working in HE, for the time that I did, and really trying to understand, I think more of looking around for the things that we do, whether it's as advisors, as administrators, or whatever, I think I was really at that time starting to get interested in like the research and like the technical things behind it. And so I think that kind of drove me to finally say, okay, my undergrad wasn't anything that I'm doing right now, now that I've been in this field for a while, and I see kind of trends and things happening, and I keep hearing these terms or whatever, but I don't really know what they mean, it would be interesting to kind of actually get information on how this lines up to what I'm currently doing. So then that kind of pushed me to actually want to go in and get my graduate degree.

52:11
And the clarify your your undergrad was an RTF and then your graduate was in HE right? Yes. Perfect. That is all my questions. Anything I'm going to stop the recording for the transcription purposes unless there's anything you feel like needs to be added to your story.